

# Hendry-Glades SUNDAY NEWS

25 cents

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## What it's like . . . . In many ways, Phil Pelletier, now retiring, showed the county what it's like, to live and breathe integrity

By RAOUL BATALLER

LaBELLE, FL (Friday, Feb. 9) In many ways, Phil Pelletier showed Hendry county what it's like, to live and breathe integrity.

One day in the county commission room one racist commissioner, Janet Taylor, accused Recreation director Pelletier of holding up renovation of the ancient one-room Daniels school in the black area of LaBelle's Sunset park, in the face of constant theft by neighbors of building materials, insinuating a sense of racial partiality on Pelletier's part, and Taylor was stopped cold with her little stock speech by the towering righteous indignation of the late Mayor Sherri Craichy who strode into the meeting declaring no one in LaBelle would ever tolerate impugning the character of Mr. Pelletier in such an unfair manner.

In his second year as Property Appraiser Pelletier came upon a bit of residue of his now disgraced predecessor, former Property Appraiser Kristina Kulpa. She had made an agreement with U.S. Sugar whose most outrageous part was that as a result of the Value Adjustment board action, USSC paid \$660,000 less in taxes, which would be missing in rough thirds from the allocations among the county, school board and hospital. The largest third of it hit the Board of Education as it faced a schools budget deficit of more than \$2.7 million, and the board's state-imposed mandate to lower whatever property tax revenue it could muster to meet it.

Nowhere else in Florida were there to be found arrangements whereby an elected property appraiser set the tax rate for a business on the basis of private, secret deals worked out between politicians and business executives who contribute to their campaigns.

Except Hendry county, the bizarre lair of U.S. Sugar Corporation.

The big Company was enjoying the budget-smashing services of County Commissioner Tris Chapman, a USSC vice president, who was thrown out of office by Don Davis in November of 2012. For many years Chapman entranced the county crowd with misguided MBA notions, dramas that voters finally had enough of, notably that the hapless county management were "all good people doing their best," and that corporate intrigue had a rightful role in the conduct of the business of local municipi-



pal democracy. For awhile, end results trumped the people's processes.

Chapman's overkill on government agencies at budget time minimized the big company's tax bill, and they savored the force of hizzoner's personality dominating the 15-watt bulbs — commissioners and county manager — running things, when his tantrums didn't get the best of him.

The most laughable stipulation in Kulpa's secret deal — for the few years it was concealed, pinning values on the irrelevancy of the contents of an old mill no longer even in existence — was that it would be binding in perpetuity on other property appraisers elected after Kulpa.

Pelletier took the matter to the county's Value Adjustment Board on which sat county com-

missioners Karson Turner and school board members, including Ray Clinerd were all unwilling to confront U.S. Sugar, except for Julie Wilkins who voted nay and was subsequently removed from the board, allowed board lawyer Holly Cosby to persuade them that Kulpa's signature had binding validity that only a court could undo.

The VAB lawyer echoed U.S. Sugar lawyers that a constitutional officer in the state of Florida was no different than a corporation president whose signature represented a long-term commitment.

So as a result, Pelletier brought the lawsuit against the Company, and USSC was the defendant.

A Naples judge heard such nonsense from U.S. Sugar lawyers arguing that their rate of

taxation applying to the contents of their mill should be fixed to a formula that they — with USSC President Robert Buker's signature — devised with the complicity of former Property Appraiser, since then twice defeated, Kristina Kulpa. The court threw out Kulpa's agreement instantly.

In 2012, according to one estimate, USSC and its related political action fundraisers poured an estimated half a million dollars into a failed Kulpa election campaign, twenty times more than the incumbent. She lost to Pelletier.

A Letter in that political campaign signed by USSC President Robert Buker, Oct. 8, 2012, wrote of Property Appraiser Phil Pelletier, "The higher taxes he proposed will seriously jeopardize our ability to stay in business."

### Open Letter to All Hendry County Residents:

By PHILLIP PELLETIER

LaBELLE, FL (Friday, Feb. 9) Property Appraiser Phillip Pelletier, who served many years as a resourceful and energetic LaBelle area Recreation director and built the West Rec organization into a model agency, and served two terms highly regarded for his courage, religious convictions and honesty in two run-ins with the county's largest taxpayer as Property Appraiser, resigned this week to enjoy a relaxing retirement, effective March 30.

An appointee of Governor Scott may fill the interim vacancy until the November election of 2018, at which time the office will be filled by general election.

Pelletier an announcement letter. He said:

"I would like to let everyone know that I have decided to retire and have submitted my letter of resignation effective March 30, 2018. I have served Hendry County for 31 years and you elected me as your Property Appraiser nine years ago. I hope I have served you well, but I'm ready to start a new chapter in my life.

