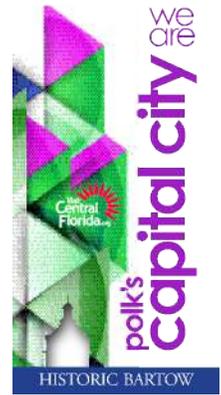




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## 12 Things I Learned Serving the City of Bartow

I am beyond grateful to have served as your City Commissioner the last six years. My goal from the very first to the very last session was NEVER to be complacent. To stay actively engaged and bring “something to the table” at every opportunity to potentially ignite a spark of discussion for a better way for our City. Having heard that, “we are good just the way we are,” I actively chose to be open and excited about learning more about how I could contribute toward a better path forward for Bartow because there is a lot of work that needs to be done.

Today is my last official day in office, and I wanted to share some of the things I have learned.

1. **Saying “we need to be proactive” does not make it so.** You have to act to make it so. Governance is a team sport, and it will not happen unless everyone is on board, focused on clearly stated common goals over the short and long term.
2. **Alignment in efforts produces a more compelling path forward with significant potential for success.** That is why I advocated so strongly for the City Master Plan so that we could be on the same page when planning our City’s future and moving forward. A haphazard approach produces haphazard results. The Master Plan will give a unified vision for the City and will result in organized growth and development compatible with the resident’s wants and needs. And most importantly, citizen input is crucial.
3. **There is so much that goes on with the ‘people’s work’ that the “people” do not know about.** It is disappointing that more folks don’t engage in what we do. The behind the scenes planning for our cities future has had many successes as well as some major missed opportunities. It is so much more involved than a simple social media post. But the City fell short of providing an easy, efficient method of sharing information, or live streaming or broadcasting meetings, to more easily engage our citizens until a pandemic forced us to do so.
4. **Decisions today must be forward thinking.** We must not be afraid to come out of the past and realize our decisions will impact future citizens. I utilized a multitude of resources that I soaked up like a sponge, from books, industry magazines, websites and a favorite resource, which was a wealth of information, was conferences. These opportunities presented speakers from all sectors related to cities sustainability, solutions to concerning issues cities face and ultimately, I would always share conference highlights relative to what we are doing, aren’t doing, should be doing, and what we could be doing better. Being knowledgeable, and up on current and successful practices and strategies held a value that I was excited to take part in, as the role of a City Commissioner. Our taxpayers fund these trips and it is our duty to deliver on their investment. Believe me, there is plenty to consider and discuss.

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5. ***Communication is vital in the role of a City Commissioner.*** I feel blessed that during my six years in office 6,000+ “locals” began following my Facebook page. I view that as evidence that citizens are more interested in active dialogue than perhaps the City has given credit for having. This engagement effort also fostered relationship building, a network as a trusted source for answers because they knew I was there for them, looking out for their best interest. I’ll be taking that with me and building upon it even more. An accurate observation for everyday communication, but critically important in times of emergencies.

The power of a post - Hurricane Irma brought about a time of community unity, the likes I had not seen in our City. One Facebook post calling for supplies filled the Civic Center stage with items for our guest workers from all over the country including our linemen, tree trimmers, and associated workforce. These donations fulfilled needs for weeks for those working in Bartow. Volunteers washed clothes, wrote notes, made dinners, were here for any and every request mostly due from Facebook outreach posts. I volunteered at the Civic Center sharing the needs of these assigned to Bartow and saw firsthand how giving and grateful this community was. It was amazing how a time of devastation actually brought “gifts” of kindness, resolve, encouragement, generosity, new friendships, laughs, tears, and unity. Bartow’s ‘hospitality’ was highlighted through a little 20 second Facebook video of a tree trimmer singing. This clip put our City on the map all across the globe with news stories from Washington D.C., to other far-reaching cities, to hear our story about the aftermath of Irma. Again, all from a post!

6. ***Quality of life is one of the most frustrating concerns and sought after needs of our residents.*** Settling on what quality of life meant was not an easy consensus for us and it was rarely discussed. But I knew that an “amenity-rich environment” has been at the forefront of other municipalities’ discussions for years, and we still haven’t quite found our way there yet. Senior Citizen Programing and Disc Golf were two things I was working on that are now left on the table, and there is so much more. But I am glad after six years of advocating, the “Bark Park” will be opening soon.

