

**Newspaper article from 1993 about Hernando Beach.** This is a long post but very interesting. It was in the newspaper less than a month after No Name storm in 1993. Two tales of a waterfront project St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla. By: NEAL THOMPSON, Hernando Times April 4, 1993 For many years to come, Hernando County's unique waterfront community will be remembered for the "storm of the century" that flooded thousands of terrified residents the morning of March 13. Leading up to that date, however, is a bizarre history that also tells the tale of waterfront development throughout Florida. It goes something like this: They say it was all great fun in the early days at "The Beach." Developer Charlie Sasser, who began dredging and filling canals for his massive project in 1959, held a fish fry each Sunday with free hush puppies, coleslaw and grits to entice people to buy "direct Gulf access" lots. Marion Overstreet ran the first bait, tackle and grocery store, where schools of fishermen stopped before a day on the Gulf of Mexico to load up on bait and beer. It sat where the Pick Quik store is today off Shoal Line Boulevard. Adjacent to Marion's was Ziggy's bar, where folks drank, ate big cheeseburgers and German potato salad and lied about the fish they had caught that day. Ziggy and Betty Mueller ran the place. Ziggy, a former German soldier and Olympic runner, would often goose-step down his own bar when he got drunk. Ted "Lindy" Lindquist ran the only marina, which he opened after the federal government forced him from his Titusville fish camp to make room for Cape Canaveral. And everyone at the beach knew that Nile Stiffler had the biggest house on the beach. The folks at the Weeki Wachee Spring attraction even used Stiffler's pool to photograph their mermaids for brochures. "Oh, we just had a good old time out there," said Catherine Deal, who built one of Hernando Beach's first houses and drove with her husband from their permanent home in Dade City each weekend to fish and crab. "It was nothing to get over 150 crabs in a weekend." Even though there is no beach at Hernando Beach, Floridians bought weekend homes and Northerners bought winter homes, and Hernando Beach quickly became unique in the county. It created a strong tax base and gave the county access to its biggest asset - the gulf. But, the party ended in 1971 when Hernando Beach hit a snag. A number of snags, in fact. And ever since, there has been a tangle of lawsuits, settlement claims, reimbursements and environmental reclamation. The big snag was, essentially, the result of a change in philosophy, a change that would make Hernando Beach illegal by today's standards and makes the rare community likely the last of its kind in Florida. "I think one of the things that happened was Hernando Beach got caught in that transition time between where there wasn't much regulation to where the state and federal regulations were coming into effect," said Larry Jennings, manager of the Hernando County Planning Department. No longer legal Marie Burns of the Army Corps of Engineers - the agency that has been Sasser's staunch foe - said, "The regulatory climate has certainly changed since 1970 to now." Bob Stetler of the state Department of Environmental Regulation goes a step further. "It doesn't belong there," Stetler said of Hernando Beach. And, when the strict regulations began to take hold, the victims were not only Hernando Beach residents and property owners, but also Charlie Sasser himself. For decades, Florida had encouraged the Charlie Sassers of the world to develop the state's waterfront. Even if it meant digging up the gulf floor or filling in waterways with dirt, Florida laws and construction requirements were lenient on projects such as Hernando Beach that drew transplants to the state's coastline. "They wanted the waterfront improved," said St. Petersburg lawyer Adrian Bacon, who represented Sasser for years. "It was a good policy. God, if it hadn't been for that, there wouldn't be any waterfront development in Florida." So that's what Sasser did. Between 1959 and 1970, he turned 500 acres of waterfront - about half of it marshy wetlands that he filled in with dirt to create dry, buildable lots - into a community of "fingers" separated by canals. From above, it looks like a huge maze. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the state's attitude shifted to one of conservation and environmental protection. The state began to claim its fragile coast as its own, instead of allowing developers to dig it up or fill it in

with dirt. And many of the state's Charlie Saspers were told that their so-called "dredge and fill" developments were no longer legal. At Hernando Beach, which had begun north and moved south, new state and federal restrictions on coastal construction caught up with Sasser when he was developing a southern section of Hernando Beach. The project was halted in 1971 when the state claimed ownership of the wetlands Sasser was digging in and the Army Corps of Engineers told Sasser he didn't have proper permits. The corps and the state sued Sasser in 1973. A few days later, Sasser sued the state and the Hernando County Commission. A settlement reached in 1979 required Sasser to put a dike around 144 acres he had begun developing 10 years earlier, to separate it from the gulf. But