

OPINIONS

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SECTION B

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J. EARLE BOWDEN

Bowden is editor emeritus of the News Journal, a Pensacola historian and author

Protect some beach parcels

Escambia Commissioner Grover Robinson and congressional ally U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller are pushing a private beach ownership bill that passed the House of Representatives by two votes and likely endangers the Interior Department's 1946 Santa Rosa Island reverter clause.

And unfortunately the National Park Service, says National Seashore Superintendent Dan Brown, has been rebuffed in amending legislation to fully protect undeveloped county conservation and recreational lands.

Robinson and Miller apparently disagree, says Brown, who helped write Interior Department's Oct. 1, 2013, statement for the needed protection. House Resolution 2954 supersedes the July 30, 1946 act, specifying that Santa Rosa Island Monument lands transferred to Escambia ownership restricted usage to "purposes deemed in the public interest and may not be conveyed by the county except to the federal government or State of Florida."

Gulf Islands National Seashore, established by Congress in 1971, limits leased residential and commercial areas to nine miles at Pensacola Beach and Navarre Beach, the four-mile segment in Santa Rosa County.

Now the Senate will determine if 99-year leaseholders — should they choose — own public lands. Cries of double taxation after court rulings allowed counties to tax improvements on leased public land led Robinson to pursue fee simple ownership.

The park service has no objection to the transfer of developed parcels for taxing purposes; rather, Brown says the public may find that conservation easements for undeveloped and recreational land specified in county codes can be changed by future elected commissioners to accommodate further private ownership and development.

The public should demand that undeveloped lands within Pensacola and Navarre jurisdictions remain natural, pristine, providing vital wildlife habitat and public recreation, the same premise of the Santa Rosa Island Monument in 1938; the same as Gulf Islands.

Too, the bill heightens possibility of reopening an old 1965 wound, the Navarre Cut, enticing beach developers to expand Navarre's commercial appeal. Between Navarre Bridge and Eglin reservation, 140 acres next to the county park has been leased for commercial development, including the possibility of a hotel or marina. A canal would cause great environmental disruption of the natural barrier island rhythms and do harm to the recreational opportunities within the national seashore, now attracting more than 5 million visitors annually. Besides, who pays to construct and maintain a canal, likely to force major erosion elsewhere on the island?

Brown says NPS wants prohibition of dredge and fill permits and construction of a channel through the island. Gulf Islands should have the authority to accept by donation conservation easements at the two commercial beach areas.

Too bad Robinson and Washington politicians refused the requests. The U.S. Senate now should insist that public beach areas under local control protect public ownership. Diminishing the vital reverter clause to solve a local taxation problem and satisfy a few island leaseholders could be another disaster. It's time for a louder public voice.

Q: WHICH MAKES SOUTHERNERS LOOK UGLIER?



EDITORIAL

All eyes on Tallahassee this week

The annual, two-month legislative session begins this week in Tallahassee. We urge the people of Northwest Florida to follow the issues that are of interest, including education, crime, job development and decisions on the continued recovery from the 2010 oil spill.

Like most years, it promises to be an active session. That's why we appreciate the state representatives from the local delegation listening last week to local requests that include traffic improvements and more education opportunities to better position the two-county area to attract jobs related to the aerospace industry.

Reps. Doug Broxson, Clay Ingram, Mike Hill and Matt Gaetz attended the Wednesday luncheon hosted by the Greater Pensacola Chamber and we trust they understand the local wish list, including the widening of Nine Mile Road in Beulah, a key artery to Navy Federal Credit Union's burgeoning campus. Navy Federal has invested heavily in central Escambia County and promises to bring thousands of more jobs. Kim Aderholdt with Navy Federal said their future plans depend on traffic conditions.

"We need Nine Mile Road to expand to four lanes," Aderholdt said. "The current infrastructure of Nine Mile Road will not support Navy Federal's needs beyond Phase One of our current \$250 million

expansion."

We hope the lawmakers use their clout to get transportation dollars to make that happen. Having thousands of additional cars on Nine Mile daily will affect traffic to the east and west. It will pay for itself and ease congestion in the area. Contact these lawmakers if you agree. The region's economy will surely benefit from an easier commute to the Navy Federal campus.

