

Tacks in the Road

By Mayor John Brodman

My two-cents worth

Ground Hog Day all over again. After an ominous and Omicron-studded start to the New Year, here we are in February, which is the shortest and one of our busiest months of the year. We can look forward to Groundhog Day, Valentine's Day and Presidents' Day (formerly known as Washington's Birthday). February is also one of our coldest and windiest times that can be full of surprises, including a few glimmers of hope for the coming spring. Let's hope that the fog surrounding the beginning of our third year of living under the COVID cloud will keep Punxsutawney Phil from seeing his shadow, signaling the arrival of an early spring. February is the time when most towns get down to the serious work of preparing a budget for the coming Fiscal Year (FY) that runs from July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023 in Pine Knoll Shores—and we are no different.

COVID update. It is now pretty clear that Omicron is very contagious but less serious, especially for people who have been fully vaccinated. Nevertheless, the rapid spread of new cases has led many of us to continue operating under our current regime of precautions and delay plans to return to a semblance of normality, whatever that means today. In Pine Knoll Shores, we are keeping a close eye on the situation and trying to keep abreast of the frequently conflicting guidance coming from our state and federal government authorities. "Following the science" today has been so contaminated by politics and contradictions that it reminds me of the words Winston Churchill used to describe Russia: "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Mixing the science with politics results in further confusion, creating a labyrinth within a maze. What are we supposed to think when Chicago closes the schools and keeps the bars open?

As we enter year three of the virus, continuous preparation for both the known and unknown uncertainties surrounding the COVID pandemic is now an ever-present part of our daily lives. The spread of the Omicron variant has been phenomenal, breaking all records. In a sense, we have all become epidemiologists. Most people I know continue to take personal responsibility by being vaccinated, wearing masks in public places, and avoiding large indoor crowds whenever possible. The Pine Knoll Shores Board of Commissioners (BOC) reviewed our policies regarding public access to town hall and participation in town government business meetings at its meeting on January 12. Opinions were mixed, with some commissioners urging caution and others believing that we should open up again and learn to live with the virus.

The BOC decided to reopen town hall and the public safety building to the public, starting January 13, while urging residents to continue taking the usual precautions. Public participation in town government business meetings, however, will continue to be limited to online remote access during the month of February, with in-person participation expected to begin in March. Members of our boards and committees will continue to meet in person or by webinar during February, with rapid testing of in-person participants prior to each meeting. The decision on when to open town hall to outside groups (e.g., Garden Club, Women's Club, HOAs) will be revisited in March. Even though town hall is now open for walk-ins, for efficiency reasons we are still encouraging persons who wish to meet with staff on particular issues to call ahead and make an appointment.

Budget discussions. Following our customary tradition, and for want of a better name, we are planning to hold our annual offsite retreat on February 10 and 11. This is the time when we meet with representatives of our citizen boards and committees to review progress, make suggestions and set priorities for the coming year. It is also the time when we meet with the town's department heads to assess their fiscal needs and set the schedule for completing and approving the FY 2022-23 town budget by July 1. Pine Knoll Shores has a number of major infrastructure projects expected to start in the coming year, and the ongoing debate over sidewalks will be continued in the context of our capital improvement plan for the upcoming budget. The retreat is also an opportunity for commissioners and staff to brainstorm freely about nagging issues that are likely to require additional study and policy attention.

On sidewalks. At their January 12 meeting, the BOC agreed with the recommendation that we consider the sidewalk issue in the context of the upcoming budget discussions scheduled for this spring, and I fully support that idea. I'm a strong proponent of sidewalks, and I am not afraid to let you know where I stand on the issue. Sidewalks in town are controversial and viewed by some as another opportunity for the mayor and commissioners to impale themselves on the horns of an intractable dilemma. In a nutshell, I don't see any legitimate reason for continuing to deny our citizens access to safe pedestrian pathways. With a nod to actress Melanie Griffith in the movie "Working Girl," here's my two-minute elevator pitch:

- We have been debating this issue for 15-plus years now, and during that time we have examined and re-examined all the issues over and over again. We have bent over backwards to engage the public and solicit their input. We have done the analyses, sought compromises and moderated our policies and goals to address the concerns of a vast and varied group of stakeholders. Many comments from the public implored us to "just do it."
- The town has grown considerably in this period and is now set to grow even more. Our new strategic plan highlights pedestrian safety as the first objective under Infrastructure: "provide safe and well-maintained public streets and pedestrian walkways."
- We need to be proactive in consideration of public (pedestrian) safety and not wait for a potential disaster (accident) to become an action-forcing event.
- We have surveyed the town for citizens' opinions four times since 2007, and while the surveys showed that most of the people were in favor of sidewalks, the margins weren't large. All surveys are flawed in some regard, and we need to exercise caution when trying to read too much into survey results. That's why we shouldn't base our decision on survey results only; we need to take other items into consideration (e.g., public safety, costs, environmental impact) when making our decision.
- We now have a historic opportunity to do what the majority of the people want during a time of low interest rates. If we don't act now, it may be years before we take up the issue again. An increase in the tax rate (1.5 cents per \$100 of assessed value) may only be short-lived. Given the rise in Pine Knoll Shores real property values, our "revenue-neutral" tax rate is likely to decline after the next County revaluation. We are only looking at a particular segment at this time, on the north side of Highway 58, from Oakleaf Drive west to Pine Knoll Boulevard. Building this segment does not mean that other segments are inevitable. It is not like the camel's nose under the

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