many acres of wetlands outside that dike, which Sasser had claimed as his own, became state property. Sasser had to restore the land to its natural state and reimburse 400 people who already had bought the undeveloped lots. Sasser then was allowed to develop and sell lots on another 160 acres, now called Hernando Beach South, to generate money for his reimbursements and restoration work. Even that process hit snags. Restoration took six years longer than it was supposed to, and some of the lots Sasser sold at Hernando Beach South couldn't be built on for years because they had no water and sewer service. Also, Sasser was required to install a boat lift to give property owners within the diked section access to the gulf. Owners who thought they were buying "direct access" lots now were 30 minutes from the gulf. That's because they had to drive their boats down their canal, attach the boat to the lift (which takes about 15 minutes) then take another canal out to the gulf. All of that clearly wasn't what Sasser had in mind. Most developers prefer to breeze into a project, build it, and breeze on to the next project. Charlie Sasser has spent more than 30 years on Hernando Beach. In the meantime, he also developed the Brookridge and High Point mobile home communities. But he couldn't seem to shake Hernando Beach. Until recently, that is. Sasser finally has sold his last few remaining lots at Hernando Beach South. He has transferred ownership of the boat lift to a property owners group, a move that was required by the 1979 court settlement. And he has completed the court-ordered restoration of wetlands to the court's satisfaction. Ironically coinciding with the March 13 storm that devastated hundreds of Hernando Beach homes, Sasser is finally severing ties with his controversial and complex project for the first time in 34 years. Sasser has been media-shy for years and did not return repeated phone messages left for him last week. Others were unwilling to speak on his behalf, including his son, David, who is a lawyer in Brooksville, and Shirley Aiken, who was appointed by the court in 1979 to oversee the court settlement and who now works in Sasser's office. Monster or hero? Sasser's departure from Hernando Beach will please some, especially Hernando Beach South residents who have been haggling with the developer for 20 years over such issues as water and sewer connections and the boat lift. Some state and federal environmental regulators, who have done the same with Sasser, but for different reasons, are also glad to see the project come to an end. "The people I've talked to aren't very happy with him," said Joe Lentini, who lives at Hernando Beach and is past president of the Hernando Beach Property Owners Association. Larry Doyle, also a resident and a member of the association's board of directors, said: "He has very good intentions; he can't always carry them out." And Stetler of the DER called Hernando Beach and similar projects "our biggest headache." Others are quick to defend Sasser. "Charlie Sasser is a great guy," said Cliff Manuel, president of Coastal Engineering Associates in Brooksville, which has done engineering work for Sasser for many years. Manuel said Hernando County is lucky to have had a Charlie Sasser, who squeezed his Hernando Beach project through a small window of opportunity that will never open again. "It was either that window or no window," he said. He added: "I think every community needs a Hernando Beach-type project." County Commissioner John Richardson said Sasser has gotten a bad rap. He was no monster, and, years before the problems began, most people liked Sasser. Many still do, he said. But Richardson admits that, from the beginning,

Hernando Beach was not always a professionally run project. It was a "hand-to-mouth operation" and "always on a shoestring." Far from being a stereotypical money-hungry developer, Sasser didn't make much money, at first, and often traded lots for services, Richardson said. In fact, early property owner Catherine Deal, who is Richardson's aunt, only built her house there because Sasser gave her four lots in exchange for an overdue office supplies bill he owed Deal and her supply company. Profits increased once Sasser realized the gulf floor he was digging contained limerock, which he sold to the state for road projects. Some canals were dug 75 feet deep and 100 feet wide to retrieve the valuable limerock. Despite the early financial problems and the more recent legal and environmental woes, Richardson considers Hernando Beach a valuable asset to Hernando County - financially and otherwise. "I'm not saying that Charlie was 100 percent right," Richardson said. "But if Charlie hadn't put that in there, Hernando County would really be in the back seat as far as being able to utilize one of its greatest resources, the Gulf of Mexico." Supply and demand Hernando Beach properties account for \$112-million in taxable value. In land size, it comprises a tiny fraction of a percent of the entire county. But on the tax books, its value is 4 percent of the county's total taxable value, according to Property Appraiser Les Samples. And the value of Hernando Beach keeps going up. In the early days, when Richardson and his friends landed planes on the roads and lots, and water skied up and down the canals, lots were cheap but sold slowly. "There