

CHARLOTTE

OUR TOWN

Student Union
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JOHN HACKWORTH

Seats aplenty at meeting

Andy Dodd.
Charlotte Ventola.
Grace Amodeo.
Peter Taylor.
Bill Coy.
Audrey Seay.
T.J. Thornberry.
Bill Truex.
Jennifer Byrd.
Suzanne Graham.
Larry Olliff.

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

www.sunnewspapers.net

Charlotte Sun editor: Christy Arnold

That's it. Those are the names of everyone — other than a handful of county staff members and a Tallahassee lawyer who just dropped by — who attended Tuesday's Charlotte County Commission meeting in Room 119 at the County Administration Building.

The commission chambers are anything but enormous, but the room seemed cavernous Tuesday with the small turnout.

Perhaps it is a sign of the times. Most people are concerned with their portfolios and mortgage payments or finding a job nowadays. In contrast, the workings of the Charlotte County Commission seem unimportant to most.

Perhaps it is the agenda? But Tuesday, commissioners took on topics like adjusting impact fees; redressing a sea grant position that was trimmed in budget talks; asking Punta Gorda to share some money; and whether to

comment on plans for a new phosphate mine in the Horse Creek area. And all that happened between 10:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

Even Commission Chairwoman Tricia Duffy noticed the lack of people in the audience — although the small turnout is nothing unusual.

"I'm surprised," Duffy said, "that we have not heard more from the public (on impact fees). There is no one here from the rural areas — not one person."

She noted that the adjusted fee schedule, which commissioners passed, will impact anyone who wants to build outside the urban service area.

Of the dozen or so people who did attend, half of them represented the Charlotte-DeSoto Building Industry Association. They each took their turn speaking out against any changes to the current fee structure — greatly lowered last year by commissioners

Seay, who attends at least one meeting per month as a representative of the Arts and Humanities Council and as chair of the government relations committee for Team Punta Gorda, is used to the empty seats.

"Sometimes it's boring, but there are important things that are discussed here," she said. "I have only seen a large crowd a couple of times, when they were discussing MSBUs."

The Sun has appealed in the past to commissioners to have night meetings. But apparently they took a stab at that recently, and attendance was about the same.

"People don't come because they think someone else will look out for them," Seay said.

I am curious about the low turnout. Is it because of the daytime slot? Is it because no one cares? Is it because everyone is too busy? Is it because no one reads advance stories in the Sun or checks the agenda to see what

topics will be discussed? Do people believe they cannot make a difference? Do we write too much about the commission?

I'd like to hear from readers. Call me at 941-206-1147 or e-mail me at hackworth@sun-herald.com.

I really want to know. After all, as Seay said, "It's worth going just to see the interaction between the commissioners."