My friendly staff is always there willing and able to assist you. As in my first campaign slogan, "Change Begins at the Top," I would not want to go backwards at this time, and would ask you to support my Chief Deputy, Dena Pittman, to continue with changes and improvements. She will be on the ballot in the November election.

On a friendly note, we will be staying in LaBelle; however, Gail and I plan to do some traveling and visiting family and friends out of state. Thank you for your support and friendships over the years. God Bless each and every one of you as he has me and my family."

Sincerely,  
Phillip Pelletier

## Clewiston engineer disciplined

SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY NEWS

CLEWISTON, FL (Monday, Feb. 5) — In the face of remarks by Mayor Mali Gardner impugning losses of grant funding as a result of staff inaction, three city commissioners voted tonight against Gardner and fellow Commissioner Julio Rodriguez to keep Johnson & Pruitt Engineering as lead go-to town engineers.

Johnson engineering, a separate Ft. Myers firm with local roots, will be among a "library" of alternate engineering consultants available for city projects. "Awards shall be given to the most highly qualified to perform the required services."

There was no mention before voting that City Commissioner Michael Atkinson, a local contractor, has some interest in the occasional services of Johnson and Pruitt.

Grants endangered by the town's inaction in recent years involved undersized and long inadequate diameter water pipes along Rte. 80 that were evidently in need of upgrade back when a major drugstore's arrival signaled need for higher water pressure, then surfaced again last year when the Hampton Inn required the same larger pipe. The town responded ponderously slowly.

A harrowing escape followed the last two offers of over \$1.4 million Legislature grants for a police station. Two years ago City Mgr. Al Perry lost all control of preparations being required to design and complete a building within its strict time frame. There was a default, after which a year later a second nearly identical Legislature grant offer was put at risk when, in the face of considerable evidence that bids could be expected to run high, elaborate drawings could not be adapted to the realities of today's contractors' compensation requirements. One of the warnings was from management of a construction project at Hendry Regional who appeared at a commissioners meeting to warn them that specialty buildings are becoming expensive to build. Fortunately, a local bank agreed to sell its property on Berner road for conversion to a police station, and now the town has to face once again a brief window of time to finish its project.

Commissioner Kristine Petersen urged solely renegotiating the town's contract with Johnson and Pruitt "for clearer understanding of job responsibilities." She warned against "moving away from what we've enjoyed" with Johnson and Pruitt, referred to the value of the history of longevity.

## Donald Peeples and Stanlo Johns are Co-grand marshals for 70th Chalo Nitka

Donald A. Peeples, 89, and Stanlo Johns, 83, were named co-grand marshals of the 70th anniversary Chalo Nitka parade set for Saturday, March 3 at 10 a.m. and will be recognized during the Chalo Nitka Festival itself at the grounds soon after the gates open at 11 a.m.

The co-grand marshals were selected as best representing the spirit of the Chalo Nitka Festival.

"For 70 years the Chalo Nitka Festival has been a celebration of the historic ties between the pioneering ranching families of Glades County and the residents of the Brighton Seminole Indian reservation," said Glades County Economic Development Council executive director Tracy Whirls,

who serves on the Chalo Nitka committee.

Peeples, the son of Joe Peeples, Sr. was born in the family ranch houses in Citrus Center where his family began ranching in the 20s. At the time, Citrus Center was a thriving boom town, site of the Citrus Center Hotel (1917) built during the first Florida land boom at the turn of the century. During the Great De-

pression, when once-prosperous businesses closed, and many families left, the Peeples family remained, creating one of the large family-owned ranches Glades County is known for.

Johns, like Peeples, is also a cattleman, purchasing his first cattle in 1959 following a stint in the army. While Seminoles started tending herds shortly after the first cattle arrived with the Spaniards to Florida in the 1500s, it wasn't until the 1930s that the unconquered Seminoles were able to establish new herds in the aftermath of the Seminole Wars, building a cattle program that has become an industry leader from a herd of 400 drought-stricken cows donated to the Tribe from the New Mexico dust bowl. In 1957 when the Seminoles obtained federal recognition as a Tribe, what had been a communal herd was divided between individual owners.

Biographies of both men are included in the revamped Chalo Nitka program book, which is available at the Economic Development Council office at 998 U.S. Hwy. 27, Moore Haven.

Ms. Whirls researched the history of the event by pouring through a collection of early Chalo Nitka programs, donated

to the EDC by former Glades County Historical Society treasurer, the late Al Schauseil.

"Bertha Gramm, daughter of one of Moore Haven's founders, Frederick V. Gram, aunt of for-

mer Chalo Nitka Grand Marshall and First Bank CEO Miller Couse, wrote a history of the Chalo Nitka Festival and how it

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