

Can we rescue paradise?

By Patti Griffiths, Special to the Star-Banner

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In the early 1960s, South Miami Beach was strewn with lumps of a gooey tar-like substance. Officials said it was oil from ships dumping bilge close to shore (now illegal) or natural seepage from the sea floor.

That was 50 years ago. Today, oil from supertankers and drill rigs can cause massive environmental and financial disasters lasting for decades.

Most Floridians live less than 50 miles from this state's 2,276 miles of coastline. But it's not just our coasts that have been abused. From the interior's laconic rural areas to its glitzy multi-cultural cities, development is expanding inward on every inch of land available.

But why has it taken this catastrophic oil spill off the coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida to suddenly snap us to attention?

It's because crude oil gushing from the decapitated Deepwater Horizon forced us to confront what has happened to Florida in the last 60 years. It is compelling us to look at not only where, but how, we live.

From 4.9 million people in 1960, Florida's population is now more than 18.3 million. In that same time span, Marion County grew from 60,000 to 350,000 people. We rely exclusively on personal transportation to obtain the most rudimentary supplies and services; it's not just a personal choice, but a necessity. Walking or bicycling safely to a park, grocery store, beauty parlor, restaurant or friend's house is generally not possible.

We have been warned. In 1947, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas' pivotal history, "The Everglades: River of Grass," chronicled decades of its degradation and abuse. In 1992, Marion County's Margaret Spontak and Peggy Cavanaugh wrote "Protecting Paradise: 300 ways to Protect Florida's Environment" (see Page 110, "The Threat of Offshore Oil"). The 2009 publication of "Ditch of Dreams" by Steven Noll and David Tegeder documented the Cross Florida Barge Canal/Rodman Dam debacle that, if completed, could have made our current water woes seem almost insignificant.

For the most part, Marion County elected officials, developers and builders dismissed the advice of renowned urban planners Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, who came here in the early 1990s to lobby for multi-generational developments with core commercial centers. In 2005, Gainesville's Dom Nozzi, author of "Road to Ruin," spoke about transportation management and walkable communities in conjunction with the Public Policy Institute's Traffic and Transportation Study. And while our state's policy was "Come on down!", state and federal

governments continued to be gridlocked regarding alternative energy sources or meaningful national public transportation initiatives.

It's about time we looked in the mirror. Continuous stretches of high-rise apartments and hotels from Pensacola south are broken only by the Everglades and the Keys, with urban high-rises dominating the coasts north from Miami to Jacksonville.

We know what's happening in the Gulf of Mexico, but on a recent trip down the east coast to the Keys, I found people in other areas of Florida are not sanguine about the future. A Vero Beach resident called the Gulf spill “one of the worst disasters since Chernobyl.”

It's not all bad [news](#). Turtle nesting areas in Vero Beach, the Nature Conservancy's Blowing Rocks Preserve in Hobe Sound, John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park and the amazingly beautiful Florida Keys are still pristine. An employee in a tourist information office in Key West's Old Town said, “People come here for snorkeling, diving, jet skiing and boating, and the water has never been clearer, more beautifully blue or more filled with fish.” Spokespersons for all areas articulated concerns about the long-term ramifications of the Gulf oil spill on marine life, but they say there are established protocols should a hurricane or gulf currents cause the oil to endanger southern or Atlantic coastal areas.

For Marion County, there is an underlying principle when local citizens band together to protest a limestone mine, ask that a scenic road be protected, lobby for appropriations to refit a drainage pipe spewing toxins into the Silver River. There is reason to support government policies that require infill and infrastructure systems in their growth strategy.

What Florida becomes — what Marion County will look like in another 50 years — that's the challenge. Across all public policy issues, there is a difference between having an opinion and being informed. Florida's future will depend on the latter. We need to defend and preserve the natural areas that draw people to this state to protect and secure Marion County's quality of life. We need sound rules for development and land use to keep from becoming an Orlando or Miami with their sprawling suburbs.

As the Deepwater Horizon debacle demonstrated, we pay a terrible price when we are not vigilant.

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