How Delray Beach Saved Itself
And Found Great Leadership Along the Way

In a decade's time, a small Florida city pulled itself out of decline — and learned lessons about leadership that could serve as a national model.

By Otis White

TWO THINGS ABOUT DELRAY BEACH, IN FLORIDA'S PALM BEACH COUNTY, ARE CRYSTAL CLEAR. First, it was a town in trouble 10 years ago. "Everyone was depressed," says Mayor Tom Lynch. "A laughingstock," says Chamber Director Bill Wood. "An embarrassment," agrees County Commission Chairwoman Mary McCarty. "Nobody trusted each other," says developer Sandy Simon.

Second, things are much better now. "As close to ideal as it gets," the *Palm Beach Post* wrote recently about Delray. "A hometown now," says civic activist Carolyn Zimmerman. "A community and not just a town," adds Simon. "It's like magic," says banker Billie Linville.

Few places have come as far as fast as Delray Beach in the past decade. In those years, the city of 50,000 created an elegant arts and community center from a crumbling elementary school, rebuilt its main street and improved race relations. It turned around its city government, floated a major bond referendum, strengthened its schools and lured a major tournament, Virginia Slims of Florida, to its brand-new tennis complex.

Vacancies along Atlantic Avenue, the main street, declined from almost half to nearly zero. Sidewalk cafes, nightclubs and art galleries opened in empty storefronts. Young couples fixed up scores of old homes near downtown. And small businesses sprang up everywhere — including a healthy mix of minority-owned ones. In 1993 the National Civic League named Delray Beach an "All-America City," the urban equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize, in recognition of its turnaround.

More amazing is how Delray did it. Not with a charismatic mayor, dynamic chamber director, major new industry or even a giant development.

It did it by reviving some dusty old notions: civic-mindedness and responsibility. In the process, Delray Beach has spawned the broadest and deepest collection of community leaders in Florida and learned lessons about leadership that could help not just other cities in trouble — but organizations as well.

Leadership is the key to understanding Delray Beach's renaissance. The past decade hasn't been so much a discovery of what to do as how to do it. Since the early 1980s, the city has understood its future lay with revitalizing its downtown, reducing crime, improving race relations and attracting young families.

Problem was, its citizens were so divided racially, ethnically and economically — and the divisions ran so deep — they couldn't get past their differences to work together. Says political scientist Lance deHaven-Smith, who studied Delray in the 1980s, "It was kind of like a dysfunctional family. They'd fixate on one problem and overlook the larger issues."

Frances Bourque, who was most responsible for the city's new community center and arts complex, Old School Square, says, "Delray Beach always had a sense of place. And somewhere between the 1950s and 1980s, it kept its place and lost its sense."

City government provided little leadership. The five-member city commission was a theater of the absurd, in which every issue was viewed through the lens of petty grievances and community rivalries, and discussions turned into shouting matches. "It was the best show in town," says Jerry Taylor, a former newspaper executive, of commission meetings. "It was like a circus."

But inside these problems lay something most cities in decline — and organizations in trouble — miss: the solutions. If Delray Beach's problems hadn't been so great, its traditional leadership so exhausted and yet its potential so clear, the people there might have missed the answers staring them in the face.

What Delray learned was a process of solving problems that works like a breeder reactor, renewing itself from its own energies. Here's how: When a problem becomes apparent, civic leaders help the people most affected organize themselves to study it and come up with solutions. When the citizens arrive at some solutions, the city offers to be part — but only part — of the resolution. The group that's most affected must accept the bulk of the responsibility.

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It's in this constant tension over responsibility — is everyone doing his part to solve this problem? — that Delray Beach generates both solutions and leadership. No one looks to city hall to figure out what to do or even to do it once it's figured out. But they do keep close watch to be be sure the city, the business community and non-profits live up to their ends of the bargain.

City hall is willing to "facilitate" the problem-solving process, help find resources and take some of the responsibility when the solution is arrived at. But it won't tell people what to do or take on the work for them. As Mayor Lynch explains, "If someone comes to us with a problem, our role isn't to solve the problem but to connect them with other people who can help them solve their problem."

