

Man with a Plan

Bill Spikowski looks back to plan the region's future.

By Pete Bishop

AS A BOY GROWING UP IN BEDFORD, Ohio, Bill Spikowski delighted in riding his bicycle to neighborhood parks and along a picturesque main street lined with small restaurants and retail shops. Today, Bedford is more Cleveland suburb than small-town—a place where residents drive to regional malls more often than they wander among local businesses.

Spikowski is a land-use planning consultant who thinks Americans are eager to return to an environment where people intermingle on sidewalks rather than tie up traffic on local highways. From rewriting zoning regulations for downtown Cape Coral to helping Lee County increase commercial areas in booming Lehigh Acres, Spikowski works on projects that improve Southwest Florida's economy and quality of life.

"It might be part of getting older—and as a kid, I didn't realize what I had growing up—but I think people really want that kind of environment again," says Spikowski. "Around the country, regulations are changing and developers now realize that people crave other people. New urban places are being built and everyone, from young people to retirees, loves them."

Based on traditional city spaces, new urbanism is a movement among planners that stresses low-level buildings, a mixture of residential and business development and an overall human scale that invites pedestrian traffic. It is a philosophy that has resulted in reinvigorated downtowns and retail districts across the country—the kind of development Southwest Florida desperately needs, says Spikowski.



People of all ages welcome the rebirth of urbanism, says Bill Spikowski.

"It's really a rebirth of traditional urbanism but adjusted for today, the age of the car," he says. "A good downtown needs two- to five-story, mixed-use buildings. Great world cities, like Paris and London, were built on that scale. We've lost those traditional planning principles that were understood 70 years ago."

Spikowski began to consider the problems of contemporary urban development after moving to Pine Island in 1974. A designer and builder of custom houses, Spikowski wanted to help preserve the rural feel of his new hometown and became an activist who regularly attended county planning meetings.

"I found out that what was going

on at those meetings was much more fascinating than what I was doing," says Spikowski. "I also realized that you couldn't just push to stop development in one area. You also have to find areas that are good for growth."

Spikowski took a job with the Lee County zoning division in 1983, eventually becoming director of growth management. In 1992, he started his own business, Spikowski Planning Consultants. His downtown Fort Myers office, in a 1920s-era brick building, is a perfect setting for a planner, he says, noting pedestrians milling along a row of sidewalk cafés and shops below his fourth-story window. "A good downtown area becomes the image outsiders have of a community,"

he says. "That's the tourism and the economic aspect of it. But it also gives a community more choices—where to live, where to shop, where to work."

The view from Spikowski's office will change in the next few years, as a series of high-rise condominium projects is completed along the Caloosahatchee River. Though Spikowski is pleased at efforts to breathe new life into the area, he has been a vocal critic of the controversial projects. "The city has a very good plan for downtown, but I don't think they are following it," he says. "A single ribbon of high-rises along the river is too spread out to walk from place to place. When people don't walk, you end up with a network of highways instead of downtown vitality."

Getting people to walk is crucial for downtown areas and smaller retail centers alike, says Spikowski. A good example is a recent project to revitalize Old San Carlos Boulevard on Fort Myers Beach. Once the town's main street, the area fell into decay after the present bridge to the island was built in the 1970s, dumping traffic one block to the south.

When town officials decided to spruce up the area, they contacted Spikowski, who had written the town's first comprehensive plan after incorporation in 1995. Along with Dover, Kohl & Partners Town Planning, Spikowski helped conceptualize a new boulevard and wrote regulations that encourage small businesses to improve their properties.

"When they built the Sky Bridge, that area was left to deteriorate and became pretty dilapidated," says Marsha Segal-George, the town manager. "Now it's lovely, a very different place than 10 years ago."

Today, a fountain on the east end of the road bookends Times Square and Lynn Hall Memorial Park to the west, creating a corridor for tourists to walk from the Gulf of Mexico to the island's back bay. New sidewalks, lighting and colonnades have turned a stagnant area into one poised for growth.

"We wanted to give that street life," says Spikowski. "It's place-making, and it happens quickly. GB



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