

Weekly Update, May 2, 2008 from Director Public Affairs

Commissioner Tammy Hall addresses REALTOR® Association Breakfast Meeting

Commissioner Tammy Hall spoke to over 100 Association members on May 2nd to provide insight into Lee County's smart growth program, encouraging members to get involved in assisting the County with its various issues such as adding infrastructure in the appropriate urban locations, increasing densities where infrastructure allows for more housing and commercial economic opportunities, while at the same time preserving water quality and restoring the Everglades. These are all goals of FAR as well. She strongly supports new technology methods for storm water management which is a logical manner in which to conserve our resources and provide for economic development opportunities. Commissioner Hall reported that Lee County has had a significant budget shortfall but that this is the time in which wise financial decisions can be made which can take us into the future with a well balanced approach to growth and development.

When asked about the Red Sox spring training team and their long term relationship with Lee County, she stated that it was excellent and that the County is working closely with the team's management to ensure they remain in Lee County and that their needs for additional facilities are met. Commissioner Hall also discussed the County's ambitious road building programs, citing the widening of Summerlin Road, Alico Road, and Interstate 75 among the most recent projects underway with many more to come.

Commissioner Hall concluded by urging members to allow their views to be heard and to continue to let County Commissioners know what the REALTOR® Association's point of view is, so that a more balanced approach to government can be had. The Public Policy Committee continues to do so and as issues come up in the future, will take a stand and report to the membership so that our voice is one that helps improve everyone's quality of life as well as economic situation here in Lee County.

Health plan supported by FAR for uninsured near passage by Florida Legislature

REALTORS® are among the highest population of uninsured in our state, as most are independent contractors, the smallest of small businesses, and twenty eight percent of our members have no health insurance. Like so many other Floridians who lack health insurance, REALTORS® are unable to seek necessary medical attention and/or face significant financial burden when medical care is necessary. Thus, FAR and your Association supports any plan that will provide available and affordable health insurance for more than 3.8 million Floridians that do not have coverage.

Providing affordable health insurance is a priority and now up to 3.8 million uninsured Floridians could soon buy inexpensive health-coverage packages, after legislators tentatively agreed Thursday May 1st to a two-step plan serving individuals as well as small businesses.

The legislation blends Gov. Charlie Crist's proposal, offering stripped-down plans for as little as \$150 a month, along with House Speaker Marco Rubio's proposal to establish a public-private corporation that would act as human-resources department and a virtual marketplace for health plans. Although Governor Crist and the state Senate initially were not in favor of the corporation concept, a compromise has now been brokered between the Governor and the House, so the Senate plans to amend the legislation Friday May 2, 2008 to ensure that: "The state Office of Insurance Regulation would have more say, employees would have more time to keep their current health plans if an employer switches to cheaper ones, and the new corporation would abide by open-records laws and be free of industry board members who would otherwise profit from their votes." House leaders have said that they'll likely take the legislation and pass it Friday May 2nd.

This corporation would be designed to help small employers with fewer than 50 workers, navigate the complex world of employee-sponsored healthcare. It would help them define what benefits they seek, how much they want to contribute to an employee health plan and help them figure out and file the proper paperwork. At the same time, the corporation would negotiate with health-plan providers, whether they were insurers or part of a new health network providing anything from traditional outpatient care to chiropractic services to acupuncture. Those health-service plans that aren't run by insurance companies would be regulated by the corporation.

Florida has the third-highest rate of the uninsured in the nation, with 20.2 percent of its population uncovered. About 43 percent of all Floridians age 18 to 34 are uninsured. We will report back next week if this critical legislation was passed on the closing day of this legislative session.