Turning to education and improving the local workforce, we're impressed with the sales pitch by Pensacola State College's Daniel Busse, who asked legislators to help pay for new engineering and aircraft technology programs. The programs would help local workers to fill those jobs.

"PSC wants to create a complete career ladder for aerospace students and also build a new home for science, technology, engineering and math departments," Carlton Proctor reported from the luncheon.

Also be sure to follow news on any constitutional amendments being considered for inclusion on the November ballot. Remember the 2012 ballot that contained nearly a dozen amendments, most placed there by the legislature, taking themselves off the hook and forcing the voters to decide? Start paying attention now so there are no surprises on election day.

We also encourage lawmakers to work beyond this year and look to tackle problems facing Florida in the next decade. On Wednesday, Mark Wilson, president and chief executive officer for the Florida Chamber of Commerce, met with our Editorial Board to discuss his group's current legislative agenda as well as Florida's future challenges.

We agree with Wilson that water quality and management will be a major issue in the next six years. Consider that because of the state's expected population growth — Florida likely will pass New York as the third most populous state — demand for water will increase 28 percent. That will impact our rivers, lakes and springs. Wilson hopes the legislature will create a statewide water commission to prepare for that growth. By 2030, he said, Florida is expected to have 6 million more people, all of them thirsty and wanting a daily shower or bath.

"We have to plan better over the next 6 million people than we did the last 6 million," he said.

Escambia and Santa Rosa are fortunate to have an abundance of water that adds to the quality of life, especially for recreational boaters, fishermen and swimmers. That needs to be protected now by the men we send to Tallahassee.

That delegation gets to work on Tuesday. Keep an eye on them to make sure they do what's best for Northwest Florida.

VIEWPOINT

We need more women to hold elective office

Does it matter that only 18.5 percent of the members of the present U.S. Congress are women?

Whereas women are 51 percent of the population and have voted in greater numbers than men since 1980, does it matter that they hold only 25 percent of the seats in the Florida legislature?

Does it matter that only 34 percent of Escambia County's elective offices are held by women, who are 53 percent of the registered voters?

It depends. If you are content with the way politics and government are conducted, then the gender disparities in our legislative bodies do not matter.

For others of us, however, the underrepresentation of women in elective office matters a great deal. As an extensive body of academic research has revealed, women make a significant impact on the body politic. The differences in the way women officeholders lead and govern, view issues and engage citizens, serve constituents and represent women, are such that were we able to raise the



DIANE MACK
Former city councilwoman

percentage of elected women to parity with men, we believe the result would be an extraordinary change in how this nation campaigns, elects and governs.

What are some of the differences?

» When women run for office, they are motivated by policy goals, not power or prestige.

» Women do not confront; they collaborate and build consensus. The most recent example of successful collaboration was the bipartisan effort of the Senate women who put together the deal that ended last fall's federal government shutdown.

» Women make the legislative process more transparent and public. They are not afraid to reveal problems and propose changes, and they tend to work harder. Escambia

Clerk of the Court and Comptroller Pam Childers has reformed the inefficient operation she took over a little more than a year ago, to the benefit of taxpayers, citizens and court operations.

Women change the legislative agenda, bringing new perspectives that arise from their broader and more diverse information sources. It was ECUA member Lois Benson who believed it was possible to relocate the sewage treatment plant from Main Street, and championed the issue to its successful outcome.

Women are more likely to take the lead on women's issues and those of concern to disadvantaged groups.

We should applaud Pensacola City Councilwoman Sherri Myers for her willingness to champion the needs of the homeless, chicken raising, and pot-bellied pigs.

These findings are not meant to diminish the good works and accomplishments of male officeholders. Their purpose is to identify the benefits to be gained by adding more women to the political mix and to note the effect

of the presence of women on male colleagues.

The response to this research is a national effort to narrow the gender gap in elective office. Among the leaders of the effort are the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, which conducted much of the research noted here, and South Carolina's Southeastern Institute for Women in Politics.

The Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida, inspired by the work of CAWP and others, was formed last summer as a nonpartisan nonprofit. To our knowledge, we are the only organization of this kind in Florida and the Gulf Coast, adding to the progress-and-innovation spotlight that shines ever brighter on Pensacola.

During this month's observance of women's history, tell your daughters and granddaughters they can be president, and the path to the White House begins in their student government, their civic club and their city.

Mack is president of The Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida Inc.