

The Early History of Sun 'n Lake of Sebring, by Neal Hotelling- Part 1; Draft 3 21-Jan-2019

Created as a Master Planned Community, Sun 'n Lake of Sebring was created in December 1974 and was the first Florida residential community to use an Improvement District to provide master infrastructure of roads, drainage, sewer, water and amenities through a governmental structure to manage its development. But that is only an official beginning; missing is the story behind its creation.

Earlier, the 7,124 acres that would comprise Sun 'n Lake of Sebring was ranchland owned by Gregg Maxcy (1885-1960). Maxcy was one of four brothers, who with their father started a citrus empire near Frostproof in the early 20th century. His brothers Lat and John continued to build the operation in Hardee County. Gregg came to Highlands County and planted groves and built a large processing plant that provided many jobs. He later expanded to raise cattle and built a meat packing plant adjacent to his citrus plant. The ranch that is now Sun 'n Lake of Sebring was one of the properties where he grazed his cattle.

In 1969, Leo N. "Jack" Weisser (1923-1982), bought the ranch from the Maxcy estate. Weisser had earlier developed Sun 'n Lake of Lake Placid, beginning about 1959. He had built a good career in the lumber business, becoming in his 30s, the only non-family member of the board of Lindsay Lumber Company -- one of the largest lumber companies operating in the southeastern United States. His role there gave him contacts with most of the builders and developers in the southeast, so when the brothers running Lindsey Lumber decided to retire in the late 1950s, Weisser, still in his 30s, decided to leave the lumber business and strike out on his own.

Sun 'n Lake - Lake Placid

Based in Miami, Weisser's original plan was to find fifty acres he could buy and subdivide, selling lots to builders to create a development. For several weeks, he would leave home on Monday and drive around the state in search of a location. Eventually he stumbled across a 3000-acre cattle ranch/retreat south of Lake Placid that was owned by a couple of brothers that made their living as lawyers in Miami. Weisser enlarged his plans and bought the land at Lake Placid to begin his new career as a developer in Highlands County.

Weisser moved his family to Lake Placid in 1962 to manage his new development on site. His son Ron graduated from Lake Placid High School in 1966. After college and a couple years with a different development company, Ron joined his father's company and helped develop Sun 'n Lake. In addition to Lake Placid, in the mid-1960s Jack Weisser saw the need for condominiums and built Lakeview Towers on Lake Jackson. When Ron headed to college, the family moved back to Miami, where doctors could better look after the health of Jack, who had a few heart attacks and eventually bypass surgery. From Miami he continued developing Lake Placid, in 1970 adding a Holiday Inn and an 18-hole executive golf course, and in 1972 a 183-acre Turf and Beach Club and building Lakeshore Tower condominiums. The Lake Placid development eventually grew to 5,000 acres.

In the meantime, another developer with imagination came to Florida and acquired a lot of land in the Orlando area. His name was Walt Disney. He worked with state officials to create a way to fund and manage a new development in a way that would not create an undue burden on the local government. In 1967 the Reedy Creek Special Improvement District was created and allowed for the creation of a

government entity that could sell bonds to fund and develop the roads, utilities and other infrastructure needed to allow Disney World to become a reality.

Sun 'n Lake - Sebring

Weisser looked at the improvement district concept and spoke with state legislators about adapting the concept for developing residential communities. State officials agreed it made sense and while the adaptation wound through the legal hurdles Weisser moved forward with the purchase of the Maxcy Ranch in September 1969 as president of Highlands County Title and Guaranty Company. Sun 'n Lake Estates was a trade name used by HCTGC to develop Sun 'n Lake of Sebring and the earlier development at Lake Placid.

Approvals and creation of the district took five years and required approvals and oversight at State and County levels. But Jack Weisser wasted no time developing plans while the government process dragged on. According to Ron Weisser, who began working with his father in 1972, the original plan for Sun 'n Lake of Sebring was laid out by noted architect Carlos B. Schoppe! (1898-1990) working with engineer C. A. Peterson. In January 1971, Weisser used the master plan to apply for a zoning change on the Sebring land from Agriculture to a variety of uses, strategically laid out to include single-family and multi-family residential, neighborhood retail, general retail, industrial and a mobile home subdivision - in total 19,213 dwelling units to be developed in 25 phases.

In an April 1972 article, Weisser described plans for Sun 'n Lake of Sebring "...to be self-containing. Sites for hospitals, churches, schools and a shopping center have been included in the plans...the approximate 22,000 sites in the overall community will also include a large apartment area with multiple units, villas, townhouses and multi-story buildings."¹ By July 1972, Weisser reported he has sold or contracted the sale of over \$1 million worth of property in its opening month."² Many lots were sold on payment terms with the title deliverable upon final payment, hence the meaning of "under contract."