NAR'S 2008 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA for upcoming mid-year legislative meetings in DC

REALTORS® from around the nation, including representatives of your association will be in Washington DC from May 12-18 to address members of Congress for completion of our legislative agenda and focusing on efforts to stabilize the nation's housing markets. The agenda for these meetings include:

Enact Housing Stimulus Legislation

- Establish a temporary tax credit or similar tax incentive for home buyers
- Modernize the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) single-family program
- Strengthen the safety and soundness of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac

Improve Access to Affordable Insurance

- Reauthorize the National Flood Insurance Program
- Address challenges in the homeowners' insurance market

Enact Small Business Health Care Legislation

- Secure cosponsors for S. 2795, the Small Business Health Options Program (SHOP)

We will keep our members informed as to these and other efforts and meetings held with our local representatives at this important conference. We will be meeting with Senators Nelson and Martinez as well as Congressman Connie Mack's Legislative Director Francis Gibbs and Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Shultz.

Finally, members that wish to follow what is happening with our representatives in Washington DC may now do so through "Open Congress". This is a new website that is a very useful tool that you can personalize to your Member of Congress, specific issues or bills, or states. You can have a look for yourself at www.opencongress.org.

Lee County removes \$73.9 million from the tax rolls due to property value challenges. A record number of petitions filed against the Lee County Property Appraiser's office has resulted in millions being saved in taxes by those Lee County property owners who took issue with values the property appraiser's office assigned their homes, condos, commercial properties and vacant tracts.

The county's more than 3,700 petitions challenging assessed values on more than 8,500 parcels of land in the county this year was the most ever received by the Appraiser's office. Florida law guarantees this opportunity to challenge the values the county assesses, even though few challenges succeed. But in many cases with the correct evidence, a challenge will win. Although with nearly 3,000 challenges from residential property owners, more than 97 percent were not approved. But a small group of Lee County taxpayers did receive a reduced assessment from the

Value Adjustment Board. That board is comprised of several County Commissioners along with school board members who formally accept the recommendations of the special magistrates. At their meeting they did award approximately \$73.9 million in reductions from the total assessed property values in the county.

About 64 percent of the petitions the county received this year went to a hearing, and of those, a little more than 6 percent were granted. Petitions for an agricultural exemption had the best success rates with more than 20 percent of those petitions granted. There were also 347 petitioners who ended up working out adjustments with the property appraiser's office ahead of the value adjustment board's decisions.

Even with the board reducing more than \$73 million in assessed value from Lee County's property assessments rolls, it still leaves the county with taxable real property values of more than \$92 billion. Under a proposed voter referendum in November, challengers may have a better change if the language as proposed and discussed last week is approved, which gives the property owner the preponderance of evidence as opposed to the Property Appraiser's office which is the definition now utilized. FAR and your association supports this ballot initiative.

Upcoming Meeting, Hearings and Workshops of Interest

Public Policy Committee Meeting on May 8, 2008, 9 am Education Center.

Party in Paradise RPAC Appreciation event and auction, May 21, 2008. At The Village Center at Paseo, from 5 to 8 pm.

Florida Gulf Coast University's Continuing Education and Off-Campus Programs, in collaboration with The Southwest Florida Chapter American Institute of Architects, will present "Greenprint: A Vision for Southwest Florida." The program will feature State Sen. Burt Saunders and Dennis Gilkey of Gilkey Organization, who will provide an update on the recent Florida legislative session and information on a regional vision of sustainability in Southwest Florida. The event runs from 9 to 11:30 a.m. on May 22 in the FGCU Student Union ballroom, and is open to the public. For more information or to register, contact Continuing Education and Off-Campus Programs at (239) 590-1095.

Board of County Commissioners, first public hearing on updates to the eagle protection and flood hazard ordinances, May 27, 5:05 p.m., Commission Chambers.

Board of County Commissioners, second public hearing on updates to the eagle protection and flood hazard ordinances, June 10, 5:05 p.m., Commission Chambers.

FAR's Annual Smart Growth and New Urbanism Series: World Golf Village

June 6, 2008

Location: Davidson Realty

100 E. Town Place, Ste 100

St. Augustine, FL, 32092

Details: FAR's Office of Public Policy at

850.224.1400