7. ***Cycling has huge potential for economic development and improved quality of life in Bartow.*** Cities are seeking the designation of become a “cycling city because they recognize the economic impacts. Trails across our country invite cyclists from all over the world to ride in cities, experiencing an active lifestyle and exceptional quality of life. We have that opportunity here. For 9 years, I have actively worked with state transportation officials on two critical projects for our City, which I hope will see completion. The pedestrian bridge over Highway 60, connecting the Ft. Fraser Trail, to our Downtown and the Peace River Trail. The pedestrian bridge provides a badly needed safer and more inviting crossing than the nine-lane intersection at Wilson Avenue. It will serve to open up Greater Bartow to both economic gains for Downtown visitors and improved exercise options for residents. The further connectivity of the Peace River Trail offers similar opportunities for our City and its residents. Bartow City officials and the BEDC must continue to actively advocate for the completion of these important projects.

8. ***I enjoyed being an advocate for our city, and taking time just to write a few letters can get results.*** Actively advocating for your community and seeking ways to engage, even outside of the city limits, is the role of your City Commissioner. Results come from asking the questions, getting answers, and implementing what you’ve learned. Bartow citizens should remember that when they vote. It’s more than a knock at the door.

I wrote many letters on behalf of our City to State and Federal representatives regarding proposed legislation that would and will be harmful to our citizens and municipalities if passed. Watching out for your interest was very important to me, and I was recognized for that with four consecutive “Home Town Hero” Awards by the Florida League of Cities. But the importance of this effort hit home with one letter in particular, to Congressman Greg Steube, regarding our 100-year-old Post Office. This one letter opened a dialogue that ultimately resulted in Steube landing a \$2 million renovation for our Post Office, which is happening now.

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9. ***Our sister cities can be our best teachers.*** I frequently toured other cities to see what grabbed me and left an impression about that community. To name a few, public art transformed St. Pete and Wynwood while revitalizing these blighted, neglected, and forgotten areas. Cities around the world that value historic preservation as an asset and leverage their dollars towards revitalization are finding benefits in marketing and economic development. It's a well-documented and proven strategy. Just driving through Lakeland and Winter Haven, with an attentive eye for what's happening and where people are going, is a solid education on what should also be happening in Bartow, but isn't.
10. ***Cities are more than the services that they provide.*** This idea is a crucial tenant for successful economic development. The best example I can think of is our local schools. Educating the children that live in our cities should be a priority for the City Commission as well. Educators need us as leaders to be supportive, present, and open to them. Our schools and district need local leaders to demand the best education, facilities, and staff. Our students, the children of our residents, will be walking in our footsteps one day and it is vital we pave the way for their City, with them in mind.
11. ***Truth, honesty, integrity, and trust do not go hand-in-hand with politics or holding an office.*** I chose to put the greater good for "all" a priority over friendships, because that is what the people elected me to do, and it cost me dearly. As much as I had hoped my commitment to these traits would prevail during the election cycle, it wasn't enough. It's just part of the reality and the sad world in which we live.
12. ***We all lead differently.*** My approach, as a commissioner was purposeful and deliberate, an ambassador of the possibilities, driven to seek ideas and pathways to success. I strived for positive outcomes and results, and wasn't afraid to acknowledge roadblocks and bottlenecks that made us less than efficient and effective. Residents, business owners, and city employees benefited from my enthusiasm, tenacity and vigor.  
Some resented it and devised a plan to remove me from office, rallied support, and it worked. However, my desire to advance this community has not waned, and I will continue to advocate, educate, and highlight how Bartow can be better, because we all deserve better.

I am often asked to run for a "higher" office, including being courted by some folks in Tallahassee for State Representative or County Commission. To that, I will say I'm flattered, but competent leaders currently hold both of those seats that I respect and have enjoyed working with. Both are doing great jobs. I would not propose running against them, thinking I could do more than what they are currently doing and making hollow promises that I would be making "great things" happen. That would be ego talking, and that is not me. But most importantly, the time and effort that I put in, I wanted to do for my town, the residents, the citizens, my family, the place where I spend my time and life.

Finally, my job as a Commissioner was to represent the citizens' interests above all else. Thank you to all that have supported my efforts the last 6 years and even prior to my taking office. Your messages of support, love, encouragement and appreciation have meant more than you can ever know. "They" may have gotten me out of office, but I'm not going away. Leaders can lead from any seat.

Stay tuned . . .



*My six years of notes will be a public record that anyone can request so that you can see what all is available to us and what we reached out for and what we didn't.*

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