The Sun 'n Lake Improvement District was officially created in December 1974, and the developer announced: "The first phase of 500 acres has 241 single family lots, 183 multi-family tracts and 127 commercial sites. Central water and sewage treatment facilities have been installed, as have underground electric and telephone lines. Lots 80 feet by 125 feet [not accessible by auto] will start at \$4,995. Lots the same size but ready to build will start at \$7,995."³ The Weisser's hosted a developers' lunch in January 1975 to launch the development. News of the luncheon reported: "Over a half million dollars in homesites and commercial property were purchased within a half an hour..."⁴and went on to state, "Sun 'n Lake Estates of Sebring is being developed in phases and will eventually be the home of 100,000 people...[and] will offer private homes, high-rise and garden condominiums."³

The development proceeded with and HCTGC handling promotion and land sales and a 5-member Board of Supervisors, elected by the landholders, issuing bonds to fund the further creation of roads, sewers and public resources and establishing and overseeing public policies. Initially, HCTGC owned nearly all of

¹ Fort Lauderdale **News**, April 29, 1972, p. 91

² The Tampa Tribune, July 4, 1972, p. 13

³ The Orlando Sentinel, December 14, 1974, page 26

⁴ Fort Lauderdale News, January 18, 1975, page 7

the land and had great influence over who served on the Board and deciding what facilities were needed for the development. Herman Alexander became the first resident of Sun 'n Lake of Sebring when he received the keys to his new home on his 78th birthday, March 18, 1975.⁵

In addition to local sales, the Weissers promoted Sun 'n Lake through independent real estate offices in the Midwest, Canada and Latin America, bring people from many locales to Highlands County. As the development grew, for various business reasons, Weisser formed C.H. Crawford Company which bought HCTGC and then Central Florida Development, Inc. (CFD, Inc.), which in 1979 bought Crawford.

As shown in the master plan, land was allotted for a golf course and clubhouse and deeded to the district. The initial golf course, now called Deer Run, opened for play on Labor Day weekend 1975; as did "The Granada Dining Room and Lounge of the Sun 'n Lake Golf and Country Club." The club offered lunch and dinner dining with live entertainment in the evenings.

The course received acclaim in golf magazines, even making Golfweek's list of the top SO courses in Florida. The concept of a front nine and a back nine, looping through the residential area was part of the Schoppel plan while Don Dyer, the golf pro/manager at Sun 'n Lake of Lake Placid was credited with the original design⁶. In 2003 golf architect Ron Gari prepared a redesign, but his work was limited to creating the island green on the finishing hole.

Weisser sold his Holiday Inn at Lake Placid in 1976⁷ and soon began work on plans for a new Holiday Inn at Sebring. Rex Bond, who in 1975 broke ground for the First National Bank of Sebring as its president⁸, became helpful to Weisser as a banker, and also served on the initial Board of Supervisors. By 1979 Bond was hired by HCTGC as its vice president and general manager for Sun 'n Lake when HCTGC announced plans to move its executive offices from Miami to an 18,000 square foot commercial center at Sun 'n Lake of Sebring.⁹ Bond later served many years as the general manager of the district, providing some much needed continuity in the 1980s and early 1990s.

In November 1977, it was reported that 4,000 lots had been sold, but "relatively few homes have been built."¹⁰ The taxing authority of the district was challenged by residents in 1978. In 1977, the Board passed a \$7 million bond issue and assessed each lot \$570 to be used for new improvements to roads, and to acquire the golf course, club house, and repay the developer for other improvements requested by the residents. In 1978, the Board approved a \$3.9 million bond issue with an assessment of \$3,200 per lot, to be repaid to bond holders over 30 years. It would "be used for the development of neighborhood streets, water supplies and a central sewage system for the subdivision. To overcome complaints that the developer should be paying for the development, Weisser explained, "Since I now own 80 percent of the home sites in the subdivision, I will have to pay 80 percent of the improvement myself." He added, "One day, all the supervisors on this board will be your friends and neighbors because you will all own the place."¹¹ A group of property owners hired an attorney to challenge the matter at the bond validation hearing, but the judge ruled that everything was in order and approved

⁵ Sebring News, March 27, 1975.

⁶ Golf Magazine, November 1976

⁷ Fort Lauderdale News, January 10, 1976, p. 91

⁸ Sebring News, March 20, 1975

⁹ The Tampa Tribune, August 23, 1979, page 12

¹⁰ Tampa Bay Tribune, November 11, 1977, p. 6

¹¹ The Tampa Tribune, May 5, 1978, p. 8

the bond issue.¹² The judge denied a motion for rehearing in July, and in August, the residents filed an appeal with the Second District Court of Appeals. In November, the parties reached an out of court settlement that allowed the bond issue would go forward, but with amendments to the county ordinance that assured homeowners at least one seat on the Board of Supervisors and a stronger say in future improvements.