Citizens have embraced the new approach. Carolyn Zimmerman, who's active in fighting crime in her low-income neighborhood, says it's both liberating and effective. "If you just go over to city hall and complain and then sit back and wait for city hall to act, you'll never get anything done," she says. "In Delray, we just go out and do it."

Better yet, the process creates new leaders. As volunteers tackle one problem successfully, they're often eager to take on others. After a while it gets addictive, says Janet Onnen, an electrical contractor who's active in schools and downtown development. "People feel good about doing things themselves," she says. "Sometimes the joy is more in working together than in the things that get accomplished."

Call it the "responsibility revolution."

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You can see it in the details. In December, when the city put up its giant Christmas tree, private workers used a crane borrowed from a local business to set up the tree. They placed it on the lawn of Old School Square, which is managed by a non-profit organization. A downtown group sponsored the tree-trimming event, paid for by a local bank. City workers did the electrical work. Volunteers attached branches and ornaments and a nearby restaurant passed out sandwiches.

Everyone was in such a good mood, no one noticed the irony: When was the last time you saw government employees working happily alongside volunteers in a non-profit project paid for by businesses?

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Delray Beach wasn't always such a happy place. In fact, the words used most often to describe the mood of the early 1980s are apathy, division, cynicism and decline. "You talked about Delray Beach in other places, and people laughed up their sleeves," says Bill Wood, the chamber director.

But nobody was laughing in Delray Beach. Among other things, the city had a serious crime problem. A low-income neighborhood just off Interstate 95 became a major outdoor drug market. Cars could veer off I-95, do a drug deal and be back on the highway in minutes. The neighborhood was so tough that when the police department tried to put a substation there, drug dealers set fire to the building. Twice.

The main approach to the city was through an African-American neighborhood. In the evenings, groups of young men loitered on the corners, sometimes spilling into the streets, frightening pedestrians and motorists. When a former police chief was asked about putting officers on foot patrol along the street, he said he was against it. Too dangerous, he said.

At the same time, the city's economic vitality was draining away. Shopping malls, including those in nearby Boca Raton, were taking retail business from downtown. Few new businesses were taking their place.

And the public schools were in such poor shape that young families avoided the city. The symbol of decline was the massive, peeling elementary school downtown, big sections of which had been abandoned. Outside, the grass was worn away, its perimeter bordered by a chain-link fence. "It was as if we had a concentration camp downtown," says attorney Michael Weiner.

What held back the city from tackling these problems was its deep divisions. An old town by Florida standards — Delray will soon celebrate its centennial — it has long been divided between a wealthy beach community, a downtown merchant class, and a poor black population that worked on nearby vegetable farms. In the 1960s and 1970s, the vegetable farms disappeared, and retirees from the North settled in the suburbs and condos west of I-95.

By the early 1980s, the divisions had hardened to the point that almost no community issue could be discussed rationally. Retirees complained about the attention the downtown was receiving, African Americans (who make up a quarter of the population) bridled at the mention of loitering, the beach community resisted higher taxes, and the downtown interests were dispirited and ineffective.

The poisonous politics ran straight through the city commission. Delray Beach residents search for words to describe commission meetings. "It was like kids at recess, cutting each other down," says Weiner. "There was so much going on politically, you didn't know which way was up," says Onnen. "There were all these different agendas and special interests," says Linville.

DeHaven-Smith, the political scientist, agrees: "It was a fairly jaundiced, cynical political process." What struck him was how little regard the city's ethnic groups and interests had for one another. "None of these groups cooperated very much, or even spoke to each other." Sign of the turmoil: The commission went through five city managers in seven years.

Delray Beach had assets — starting with its beautiful beach and quaint 1920s-era downtown, and including its location in booming Palm Beach County — but it couldn't agree on ways to take advantage of them. Residents were too busy fighting each other.

The turnaround of Delray Beach began with a force that has unified many a

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FRACTIOUS COMMUNITY: A THREAT FROM THE OUTSIDE.

In 1986, the Florida Department of Transportation let it be known it planned to widen Atlantic Avenue from I-95 to the beach. Business leaders were horrified; they believed it would decimate the downtown.

