

June 2020 Issues Committee Report

Florida Law Restricting Voting Rights for Felons Unconstitutional

'On May 24, US District Judge Robert L. Hinkle moves hundreds of thousands of felons who have completed "all terms of their sentence including probation and parole" one step closer to winning back their right to vote. The judge faulted the State for failing to come up with a way for felons to determine what they may owe the State or for them to show they are unable to afford the payment. He ordered the division of elections to put in place a new process for felons to request an advisory opinion on whether they are eligible to vote. If they are not answered within 21 days, they will be allowed to register.

The Governor's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but the State is expected to appeal the decision.' (This was taken from a May 24th NPA News release.)

Redistricting (Updated – June 2020)

This issue needs to stay front and center for this County Commission election; we do not want this to rest. While the Redistricting was not illegal, the Commissioners' actions ignored what the voters sought, Commissioners Accountable, and in a purely political move changed the district boundaries for 2020 Commission elections. Commissioners have returned to court to ask the defendant to pay for Court costs.

Background: The Voters in November 2018, voted via petition, to change how county commissioners are elected by switching from countywide election to voters living within a district selecting their commissioner. The Commissions in May 2019 made a moved to redistrict before 2020 election to shield one or more of the current Commissions by change district boundaries to move more Republican voters into certain districts. The redistricting changes also meant that the 2020 Democratic candidate Fredd Akins for District 1 was no longer eligible to run. He was no longer a resident in District 1 as redistricting changed the District 1 borders, excluding his residence and his ability to run for the open seat.

A judge has ruled in May against Fredd Akins in the redistricting lawsuit, finding that new Sarasota County Commission districts will stand. The following was taken from Jacob Ogles reporting on May 4, 'Judge rules Sarasota County redistricting legal, new (*district*) lines stand for 2020.' "There is simply no record evidence that the main driver of this was skin color, rather than **simple political gerrymandering** and 'hardball' **partisan incumbent protection**," US Judge William Jung said. Additional, the individual that provided the 'new districting map,' in a deposition, "Waechter said he did not use census data but voter registration to redraw maps, but could not provide much on his personal process as he had wiped and destroyed a hard drive in his computer."

Siesta Key Beach Road

Also, in the 2018 election, voters petitioned (there were two petitions) the Commissioners to retain ownership of Beach Road. These voters approved both amendments by more than 65%. The Commissioners proceed to take both adopted amendments to the courts to have them overturned. The result for residents is the new owners of Beach Road have moved to fences off portions of the beach to protect themselves from visitors. The reason was visitors could have COVID-19. These fences were just recently removed for environmental reasons, and the owners have now put up signs that indicate 'membership tags' are needed.

Update: In a move, some residents decried as a way to muzzle the public, the **County Commissioners** also proposed tightening the county's rules for placing petitions on the ballot. The Commissioners moved to increase the signature requirement for registered voters and to impose a start date for a petition signature to qualify for future initiatives.

Sierra Club – Sarasota County Ready for 100 Initiative

The Sierra Club, with the Suncoast Climate Justice Coalition (SCJC), is expanding its efforts to address climate change by working on increasing the use of solar energy in our local and State government facilities. The SCJC, with its 'Ready for 100' program, is asking for support of its petition to the Sarasota County

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Commissioners to take action on the climate crisis seriously and put our county on a path to clean 100% renewable energy for all. Learn More: <https://www.suncoastclimate.org/>.

Democratic Party Platform: “Democrats believe that climate change poses a real and urgent threat to our economy, our national security, and our children's health and futures and that Americans deserve the jobs and security that come from becoming the clean energy superpower of the 21st century.”

