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Liz Taylor leads Pam Wharton of Iowa 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."



When Liz Taylor's mother, Geraldine, spurned offers for her Sandcastle Apartments, developers built 10-story condominiums on each side and about 40 feet closer to the Gulf of Mexico, dwarfing her two-story Madeira Beach triplex.

"They called her a holdout," recalled Taylor, 47, of Tampa. "And because the name of the apartments was the Sandcastle, they called her queen and her castle, standing in the way of progress."

She held out until the end. Geraldine Taylor died in April at age 86, fulfilling her wish to live out her life at the place she designed, built and managed 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 1966," he said. Then, he recalled, visitors were repeat customers staying in mom-and-pop motels.

That has changed. "The economy is shifting today to 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 her Bamboo Beer Garden in Madeira Beach. "Most people buying these condos have been visitors coming to the area for decades."



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

PINELLAS COUNTY BEACHES



Tribune map

CHANGING BEACHFRONT

Continued From Page 1

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 boom of the 1970s and 1980s.

Their main targets: aging or run-down beachfront motels and apartments whose land has become too valuable to support \$100-a-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 town 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 county's tourist-based 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 on 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 181 Gardens on Indian Shores, the Aquarium and the London Wax Museum on St. Pete Beach, attractions that targeted Central Florida day-trippers and vacationing Midwesterners.

Many of the deep-sea fishing concessions that dotted Gulf Boulevard from Pass-a-Grille to Clearwater Beach, with a stronghold in Madeira Beach, have disappeared.

Gulf Golf, a 50s-era putter-golf course on Treasure Island; Johns Pass 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.

Souring property taxes most often are cited as the reason motel owners are selling out. High insurance costs, changing consumer tastes and an inability to raise room rates on older motels also play a part.

"I don't know how other people can afford to do it now. It just doesn't make sense financially," said Rosemary Petit, who for nearly 25 years ran the Seahorse Cottages & Apartments, a mainstay on Treasure Island since 1938.

Petit and her husband, Tom, bought the assembly of white cottages with aqua trim in 1980. The couple before them 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.

Petit sold the business to a developer for \$1.8 million in 2004, shortly after the death of 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," Petit said. "My husband was never going to sell it. I just couldn't hold on emotionally anymore."

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

She said she paid a whopping \$70,000 in 2005 property taxes on her beachside rentals, Gulfside Resorts and Sarah's Seaside villas, named

See SEASIDE CONVERSION, Page 13 ▸
Developers say tourists want more.