



THE HOLDEN BEACH WEST DISPUTE began in mid-1985 when individuals protested the public closing of Ocean View Boulevard West.



LOCAL HURRICANE EVACUEES gather around a television to watch news reports about Hurricane Diana in September 1984.

A RETROSPECTIVE

The '80s In Brunswick County: A Turbulent Decade Of Growth

BY RAHN ADAMS

"Dedicated to the continued progress of Brunswick County," proclaimed the masthead of *The Brunswick Beacon* in 1980. Over the next 10 years, that pledge proved to be prophetic, as the theme of the decade could be summed up in one word: progress.

Brunswick County came of age in the 1980s. Its "greening" was evident not only in terms of its breakneck population growth—35,000 in 1980 compared to 53,000 in 1989—but also where progress in providing complex and often costly services to an increasingly urban community was concerned.

A countywide water system was built; new businesses and shopping centers sprang up; and many agricultural lands were converted into lush golf courses, to meet the growing and changing demands of the county's permanent and seasonal populations.

In the 1980s, headway also was made here in a war that continues to be waged in Brunswick County and across the nation. If the melody of the decade was one of "progress," its counterpoint was "drugs," as the county contended with the discord that came with being the state's "gateway" for marijuana and later cocaine traffic.

At the close of nearly every year during the decade, the *Beacon* news staff looked back at each preceding 12-month period and pieced together patchwork quilts of events for the newspaper's "Year in Review" articles. Now, as those quilts are laid out for inspection, their patterns are surprisingly similar, despite the different hands that touched them and the different materials that were used in their makings.

1980

It was another year of growth for Brunswick County. 1980 saw several changes upward, but as always they were accompanied by growing pains and offset by controversy and struggle.

There were two basic issues—"continuing news refrains," as *Beacon* staff member Marjorie McGivern put it—that dominated local news that year: land use and drug trafficking.

One "struggle" that caused great concern was the county's land use plan update. Mandated by the Coastal Area Management Act, the document was hardly a routine update, as county planners discovered again five years later.

The 1980 update changed about 35,000 acres of land along the Cape Fear River to industrial classification, to clear the way for construction of a proposed oil refinery. Citizen and environmental groups fought the plan and caused the Coastal Resources Commission to send it back to the county for revision.

From February to December 1980 authorities seized about 40 tons of marijuana and a million Quaaludes in Brunswick County. In one *Beacon* photograph, Sheriff Herman Strong—who later proved to be a player in drug conspiracies—was shown with five tons of marijuana that were found in a DC-4 airplane seized at the Brunswick County Airport.

Ms. McGivern also noted a concern that foreshadowed problems that the county now sees more clearly. "Solid waste disposal looms as the number one problem of the

coming year...Objections (to a central landfill site) include the fear of contaminating nearby Lockwood Folly River..."

1981

The year 1981 might well be looked upon as a year in which some of the weightiest decisions in Brunswick County's history were made.

Perhaps the most far-reaching decision to which *Beacon* writer Rich Nubel referred in his year-end review was county voters' passage of a \$37 million bond referendum that would allow the county to either participate in the Lower Cape Fear Water and Sewer Authority's regional water project, or to build its own countywide water system. We now know that the county pursued the latter option, due to initial failure of the regional water system concept.

County voters also went to the polls and soundly defeated a referendum that would have permitted the sales of beer and wine in unincorporated areas of the county. That decision would stand until November 1989, when a countywide ABC referendum passed with surprising ease.

Ironically, the issue that had spurred the land use plan controversy in 1980—the proposed oil refinery—was negated in 1981, when Brunswick Energy Corporation announced it would abandon plans for the refinery.

Marijuana smuggling investigations continued, setting the tone for drug probes in years to come: No one was above the law. Among individuals convicted were N.C. Marine Fisheries officers Duane Morton and John Kinlaw, who were

linked to a case involving the attempted importation of \$6.2 million worth of marijuana.

1982

*A year of vacillation and a year of promise; a year of compromise and a year of challenge. That was 1982, wrote the *Beacon's* Susan Usher. But through all the growing pains a single thread of silver sparkled like sands in the beach: a vision of a better Brunswick County in which to live and work and plan.*

Again, the main concerns were water and drugs. Brunswick County stepped forward and signed on as the Lower Cape Fear Water and Sewer Authority's first official customer—a distinction the county held until late in the decade.

Also, Leland Sanitary District residents approved a multi-million dollar bond referendum to finance a water distribution system that would eventually hook onto the county water line.

The county's reputation as a haven for drug smugglers was offset somewhat, as prosecutions got under way in several marijuana trafficking cases. But drug busts continued—most notably, the seizure of

33,000 pounds of marijuana and 158 pounds of hashish from the *Brixham II*, a trawler that was seized at the mouth of the Shallotte River.

And then, the county's drug trafficking puzzle came together...

1983

For residents who had hoped to remember 1983 as another continuing year of growth and progress for Brunswick County, "Operation Gateway" clouded the picture.

The year was perhaps the most unsettled period in the county's recent history. As *Beacon* writer Terry Pope noted, "Growth and future visions of a better county took a temporary back seat to a year of drug-smuggling investigations and the downfall of political powers in Brunswick County."

Residents were shocked to learn that among the 21 men indicted on federal drug charges were some of the county's highest-ranking officials, including Sheriff Strong, former County Commission Chairman Steve Varnam, Shallotte Police Chief Hoyal "Red" Varnam and former Holden Beach Police Commissioner Roger Morton.

In Strong's much-publicized trial, county Det. Paul Campbell testified that the sheriff had told him, "We can't fight them (drug smugglers), so we might as well join them." Strong was convicted. Chief Det. John Carr Davis was appointed sheriff, following Strong's resignation.

Other county concerns that year included: a change in the county's five electoral districts, so that each district would contain about 7,000 residents for fairer representation; the start of installation work on the county's new water system; and attention to severe erosion problems on the east ends of Ocean Isle Beach and Holden Beach.

1984

1984 will be remembered in Brunswick County as the year of Diana, the first hurricane to make landfall in Brunswick County since Hazel 30 years earlier.

Just as local residents were reminded of the powers of nature again five years later, Hurricane Diana caused millions of dollars worth of damage. But unlike Hazel in 1954 and Hugo in 1989, (Continued On Following Page)

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