Tom Lynch, who was active in downtown activities, remembers it as a wake-up call. Until then, he says, the city's problems were "like the aging process — hard to see." The DOT's threat to Atlantic Avenue was plain, immediate and unifying. "It gave us a common enemy to go out and fight," he says.

What gave Delray the will to fight was a task force report the year before that envisioned a completely different downtown from the one the DOT had in mind. Where transportation planners argued that widening the road would help downtown by funneling more cars through it, the task force recommended the opposite: narrowing Atlantic Avenue from four lanes to two, slowing traffic and creating a more pedestrian environment.

When the city commission took its own task force's advice over that of outside experts, it was a first big step in the responsibility revolution. (Delray eventually cut a deal with the DOT to widen two other streets instead, and the state transferred responsibility for Atlantic Avenue to the city.)

But there was more to it than that. The downtown task force had inspired confidence by the way it worked. A broadly representative group (including minorities), its members took their work seriously, emphasized consensus and trust, and placed faith in their own judgment. Because of the self-confidence, they were skeptical of outside experts and their "big fixes" and willing to accept responsibility.

That spirit carried over when the city formed a Community Redevelopment Agency to manage the renewal plan. There was no mega-development, festival marketplace or out-of-town savior in the CRA's plan. Its approach was modest, almost humble: Start small, with a single block, and move outward. Lend money to property owners willing to fix up their buildings. Get merchants together on special events and celebrations. Don't look for big new projects, work with the ones you have. And don't try to solve all the problems yourself, insist everyone do his part.

Dawn was breaking on Delray's responsibility revolution.

But before anyone was willing to take responsibility, they had to believe the revolution would succeed. That's why the CRA concentrated first on making Atlantic Avenue look better. It widened sidewalks, installed paving stones and ornate street lights, buried utility lines and planted trees.

Why begin with cosmetics? Psychology, says Lynch. Given Delray's history of apathy and decline, downtown leaders felt the citizens needed visible signs of progress. "It was a perception change," he says. "When people saw the street lights and the rest, they felt like it could happen."

It wasn't the big fix that many cities pursue. Nor was it a quick fix. Mary McCarty, who was on the city commission, remembers a two-year lag between the CRA's beautification projects and the first significant private investments. "It was like, OK, where's the payoff?" she says, drumming her fingers on a table. At it turned out, though, it was a sure fix.

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AS CITY LEADERS WAITED FOR DOWNTOWN TO REVIVE, OTHER PROJECTS MOVED AHEAD SLOWLY. Frances Bourque, who was active in historic preservation, took on one of the biggest — doing something with the old elementary school downtown, which was being abandoned by the school system.

With three large buildings dating to 1913, the old school was too big to ignore and too obvious. It sat right at the center of town, along Atlantic Avenue. City leaders had the vague idea of making it into a community center.

Bourque decided early on to handle the project with a small group and not ask for city help. It was a wise decision. "Had it been something the city commission decided to do," she says, "they would have brought in outside consultants, visited other communities and had debates about how it should be done and what it would cost." In other words, trapped in the poisonous politics of Delray Beach.

As it was, nobody noticed as Bourque and her group of amateurs taught themselves the arts of grants-writing, fund-raising, renovation design and supervision, museum and theater

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management. "I think one of the reasons we were successful," she says, "was we didn't have a pro — or need a pro."

This was a new way of thinking: Develop talent from within, don't depend on outsiders, take responsibility yourself. In time, this do-it-yourself approach had a multiplier effect. As local people learned new skills and became successful, it increased their confidence to tackle other problems. As Janet Onnen explains, "The successes here seem to be very deeply rooted because these are things local people accomplished — not someone from the outside."

Meanwhile, others were taking responsibility. Two young real estate developers assumed the monumental task of turning around Delray's schools. They became interested, says Tom Fleming, because of troubles they were having luring families to their developments. "We were just two guys trying to sell homes to families and finding out the city was going down the tubes," he says.

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Fleming and his partner started interviewing local officials and school administrators in West Palm Beach. Gradually, they developed a plan for putting the city in partnership with the school board in improving Delray Beach schools, along with a healthy dose of volunteer labor. Another step toward responsibility.

