

Business Review



**PLANNING:
ENGINEER
RELATIONS**
Engineers now
must sell their
clients' projects
to communities.
Story on Page 8

**SPECIAL SECTION:
CONSTRUCTION
GUIDE 2007**
SEE PAGE 21
A look at the top 30
construction projects
on the Gulf Coast.

DEVELOPMENT by Jean Gross | Editor/Lee Collier



PR Engineers

Engineers and urban planners now have to sell their clients' projects to neighbors, environmentalists and government agencies. One firm melds this brand of public relations with its engineering and planning services.

REVIEW SUMMARY

Industry. Engineering and urban planning

Company. DeLisi Fitzgerald Inc.

Key. The rising clout of community groups opposed to growth means firms should be more engaging during the planning stages to be successful.

rumors of a new landfill near a residential community.

As community groups around the state become more vocal in their opposition to growth and development, engineering and planning firms are increasingly thrust into the political arena. Engineers and planners are now becoming lobbyists and public relations experts for their clients, roles that they're unac-

customed to. (At rival firms, DeLisi jokes planners are little more than "permit processors" for engineers.)

Those new roles are likely to become more important if the Hometown Democracy movement gains steam. If the Hometown petitioners get enough signatures to put the issue on next year's statewide ballot and Florida voters approve, it will force people to vote on any major land-use change. Developers then will have to "sell" their projects to voters, much as politicians appeal to them now.

Fact is, smart developers are already doing much of that political and public relations work today. They're hiring firms such as DeLisi Fitzgerald to draft and engineer development plans in concert with surrounding landowners, environmentalists, politicians and others.

In Charlotte County, for example, Waste Management had planned to build offices and a truck-washing facility, but failed to inform any of the neighboring communities. The secrecy backfired and it became a textbook example of the wrong way to plan a project. Unfounded rumors of a landfill spread quickly

through the nearby neighborhood, threatening the project. Although the County Commission ultimately approved the project, it was one that nearly failed because of miscommunication.

By the time a development reaches commission meetings, it's often too late to change public opinion, especially if neighbors don't approve. "Trust is the most difficult thing to repair," DeLisi says.

Resolving disputes upfront

Before he founded his firm last year, DeLisi, 34, was director of planning for the Bonita Bay Group. The Bonita Springs-based developer is well known in development circles for pioneering developments in consensus rather than in court with neighbors, environmentalists and government entities.

DeLisi isn't just an urban planner. "I was trained at M.I.T. in dispute resolution," he says.

So what's the secret to neutralizing the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) crowd?

"There's no fail-proof way of doing this," DeLisi insists.

But he starts with a simple prem-

ise that most people are reasonable. "I just sit down with people and talk to them," he says.

The firm prefers to bring interested parties together in small groups. "It's much more proactive to get people to talk in small meetings," DeLisi says. Most people won't speak up at large gatherings.

The key is to start communicating long before anything reaches zoning hearings and establish regular monthly meetings. If a developer involves neighbors in the planning process, it's much more likely to be approved by politicians. "Most county commissioners react to what they think community groups want," DeLisi says, adding, "Eighty percent of those who show up at commission meetings are misinformed."

When he's lined up public support for a project he makes sure everyone shows up at government meetings so commissioners or council members can see there's broad support for a development plan.

In many cases, DeLisi is involved in helping developers increase the number of homes per acre. One of DeLisi's favorite props to persuade neighbors to accept higher densities is an aerial photo of Golden Gate, the area east of Interstate-75 in Collier County where low-density has created urban sprawl choked by traffic.

Still, developers are often reluc-

Growing in the downturn

Starting an engineering and urban planning firm in the midst of a residential downturn takes guts. "I'm much more of a risk taker," says DeLisi. "My daughter was born two weeks after I started this company."

But large developers in Southwest Florida such as Bonita Bay Group are looking past the downturn to the eventual rebound, providing a stable flow of work to DeLisi's new firm, DeLisi Fitzgerald Inc. "Everyone is moving ahead with entitlement work."

That's because changing the land use on big tracts can take years, especially if it involves hundreds of acres. By then, most developers believe the residential market will have

returned to a more normal pace.

In addition to work for private firms such as Bonita Bay Group, DeLisi's firm has found work in the public sector. For example, it's working on a plan for 18,000 acres in western Hendry County and another for the city of Bonita Springs.

DeLisi Fitzgerald has eight people in its Fort Myers office. "We'll be up to 15 in three years no matter what the market does," he says. DeLisi declines to cite revenue targets.

What's more, he plans to eventually open offices in Tampa and Orlando. "I'd love to be on the east coast," he adds. "We're ready to go and do it."

—Jean Gruss

tant to share their plans. "Some developers are scared of doing it," DeLisi says. But it pays to involve others in the process because it can head off costly problems later on. For example, a project can easily be delayed by months if a municipality rejects a certain part of the plan. What's more, it could involve costly fees to draft new engineering plans.

For the most part, elected officials in Southwest Florida aren't as anti-growth as they may sometimes appear. "The vast majority don't want moratoriums," DeLisi says. There are bigger threats to the residential market than vocal opponents of growth, he says: property tax inequities and homeowners insurance, both of which the state has failed to properly fix.

And DeLisi Fitzgerald is politically active. "We get involved in campaigns," DeLisi says, including fundraising for candidates the firm deems friendly.

That even includes supporting candidates with an environmental bent. "I expect people to have an open mind," DeLisi says. "I don't want to hear 'I'm against density.'"

For example, DeLisi Fitzgerald recently supported Adam Cummings' successful campaign for a seat on the Charlotte County Commission. Cummings, who was backed by the Sierra Club, understands good urban planning, DeLisi says.



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