In January 1980 there were discussions with the county and residents to convert the Sun 'n Lakes of Lake Placid to a Special Improvement District¹³. Many residents at Lake Placid saw it as disadvantaging the residents in favor of the developers, and their county commissioner agreed, and that spring passed a motion at the county level that future tax districts would be under the county "and not subject to an outside body of supervisors."¹⁴

Before the new Holiday Inn (now a Quality Inn) received its final approvals, Jack Weisser passed away in Miami on May 27, 1982, at the age of 58. There were about 600 homes at Sun 'n Lake of Sebring at the time. His son Ron, already active in the business, succeeded his father as president and continued developing Sun 'n Lake Estates at both Sebring and Lake Placid. He broke ground on the Holiday Inn in July 1982¹⁵ and had it open in time for the March 1983 Race Week.

In addition to continuing residential lot development, in June 1985, the Highlands County School Board approved acquiring the site that would become Sun 'n Lake Elementary School¹⁶; it opened in the fall of **1986**.

In October 1985, with population at Sun 'n Lake of Sebring having grown to about 3,000 and Sun 'n Lake of Lake Placid about the same, Ron Weisser announced that the developments were being sold to Harbor Federal Savings and Loan Association¹⁷. While indication was that his management would continue, Weisser left the project and moved to the Tampa area.

Under Harbor Federal, J. T. "Tim" Collins, who had been an accountant in the Weisser organization, became president of CFD, Inc. and led the further development of the Sun 'n Lake properties. As CFD, still held a second mortgage on the former Holiday Inn at Lake Placid, when the property was sold at auction in 1986, Collins, on behalf of CFD, entered the highest bid¹⁸.

In June 1989, CFD announce plans to issue up to \$47 million in new bonds to extend development to 7,000 lots, some of which were already sold. Rex Bond, who had transitioned to being General Manager of the District clarified that the district would initially seek to sell \$5.8 million in bonds to extend services to 1,100 lots. More bonds would be issued as the development progressed¹⁹.

By 1991, CFD was in trouble. It owed between \$300-400 thousand dollars in delinquent taxes to the county and about \$1.2 million in additional taxes to Sun 'n Lake.²⁰ Things got worse in September. It

¹² The Tampa Tribune, June 28, 1978, p. 4

¹³ The Tampa Tribune, January 16, 1980, p. 4

¹⁴ The Tampa Tribune, April 24, 1980, p. 15

¹⁵ The Tampa Bay Tribune, July 15, 1982, p. 54

¹⁶ The Tampa Tribune, June 29, 1985

¹⁷ The Tampa Bay Tribune, October 3, 1985, p. 56

¹⁸ The Tampa Tribune, November 25, 1986

¹⁹ The Tampa Tribune, June 17, 1989, p. 71

²⁰ The Tampa Tribune, June 9, 1991, p. 59

came out in court, that despite a court order, CFD did not have sufficient funds to register and deliver deeds to 4,500 buyers who had completed payments on their lots²¹. Collins cited the recession as cutting into real estate sales nationwide for depleting their working capital. In October, citing \$80.4 million in debt to more than 7,500 creditors against only \$8.6 million in assets, CFD filed bankruptcy.²²

At the Annual meeting in January 1992, General Manager Rex Bond indicated that due to the CFD bankruptcy, there may need to be a special assessment to maintain the level of service, which had a \$400,000 shortfall in the 1991 fiscal year and has only about \$600,000 in reserves.²³ Bond expressed hope that the bankruptcy court would grant CFD's unsold lots to the district so it could sell them and recoup some of its losses."²² Ironically, Tim Collins was among the four individuals elected to the Board of supervisors at the meeting.²²

Here ends Part 1 of the history of Sun 'n Lake. Still to come is how the Sun 'n Lake Improvement District came through and evolved to where we are today. Frankly, your scribe is also curious to discover how things played out over the last three decades but is comfortable calling Sun 'n Lake home today.

Sun 'n Lake of Sebring, can be thankful for its improvement district. With strong leadership from Rex Bond, it came through the challenging period of the 1990s and has seen continued growth.

Sun 'n Lake of Lake Placid, who shunned becoming an improvement district, relied on its homeowners' association. After 18 months of fighting through bankruptcy court, it was finally given title to the 15-acre recreation area on Lake Grassy.²⁴ Still, with the loss of many of its features, including its golf course that were dependent on CFD, the Lake Placid development has never fully recovered.

²¹ The Tampa Tribune, September 27, 1991. p. 71

²² The Tampa Tribune, October 12, 1991, p. 95

²³ The Tampa Tribune, January 26, 1992, p. 81

²⁴ The Tampa Tribune, July 9, 1993, p. 58