Other parts of the community were rousing. One was the African-American community. Its awakening began, ironically, with a misbegotten Community Redevelopment Agency plan for the portion of Atlantic Avenue that crosses the largest black neighborhood.

While most citizens resisted a big fix downtown, some thought it was just what was needed in minority neighborhoods. They learned otherwise when a former CRA director announced his ideas about bulldozing black-owned stores and homes near Atlantic Avenue. African-American leaders came alive. At public hearings, they protested that this was just urban renewal — "black removal," as it's sometimes called — under a new name.

White officials were defensive at first, then encouraged. Says Lynch, "(The CRA director's plan) had the same effect in the black community that the DOT proposal had for us. It got them organized."

Lula Butler, the city's community improvement director, agrees. "From that point on," she says, "the people have gotten involved and stayed involved." Apathy was starting to recede.

But while these projects were nibbling away at some of Delray Beach's toughest problems, they were doing so without much contact or coordination. And they had done little to reduce the divisions of the community — or the viciousness of Delray politics.

What was needed was something to tie these individual efforts together, to create a whole picture from the pieces. Sandy Simon thought he knew how: an event known as a "visioning conference."

Simon was a Delray native who had left for 20 years to build and manage real estate projects in Atlanta. There, he'd seen how well a city can work together, with government officials, business interests and minorities pulling together, because of their faith in a common good. Delray Beach still lacked that faith. "People were beginning to assert some responsibility," Simon recalls. "It was scattered, but it had started. It was almost like the fruit was getting ripe."

With Lance deHaven-Smith, the political scientist who had studied Delray Beach, Simon arranged a three-day retreat in 1988 to nearby Hutchinson Island for 125 of Delray's leaders, including the entire city commission.

As they describe it, the conference was designed to produce what Delray lacked, consensus. The first day was spent explaining the challenges facing Delray and discussing the problems in small groups. In the second day, the old divisions receded, as participants worked together. By the third, when the groups reconvened, participants were startled to discover they'd come to the same conclusions.

Today, Delray's leaders look back on that weekend as the city's breakthrough, when a new vision of Delray Beach was born and its leadership energized. "The visioning process was the glue that put it all together," says Butler. "It was very important," adds Bourque. "People began to hear these wonderful community attributes, and we discovered we didn't want to be like anyplace else."

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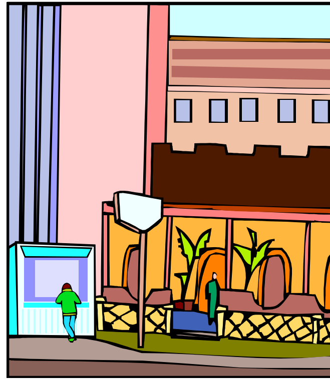
The visioning conference did more than produce good vibrations. Participants came out determined to change the city. They started by sponsoring — and campaigning for — a $22 million bond referendum to improve drainage, fix roads, improve areas surrounding schools and speed up the restoration of Old School Square. It passed with 60% voter approval.

Then they set to work changing Delray's politics. A new slate of commissioners, including Tom Lynch, ran on a platform of ending the circus atmosphere of commission meetings and making government more businesslike. They businesslike. They were elected by huge margins.



Lynch, an insurance agency owner, has become a passionate spokesman for not just reinventing government but rethinking its very purpose. At its core is the notion of government as a facilitator and consensus-builder, not a solver of problems. "The only way you can win anything," he says, "whether it's rejuvenating a city, waging a war on drugs or a war on crime, is on drugs or a war on crime, is by bringing people together and solving it as a community."

OF ALL DELRAY BEACH'S PROBLEMS, THE HARDEST TO DEAL WITH WAS CRIME. Partly it was because the drug trade had become so entrenched and fearless. And partly because of racial sensitivities. Many blacks saw discussions of crime and loitering as directed at them alone.

There was only one way around the problem: Bring African Americans into the civic fold. It is inclusiveness with a purpose. At a point, Delray's white leaders recognized the city couldn't advance if a quarter of its population sat sullenly on the sidelines.