Sign the petition: https://addup.sierraclub.org/campaigns/were-on-a-mission-to-commit-sarasota-to-a-100-clean-renewable-energy-future---join-us?promoid=70131000001LjgmAAC&utm_medium=recruit&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=addup

Benderson Siesta Promenade

Per Sura Kochman's recent update, the Second District Court of Appeals, a provisional date has been set for the oral arguments (via video) in the appeal of the Sarasota County Commissioners' decision to allow the Benderson project to go forward. The court hearing scheduled for Tuesday, June 23, 2020, at 11 am at the 2nd District Court of Appeals, Tampa Branch Headquarters, in the courtroom of the Stetson University College of Law, Tampa Campus, First Floor, 1700 North Tampa Street, Tampa, FL. The panel of judges consists of Judge Robert J. Morris, Jr.; Judge Daniel H. Sleet; and Judge Matthew C. Lucas. Sura has a google drive set up with the latest filing documents. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1d28P79WyPN - Tuhy05Yz2Hqa51-itqS/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1d28P79WyPN-Tuhy05Yz2Hqa51-itqS/view)

Associated with this Benderson Project, is the possibility of a traffic light on Stickney Point Road. This light (at Avenue A&B on Stickney Point Road) will be needed to allow traffic to exit the Siesta Promenade onto Stickney Point Road to go Eastbound. So far, FDOT is against a traffic light as it is too close to the intersection of Stickney Point and 41. The County Commissioners road swap (River Road for Siesta Drive and Stickney Point Road) has not been completed as yet.

Farm Fishing Offshore

To my knowledge, no additional feedback has been received on the January EPA hearing on the permit to erect a fish farm in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Venice. Let me know if anyone has seen anything regarding continuing this project. The EPA received more than 9,000 comments. There is no predetermined deadline for a response from the EPA on this project's permit. Those people that submitted comments and providing an email address are to receive information when the decision is made.

COVID-19

- Over 112,000 deaths have been reported in the US from COVID-19. In Florida, the numbers of cases are rising with 60,813 cases (plus another 1,180 that are affected but aren't Florida residents) and 2,607 deaths. On June 2nd, the Miami Herald-Tribune reported that Florida's coronavirus cases top 1,000 for the fifth day in a row as testing steadily increases. This testing brings the current instances in Florida closer to 64,000 known cases. In May, the number of confirmed reported cases in Sarasota was 647, with 80 deaths. In Manatee, there were 1,074 confirmed cases and 98 deaths
- Almost half the states do not track the race and ethnicity for those who have died in the pandemic. And States that are tracking racial and ethnic data do not account for age differences among population groups — making it difficult to compare the risk of COVID-related death across groups accurately.

However, available data from the States show that some racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to die of COVID-19 than whites. And a new, age-adjusted analysis by researchers at Yale and the University of Pittsburgh provides a clearer picture of the devastation COVID-19 has caused in black and Latino communities in particular. The study led by Yale researchers, which appeared as a

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preprint in mid-May, used more recent data, assessed its quality, and adjusted for age in their analysis. Lead study author Dr. Cary Gross and colleagues found that black Americans are 3.5 times more likely to die of COVID-19 than white Americans.

M-CORES new toll Highway planned for the center of Florida

With COVID-19-related budget cuts looming, should the Governor kill budget-busting road projects, such as the M-CORES, the budget-busting proposal to build three roads to nowhere through rural western Florida? <https://floridamcores.com/>. The opposition to the project is discussed in this Tampa Bay Times article: <https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/2020/03/03/florida-doesnt-want-these-toll-roads-to-ruin-column/>

"At several meetings, Florida Department of Transportation's representatives have instructed task force members not to question the "need" for the roads, even though that is part of their purpose, as defined by the legislation. And with only six months remaining in the rushed 13-month process, DOT has not provided critical information, such as economic viability, demonstrated need, and potential road alignments."

The Approved State Budget also supports the expansion of the School Voucher Program

The approved budget proposals expand eligibility for the State's school-choice scholarship program, already the nation's largest with about 150,000 students receiving vouchers to attend private and religious (Christian and Parochial) schools. The maximum number of students allowed participating in the FES scholarship program increases annually by 1% of the total public school student enrollment. Also, included in the bills are changes provisions relating to educator preparation programs, subject area mastery, and renewal of educator certificates.

Where do we go from here? Recommendations, suggestions?