

June Hot Topics

Florida's Environment - How Women Led the Way and the Impact of Recent Legislation on Future Growth

By Ann Hellmuth, LWVOC President

No punches were pulled Wednesday (June 8) when two experts on Florida's environment took stock of the impact the last session of the state Legislature will have on future growth.

"The environmental movement is not dead but it might as well be," chairman of 1000 Friends of Florida Victoria Tschinkel told more than 90 members and guests at the League's monthly Hot Topics luncheon.

"We always had a seat at the table - we were treated as ladies and gentlemen - although we were not always listened to. Now there is no time for environmentalists...we are not dead in spirit, but we are going to have to change the way we operate," Tschinkel said. "There is no room for ladies and gentlemen."

Journalist Jane Healy, who won a Pulitzer Prize for her "Florida's Shame" series on the state's growth, warned that "things are worse than they look" because of the likely effect of a growth bill, which the Legislature attached to the House budget, which passed without debate.

"What local governments are going to stand up to developers?" Healy said. "They are not going to know what hit them."

The bill, which Gov. Rick Scott has signed into law, rolled back the 25-year-old Growth Management Act, virtually eliminating state control of growth. The Legislature's action also does away with concurrency, which forced developers to help cover the impact of new subdivisions by paying toward the cost of schools, roads and other services.

Healy, a former Orlando Sentinel vice president, editorial page editor and columnist, said the new law means that local governments would be able to approve developments "with no money for schools and roads - - just like it was in the '70s."

Tschinkel said it was a "very shocking year" with a governor "who probably doesn't know the growth management laws on the books in

the state of Florida and the bipartisan 30-year history which created them” and young legislators who “went over the cliff with him.”

Healy said that local governments would be able to approve developments “with no money for schools and roads - - just like it was in the ‘70s.” The Florida Chamber of Commerce and Associated Industries “pretty much wrote the bill” and House Speaker Dean Cannon, Senate President Mike Haridopolos and Gov. Scott were willing participants, Healy said.

Tschinkel, who served as secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation from 1981-1987, called the manipulation by legislative leaders to get the growth bill passed “the most incredible sleight of hand.”

The program opened with LWVOC member Leslie Kemp Poole, an adjunct professor of Environmental Studies at Rollins College, delivering a fascinating presentation on the role of women in Florida’s 20th century environmental movement. Poole, who conceived and planned the HT program, also acted as moderator.