

12 • NATION/WORLD • SUNDAY, MAY 28, 2006 • THE TAMPA TRIBUNE • TBO.com



Tribune photo by CHRIS URIO

Liz Taylor leads Pam Wharton from the beach to the Sandcastle Apartments in Madeira Beach. Taylor's mom built the Sandcastle, now flanked by high-rise condos, in the 1960s. "It's sort of heartbreaking," Taylor says of the changes. "It's like watching your old neighborhood go."



Tribune map

CHANGING BEACHFRONT

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beach towns and cities from St. Pete Beach to Clearwater Beach.

Developers are gobbling up prime locations along the coastline with an appetite not seen since the condo booms of the 1970s and 1980s.

Their main targets: aging or rundown beachfront motels and apartments whose land has become too valuable to be used for 30- or 90-night rooms. Replacing them are taller, high-priced condos and condo-hotels with fancy names and deep-pocketed clientele.

"These condos are a million and above," said Laura Labadie, another Indian Rocks Beach innkeeper. "Nobody but the rich people will be able to come to the beach again."

City and tourism officials generally support the changes, saying they are revitalizing the barrier islands and enriching tax bases. Small-business operators fear the long-term viability of the beach tourism economy and mourn the loss of the little, idiosyncratic inns just steps from the surf.

"It's sort of heartbreaking," said Liz Taylor, whose mother, Geraldine, built and ran the Sandcastle Apartments in Madeira Beach from 1964 until her death last month at age 86.

"It's like watching your old neighborhood go," said Taylor of Tampa. "I had my first birthday here on the beach."

The family is putting the property up for sale, hoping that a buyer will continue to operate it.

The fading places join such long-gone institutions as Tiki Gardens on Indian Shores, the Tropicana and the Long Way Museum on St. Pete Beach attractions that targeted Central Florida day-trippers and vacationing Midwesterners.

Many of the deepest fishing concessions, located Gulf Boulevard from Pass-a-Grille to Clearwater Beach, with a stronghold in Madeira Beach, have disappeared. Gulf Gold, a 1960s-era, go-course on Treasure Island; John Foss Marina, a landmark on the south shore of the nautical channel of the same name; and Parsley's mobile park on Redington Shores recently have been demolished to make way for upscale residences.

Soaring property taxes most often are cited as the reason motel owners are seeking to increase room rates, changing consumer tastes, or an inability to raise room rates on older motels also play a part.

"I don't know how other people can afford it, but I just don't think it makes sense financially," said Rosemary Pett, who for nearly 25 years ran the Seahorse Cottages & Apartments, a mainstay on Treasure Island since 1980.

Pett and her husband, Tom, bought the assembly of white cottages with aqua trim in 1980. The couple before they ran the business for 30 years.

Many of the visitors they inherited had been coming to the Seahorse for decades, attracted by the personalized attention they received and having the beach at their front doors for cookouts and family get-togethers.

Pett sold the business to a developer for \$1.5 million in 2003. She died later that year. Her husband, a retired principal at St. Petersburg High School who handled much of the maintenance.

"Mostly I sold it because it's too hard to run a mom-and-pop business without the pop," Pett said. "My husband was never going to sell it. I just couldn't hold on emotionally anymore."

Wilkerison, the Indian Rocks Beach innkeeper, also is flirting with extinction.

She said she paid a whopping \$70,000 in 2003 property taxes on her beachside rentals, Gulfside Resorts and Sarah's Seaside villas, named

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Developers say tourists want more.

When Liz Taylor's mother, Geraldine, started offering for her Sandcastle Apartments, developers built enough beachfront life at the place she deserved, built and ran since 1964. "I just don't know where families are going to stay when they come to the beach; it's all condos now," Liz Taylor said her mother would often say.

Ken Hamilton, 51, grew up working on Clearwater Beach after his father bought the Palm Pavilion Hotel in the 1960s. "I've been selling Coca-Cola to girls in bikinis since 1960," he said. Then, he recalled, he would see repeat customers staying in mom-and-pop motels.

That has changed. "The economy is shifting toward condos and condo-hotels," he said. "It's not about being in favor or against [them], it's about the inevitable."



Small shops and motels used to define Pinellas County beaches. "Now they're all starting to look the same," says Pat Elias, co-owner of The Florida Shell Shop in Treasure Island.



Rosie DeYoung doesn't mind the changes. She says many of the new condo residents hang out at the Bamboo Beer Garden in Madeira Beach. "Most people buying these condos are from out-of-town visitors to the area for decades."



Anne Garris, left, talks to residents Rosemarie and Douglas Bonnington, as Patricia and Dick Stelbelton enjoy the sunset at Clearwater Beach.