was nobody there - nobody," Richardson said. Vacant lots initially sold for as low as \$1,995. And financing was available for \$100 down and \$10 a month. But after 1971, when the federal and state restrictions kicked in, Hernando Beach suddenly became an endangered species. And ever since, prices for lots have ticked up and up. "It's the law of supply and demand," said former Hernando Beach real estate broker Jay Evans. "There just aren't any more gulf-front lots available." Evans' father, Jack, was a Hernando Beach real estate pioneer and helped start the beach's first real estate company, Hernando Beach Realty. Evans recalls lots selling for \$2,995 when he was young and reselling for 10 times that a decade later. Evans' brief stint working for his father ended in 1980, and his father sold the business in 1985. His father died in 1989. But Evans said his father would have been shocked to see gulf-front lots that he had sold 25 years ago for a few thousand dollars now selling for \$125,000 - for the lot alone. Harry Burns has sold homes and lots for Hernando Beach Realty for 10 years. He said an average price for a lot is \$30,000, though some sell for more than \$120,000. And some homes have sold for \$300,000 or more. Despite rising prices, Burns thinks Hernando Beach has yet to reach its potential. It's still considered rural. It's still relatively affordable. And it's never been marketed as an exclusive, gulf-front community. But that's what it could become, Burns said. Hernando Beach has retained its integrity. It has single-family homes instead of apartments and mobile homes. And as Tampa Bay's growth continues to move north, Hernando Beach is going to gain stature, he said. "And there's going to be a time when it's very, very expensive," Burns said. Last of its kind Today's Hernando Beach is far beyond the days when residents couldn't drink the bad, rusty, salt-infested water. The days when people used gas stoves and refrigerators because they never knew when the electricity would go out. As Catherine Deal put it: "It's definitely not a fishing village anymore, or a weekend place." And despite the devastating beating Hernando Beach took on March 13, most people doubt the flood will have any long-lasting effect on its future. Floridians will accept it, and newcomers will forget it, Deal predicted. "Natives, we accept that kind of weather. That's the chance you take when you live on the water," she said. "I don't think the storm will run people off. Not for long. They forget quickly." In fact, some county officials hope the storm will help bring some of Hernando Beach's older homes up to today's standards. Hernando County had no building or subdivision codes until 1972. "So anything before that was built to whatever standards the contractor felt were sufficient," said deputy county building official George Rodriguez. That means many 30-year-old, one-story homes were most vulnerable to flooding. Of the older homes, 256 are

considered destroyed and will have to be rebuilt to modern building codes. That means they must be built on stilts, or with collapsible first-floor walls, in case of flooding. "We would not have had homeless people if all the houses were built to code," Rodriguez said. In 1984, tougher federal building standards were established for new homes in flood zones. So all post-1984 Hernando Beach homes weathered the March 13 flood well. "That means the codes are correct," Rodriguez said. So, the way county Development Director Grant Tolbert sees it, the county will continue to upgrade the outdated aspects of Hernando Beach to preserve a community that Hernando County is lucky to have, and March 13 won't see repeated. "If you're asking could it be built today, the answer is no. I don't think we'll ever see communities like that built in Florida ever again, because of the environmental regulations," Tolbert said. And if you ask John Richardson - who swam, skied and fished Hernando Beach canals as a boy, who sneaked out of his job at Weeki Wachee Spring to get to Charlie Sasser's fish fries, who started his own marine construction business there as an adult, who lived there until recently, and whose parents still live there - he shakes his head and says, "It is truly the last of its kind." Even though there is no beach at Hernando Beach, Floridians bought weekend homes and Northerners bought winter homes, and Hernando Beach quickly became unique in the county. It created a strong tax base and gave the county access to its biggest asset - the gulf. At Hernando Beach, which had begun north and moved south, new state and federal restrictions on coastal construction caught up with [Charlie] Sasser when he was developing a southern section of Hernando Beach. The project was halted in 1971 when the state claimed ownership of the wetlands Sasser was digging in and the Army Corps of Engineers told Sasser he didn't have proper permits. But many acres of wetlands outside that dike, which Sasser had claimed as his own, became state property. Sasser had to restore the land to its natural state and reimburse 400 people who already had bought the undeveloped lots. Sasser then was allowed to develop and sell lots on another 160 acres, now called Hernando Beach South, to generate money for his reimbursements and restoration work. Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.