

General Gayety

by Leslie Robinson
Contributing Writer

Florida flush



These days when I think of Florida, I don't think of Walt Disney World or spring training or the Everglades. I think of bathrooms.

That's because some Floridians seem to think of nothing else. They're not potty mouths, they're potty heads.

Consider events in the city of Gainesville, home to the University of Florida. Last year the city commission added gender identity to Gainesville's anti-discrimination ordinance, which already included sexual orientation. The city's transgender citizens were protected from discrimination in housing and employment, plus they could use the public restroom of their choice.

And, so began the War of the Loo.

Irate bathroom defenders got a charter amendment on the ballot to sweep away the city's protection for trans folk and gays and lesbians. A new broom sweeps mean.

A group called Citizens for Good Public Policy led the forces of bathroom segregation. The name Citizens for Good Public Plumbing would've been more to the point.

The group took its campaign to the airwaves. In one ad, a young girl leaves a playground and heads into a women's restroom. Lurking outside, a grungy-looking man follows her in. Words on the screen read, "Your City Commission Made This Legal."

How easily, in a political campaign, truth swirls right down the drain.

A spokesman for Citizens for Good Public Policy noted his side's message stayed consistent during the campaign: "Keep men out of women's restrooms!" He declared, "That's our motive, plain and simple."

In the end, this all-bathroom, all-the-time approach didn't work. On March 24 Gainesville voters rejected repealing LGBT civil rights. Three cheers and a 21-toilet-brush salute to the people of Gainesville!

A week before the Gainesville vote, the city of Fort Lauderdale enthroned a new mayor, ending the 18-year reign of Jim Naugle, a man known in and beyond Florida for his fixation with facilities.

Term limits prevented Naugle, a conservative Democrat, from running again. Thank the porcelain god, for presumably this means he won't touch off another firestorm like he did in the summer of 2007 when he told the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* that public restrooms in the beach town were plagued by "homosexual activity."

He wanted to install a robotic toilet near the gay beach as a deterrent. Robo-john as robo-cop.

Naugle also said he doesn't use the word "gay," since most homosexuals "aren't gay. They're unhappy."

I don't have to tell you that a certain substance hit the fan. The local gay community launched a "Flush Naugle" campaign. At the height of the flap, Naugle invited the media to come hear an apology. He proceeded to offer one — to families, for not being aware how bad the problem of gay sex in public restrooms actually was.

Fort Lauderdale police called bathroom sex "a non-existent problem." But Naugle's mind was bogged down in the bog.

Naugle had supporters. A man in Fort Worth, Texas, emailed the mayor to say, "It's time us straight people started taking our country back from these sick people and make them either get help for their disease or go to jail."

Ideas suitable for flushing.

Probably the people taking the most comfort from Naugle's loss of station are local tourism officials. They had toiled to make Fort Lauderdale gay-friendly and the city collected lots of money from gay visitors. After Naugle roiled the waters with his comments, he was removed from the Tourism Development Council. Yes, he was no longer privy to what went on.

Tourism officials said the mayor's remarks kept gays away and also kept away families who feared the city was a sewer. As far as the officials are concerned, Naugle's mouth worked, but his mind was indisposed. ▀

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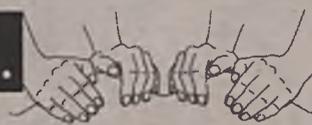
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