



Tribune photos by CHRIS URSO

Mary Wilkerson inspects the cupboards in a rental unit at Gulfside Resorts in Indian Rocks Beach. She and her husband, Lee, are struggling to hold onto Gulfside and Sarah's Seaside villas, for which they paid \$70,000 in property taxes in 2005.

SEASIDE CONVERSION

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after her 17-year-old daughter. She and her husband, Lee, are struggling to hold on to their properties — and the dream of their daughter one day taking over the business.

"This has been something that we've worked very, very hard for and put a lot of our time and energy toward," Wilkerson said. "It's like this great unknown black cloud that kind of hangs over everything."

Being Priced Out

Since 2001, Pinellas has lost about 5,000 of its nearly 40,000 rooms to condo development, county tourism officials said.

Many visitors are being priced out of the market or choosing to go elsewhere, Madeira Beach Mayor Charles Parker said.

"They have no place to stay," Parker said. "The only thing they can do is rent a condominium, which becomes a much more expensive proposition. Maybe a few do that. But I do think we've lost a great number of our traditional winter visitors."

It's not just a local problem. The loss of hotel rooms along Florida's coast is fast becoming a statewide issue, one the Legislature attempted to tackle this session through a variety of property tax relief bills that went nowhere.

The pressures to sell may cause even the most determined motel owners to give in.

Teresa Tas has owned Gem Tower Apartment Motels on Clearwater Beach for 15 years but knows time is almost up.

"I raised my kids. I made a living here. It was OK, but with changes — it's difficult not making enough money to survive," said Tas, 52. "Our room rates should go up, but we can't do that. Our hotel is older, and we have customers that have paid the same price for years and got used to that."

Several motel owners said Pinellas County Property Appraiser Jim Smith is contributing to their demise by assessing property according to its "highest and best use."

"They say, 'You're valuing us as if we were a condo,'" Smith said. "People don't realize that market sets the value."

Change Is Inevitable

The trend of converting aging motels and apartments to condos began about five years ago and is most prevalent on Clearwater Beach.

"For Clearwater Beach, there really hadn't been any new residential de-

When Betsy and Burton Schoepf moved from Tampa and bought a 1918 beachside bungalow for \$50,000 in 1977, Gulf Boulevard was

there were no sidewalks, and the shoulders were filled with sand spurs. Vacant land abounded, and most residents were retirees with modest incomes.

"You could shoot a cannon down Indian Rocks Beach and not hit anybody in the middle of the day," said Betsy Schoepf, 68, executive director of Indian Rocks Beach Art Center.



velopment in 20 years," said Steve McAuliffe, vice president of sales and marketing for JMC Communities, developers of beach condominium projects such as Belle Harbor and Mandala Beach Club.

"There was a definite need for new condominium housing on the beach. It continued in beautifully with the city's redevelopment programs to bring more residential activity to the beach," McAuliffe said.

JMC's newest project, The Sand Pearl, under construction, will include condo units and hotel suites.

"Vacation travelers' needs have changed over the years," McAuliffe said. "They want more amenities. The beach alone and swimming pool isn't enough any longer."

Joe Novogratz bought a condominium at Mandalay Beach Club in 2002 and stays three to four months a year. He and his wife, Amy, have come to Clearwater Beach for eight years and previously stayed at the now-demolished Clearwater Beach Hotel or the Sheraton.

Although Novogratz thinks some of the spring break crowd may dissipate "as a result of the beach upgrading," he thinks condominiums appeal to a broad range of people.

"I walk the beach and see all kinds of people," he said. "There's all classes on the beach. There's room and enough public access. Everybody that wants to be there can."

Yet some say the condos are making the beaches more homogeneous and sterile.

"When I came up here 15 years ago, each beach definitely had its own distinct character, which was really neat," said Pat Elias, co-owner of The Florida Shell Shop on Treasure Island. "Now they're all starting to look the same."

Still, most say the beaches probably won't become like Miami or Fort Lauderdale, with towering condos lined end to end, or even like Sand Key, a 1970s condo canyon south of Clearwater Beach.

Most Pinellas beach communities have ordinances limiting building heights to four or five stories.

Some longtime beach residents see the changes as inevitable and have taken a go-with-the-flow attitude.

Whether it's rowdiness at a public beach access, the ear-buzzing sounds of power skis at a boat ramp, or a multistory building rising next door, "all of us have to put up with something," said Betsy Schoepf, an Indian Rocks Beach resident

since 1977. "We've all learned to be very flexible," she said. "You just don't worry about it."

Brad Holybee, an owner of Candy Kitchen, a Madeira Beach landmark dating to 1950, said the redevelopment is overdue.

"It's time has come, and you've just got to roll with the changes and re-create yourself," he said.

Holybee said business hasn't been affected by the condo conversions.

Others say the gentrification of the beachfront has meant fewer patrons and less revenue. Motel visitors are more likely to shop and eat out, contributing to the local economy.

"The new people moving in, they've literally been here three months, and they're saying, 'What is happening to our island?'" Elias said. "I don't know how it got to be their island in three months because it's the tourists' island. That's the bottom line."

At the Bamboo Beer Garden in Madeira Beach, owner Rosie DeYoung said many condo newcomers patronize her landmark bar in Johns Pass Village.

"Most people buying these condos have been visitors coming to the area for decades," she said. "I am pleased with the quality of the people coming here. There was a time when there was a real transient force in the area."

Pat Ross, manager of The Green Turtle Shells and Gifts on Clearwater Beach, said the decline of motels, as well as the increased cost of gas and airline tickets, have meant less business. The owners may close in December, she said.

"If I didn't live here, I wouldn't come here. I couldn't afford it," Ross said. "This is just going to be a rich man's paradise."

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