

BUSINESS PROFILE

A model of consensus building

BY MARY BRIGGS
Special to Florida Weekly

Dan Delisi spreads a large map across a folding table in the meeting room of a Port Charlotte homeowners association. A handful of the community's residents are gathered around him. He starts by explaining why they were invited to meet this day and then points to areas on the map, highlighting boundaries and points of interest along the way. Then he's quiet and asks the group for their input, their vision of what they'd like to see developed or not developed in the region.

It's a scenario he's prompted in hundreds of meetings over the years. Not just for this group, which has gathered to discuss a study of the U.S. Highway 17 corridor in Charlotte County, but also for dozens of other stakeholders in the study area and for a score of other similar projects he's worked on during his career.

Delisi is one of the principals of Delisi Fitzgerald, a planning and engineering firm based in Fort Myers. As an urban planner, his job is to manage government approvals relating to community planning, comprehensive plan amendments, and zoning for his clients, which include public entities and private sector firms.

"I believe in a consensus-building approach to planning," Delisi said. "My experience has been that it pays off to involve as many people as possible in the community planning process. When you get input from residents, environ-



Dan Delisi

COURTESY PHOTO

mentalists, community leaders, anyone and everyone who is a stakeholder in any particular project, you end up with a better plan, a better vision."

The key, he said, is to listen, a trait he learned while being trained in dispute resolution at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Long before a public hearing is scheduled, Delisi holds dozens of meetings with anyone who could potentially have an impact on, or be impacted by, a development project. This may include utility managers, school planners, environmental groups, business owners or transportation planners.

"By getting input early and including people in the planning process, you have fewer surprises when a project finally gets in front of a city council or board of commission for approval," he said.

Community groups around the state are getting more vocal in their opposition to growth and development, and the Internet and e-mail are making it easier for them to organize and oppose projects. It's become so prevalent it has its own term - NIMBYism, or "Not In My Backyard."

"People want to be heard," Delisi said. "They want to have a say in what happens in their neighborhood. When they

get that, they become your supporters."

Delisi has worked on a number of high profile projects in Lee, Collier, Hendry, DeSoto and Charlotte counties over the years. He is currently leading the visioning for 4,000 acres designated Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource (DR/GR) for the city of Bonita Springs, and recently completed a Development of Regional Impact in Hendry County.

In Charlotte County, he led a public/private partnership with county staff and multiple property owners in a 22,000-acre area in the Burnt Store corridor. That effort has been lauded as a model for community planning and landed him on the list of the "Top 10 People of the Year" by a columnist for the Charlotte Sun newspaper.

Delisi is just 35, young for having had such a distinguished career. He's served on a number of committees related to growth management, including being appointed by the Speaker of the House to a 15-member Florida Impact Fee Review Task Force, which was created as a result of growth management legislation. Prior to forming Delisi Fitzgerald with his business partner Drew Fitzgerald, he worked for the Bonita Bay Group as its director of planning.

Meanwhile, the U.S. 17 Corridor study moves forward. The project is in between two public workshops and more small-group meetings are being scheduled.

"It's more time consuming to do community planning this way," Delisi said. "There are a lot more meetings and a lot of input to include, but what you get in the end is a better community. And isn't that what it's really all about?" ■

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