

# City stands ground on bypass project

By GREG GILES NEWS EDITOR VENICE GONDOLIER

City council on Tuesday voted unanimously to stick to its guns in support of the six lane widening project on U.S. 41 Bypass.

It's been the No. 1 priority of the Sarasota-Manatee Metropolitan Planning Organization, the regional transportation board, for over 15 years.

But recently the MPO voted 9-5 to change at least some sections of the project in favor of keeping it to four lanes. The MPO wants the city of Venice to consider enhancements or even a roundabout instead.

Council members were united in their rejection of the idea.

"I'm not sure why we're even revisiting this," said Council Member John Moore. "It's taken 15 years to get here. If we don't send the strongest message possible we want to move forward with the project in a timely fashion, I don't believe we will ever see this in our lifetime."

"We are being asked to be the tail that wags the dog," said Mayor John Holic.

"I don't think Venice is in a position right now to say we need more roundabouts," said Council Member Jeanette Gates. "Venice's median age is 67 years of age. I don't know they can change into that. It's also a problem with the drawbridges. I don't know they would work well together."

Sarasota MPO member Rod Warner made a second presentation to the council about the benefits of roundabouts and traffic-light management on Tuesday, but it was clear from council comments the recommendation to partake in a traffic study or further consider the idea wasn't going anywhere.

Warner agreed that rethinking how to address traffic congestion can be a difficult topic, but urged council to keep an open mind. The city of Sarasota, which is planning a series of roundabouts on U.S. 41 at Sarasota Bay, only came to the conclusion it was beneficial in the last 18 months, he said.

Venice hasn't even vetted the idea or held a workshop on it.

Warner said he thinks city leaders are concerned the \$36 million that was moved up two years early by the Florida Department of Transportation for right-of-way purchases in the project will evaporate if the MPO doesn't act now.

"It won't," he said. "The project will remain the No. 1 priority of the MPO. The funding will be there."

North Port City Commissioner David Garofalo, new chair of the MPO, told Venice council members he wanted to voice strong support for Venice, referring to newspaper accounts of a divided MPO on the issue with some local governments vying for the funds.

"We want to make sure there is a strong olive branch out there, and there is not a newspaper dividing us," Garofalo said.

"The idea has merit," said retired judge Don O'Connell. "... if they would have come to us with this 20 years ago. Right now it's throwing a wrench into the process. They have the money and don't want to lose it."

Tuesday's vote now means the MPO will have to address the issue yet again, likely in March, when it reconciles differences among local jurisdictions and presents its final priority list to the Florida Department of Transportation.

## Pineapples signs OK'd

In other news, Pineapples Island Grille won unanimous approval for a sign variance Tuesday. The city planning commission, unsure of its authority to allow such a variance,

the first of its kind in its zoning district, denied the sign variance last year. Pineapples owner Tom Carney appealed the decision.

What appeared to seal the decision was the fact that the current letters on the building would have to be made even smaller to accommodate additional lettering (“Island Grille”) and an emblem to meet its variance request.

“This is a branding-marketing issue for his restaurant,” said Carney’s attorney Greg Roberts. “Pineapples’ doesn’t identify what it is.”

“I don’t see it as the eyesore I initially thought it might be,” said Vice Mayor Kit McKeon.

Some council members objected to granting variances, but even staff recommended granting it because of the restaurant’s large building size, in this case 9,000 square feet, in a zoning district mostly defined by buildings that are 2,500 sq. ft. The property is on the fringe of the zoning district, across the street on U.S. 41, separating it from nearly all other buildings in the district.

“It’s the perfect reason why you have variances,” Roberts said.

Asked by McKeon if the city was opening Pandora’s box by granting the request, city planner Roger Clark said he didn’t think it would.

“When writing an ordinance you try to do the one-size-fit-all. But they don’t always fit all. There is always going to be some anomaly. The intent was for areas (with) relatively small storefronts. This is a large building. I think this is the appropriate kind of request.”

Not everyone was satisfied with council’s decision.

Former Mayor Ed Martin said it would hurt the esthetics of the community.

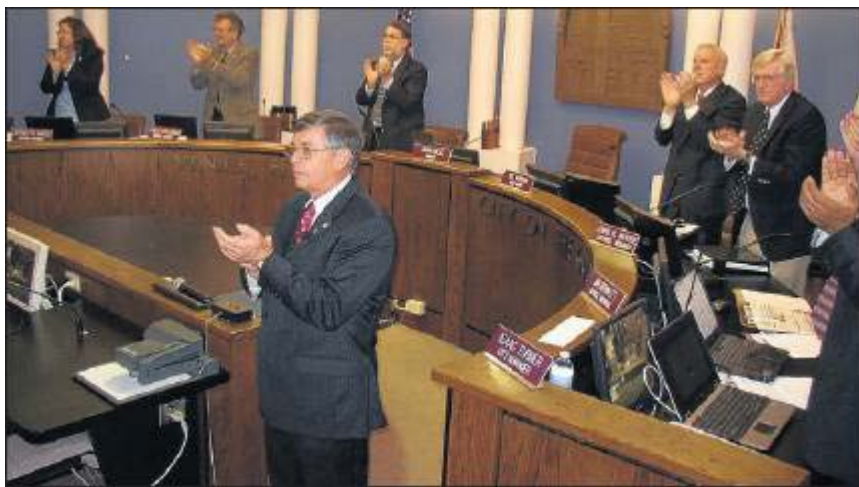
“You do not need a big sign to have a successful bar and grill,” he said, and showed additional photos of restaurants and other successful businesses with smaller signs.

“This project doesn’t meet any of the criteria” listed in city rules for a variance, Martin said. “There is no hardship. It’s very successful. There is no evidence the public would be served” by granting the variance.

It might lead to “a bunch of requests and begin to change the cityscape we have now.”

During Martin’s tenure the city challenged the color scheme of the restaurant and ordered an audit of the restaurant’s renovation costs over a concern it violated a permitting rule.

[gqiles@venicegondolier.com](mailto:gqiles@venicegondolier.com)



SUN PHOTO BY GREG GILES

Venice City Council members applaud first responders who reacted to last week’s multiple car accident on Harbor Drive. The council on Tuesday made decisions to continue supporting the bypass widening project, granted a sign variance for Pineapples Island Grille, and scrapped a harbor mooring project.