So they reached out in two ways. First, by making city investments in predominately black neighborhoods, including the municipal tennis complex and a new recreation center, named after one of Delray's leading black citizens. Second, by seeking African Americans to serve on city boards.

And vice versa: Whites routinely turn out these days for causes in the black community. At this year's Christmas party of the Delray Merchants Association, a mostly black organization, nearly half those attending were white. The fire chief, police chief, CRA director and other city officials were present, as well as many of Delray's civic and business leaders. The party was held in a black neighborhood.

This familiarity hasn't been quick or easy. Early on, says Clay Wideman, a black business leader, some of the contact was clumsy. "It began with what I call false communication because we didn't know each other well," he says. "We hadn't mingled together except at the workplace, and that was at different (social) levels." But working together on civic projects — and simply socializing — have deepened the understanding and trust, he adds.

Delray's racial tensions have not ended. In 1995, a large group of young African Americans held a march through town, protesting that they were shut out of city decisions. (The city's response, supported by older black leaders: Get organized, find solutions, take responsibility, and we'll do our share.) Even so, says Wideman, "We're doing it in Delray Beach like America ought to do it. We're breaking down the barriers."

Nor have crime and drugs disappeared. But with a new community-policing program (including foot patrols), a vigorous neighborhood watch program and broad support in the black community, everyone agrees Delray's crime problems are greatly reduced.

THERE'S YET ANOTHER LESSON LEARNED IN DELRAY BEACH THAT COULD BE APPLIED AS EASILY TO BUSINESSES AS CITIES: THE VALUE OF HAVING NO GRAND DESIGN. In a way, it's a byproduct of the Delray's no-big-fix philosophy, the belief that development should be incremental. But there's more to it than that.

By not having a master plan, Delray's leaders have sometimes discovered assets they hadn't counted on. Like a blossoming arts community.

Shortly after the Old School Square art museum opened in 1990, galleries and sidewalk cafes began moving into storefronts nearby, attracted by the elegant restoration and friendly pedestrian environment. Even more surprising, artists started buying up homes in the neighborhood behind Old School Square, Pineapple Grove.

While no one planned this artistic influx, it didn't take Delray Beach long to recognize and embrace it. One way: by relaxing the zoning in

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Pineapple Grove to allow artists to live, work and sell in a single building.

And it has marketed its windfall through street festivals called “Art and Jazz on the Avenue.” Four nights a year, merchants stay open late, jazz bands play, and galleries welcome visitors who drive from as far away as Miami. One of the festival’s most enthusiastic supporters is attorney Michael Weiner, who lives and works in Pineapple Grove. “People said, ‘Nobody will come out at night to downtown. They’ll be too scared,’ ” he recalls. “We had 10,000 people show up the first time.”

Delray Beach’s leaders are cautious about prescribing their methods for others. “Maybe there are some things here that are so unique we can’t go up and down the coast saying, do it like we did it,” muses Weiner. “We had assets,” agrees Lynch. “Our assets were a quaint town and a wealthy community that liked Delray and had been here since the 1920s.” Without that base, he adds, the turnaround would have been much more difficult.

Still, most believe there are things to be learned. Among them, says CRA Director Christopher Brown, is “don’t get romanced by the big fix.” Start small, concentrate your efforts, he says, “and work your way out from there.”

Look inward for assets and leadership, advises Onnen. “What Delray did was look to the talents that were here and the natural resources we had, then we looked at market trends,” she says. “And rather than wait for someone to come in and fix it, we did it ourselves.”

Include everyone, seek their judgment but don’t assume their problems, says Simon. “You have to include the people,” he says. “The people have to own the (decision-making) process and accept the responsibility.” When in doubt, he adds, “err on the side of inclusion.”

Get people organized, says Zimmerman. “I think you’d have to do it neighborhood by neighborhood. You don’t start at the top, you start at the bottom.” County Commission Chairwoman McCarty agrees: “You’d have to go a neighborhood at a time, letting government play a supporting role.”

Finally, be patient. “This was not a straight line,” Weiner remembers. “It had its fits and starts.” And Delray Beach is still not done, he cautions. “This is very much a work in progress,” he says.

But by anyone’s measure, a nice piece of work. And a lot of progress.

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