

# Only teamwork will make the dream work for a better, brighter Sarasota



**Seidman Says**  
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Columnist

Sarasota has a history of residents coming together to advocate against policies, proposals or projects they feel will impact them adversely. The number of color-coded, slogan-bearing T-shirts that have been produced over the past few years to visually represent neighbors aligned in fighting a cause could probably clothe the needy of a small nation.

Yet just as Sarasota's plethora of nonprofits (more than 1,300 at last count) are sometimes accused of being silo'd, duplicative and non-collaborative, these groups generally form to fight a specific project or a single neighborhood's concern. Rarely is that enough to get the job done; establishment entities with more behind-the-scenes connections, power and money often prevail.

With our area's growing reputation as the country's hotbed of conservative activism and in the run up to an election where the results could produce radically different scenarios for our area's future, grassroots groups have been popping up to play whack-a-mole with every emerging threat. But this year, there's a new phenomenon: These groups aren't just multiplying, they're uniting.

That is the driver behind two networks that have formed in recent months in an effort to amplify citizens' voices. One, SCAN (Sarasota Citizen Action Network), arose from the belief that growth and development in Sarasota is out of control and planning for it has lost perspective, proportion and a public vision. **The other, PEN (Public Education Network) Sarasota, was catalyzed by the threat of privatization of Florida's public educational system and the desire to preserve the quality of our A-rated public school district.**

SCAN started with the widely shared sentiment that growth pressures were increasing countywide, with developers proposing ambitious projects likely to negatively impact existing adjacent communities and public amenities. At the same time, many residents felt the Sarasota Board of County Commissioners was increasingly excluding the public from having any say in the planning process.

SCAN's first meeting in January drew representatives from three groups – one working to prevent construction of mega-hotels on Siesta Key (Protect Siesta Key); another to deny a proposed housing development adjacent to the Celery Fields (Fresh Start for the Celery Fields); and a third fighting the expansion of Lakewood Ranch into the rural Old Miakka community (Keep the Country Country).

"The prospect of losing any one of these unique areas is a countywide gut punch," Tom Matrullo, a former newspaper journalist who handles communications for the network, said at the meeting. "The odds are not strong if each community stands alone. We need a network to halt this juggernaut, a strategic network sharing information and gumption."

Matrullo points out that SCAN is a "self-sustaining network," not a nonprofit or other registered organization; it doesn't have officers or even a website, though he maintains a blog of information. Its sole purpose is to bring residents from different parts of the county who are facing development challenges in touch with each other.

Other groups that have since joined the effort include SEERD (Sarasota East-Enders for Responsible Development (mobilized to oppose relocation of a private school in their Bee Ridge Road neighborhood); the Pine Shores Neighborhood Alliance (led by Sura Kochman, which has been fighting to minimize the neighborhood impact of a Benderson approved development at Stickney Point Road and Tamiami Trail); and others committed to preserving the historic buildings at Warm Mineral Springs in North Port.

The network's monthly meetings, which alternate locations throughout the county, feature presentations from affiliates that provide useful information to other participants. For example, in March, Susan Schoettle, a former county attorney, walked attendees through the many stages of the county's confusing



**Signs posted by residents opposed to high density hotels can be seen in numerous locations around Siesta Key. Some local grassroots groups are working together to increase their impact in the fight against overdevelopment in Sarasota.**

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planning process; engineer Steve Suau gave an overview of newly released flood maps and Rob Wright offered a brief tour of the Celery Fields, where a 140-house subdivision has been proposed by D. R. Horton on adjacent land.

The upcoming April 24 meeting at Venice's Jacaranda Library will offer experiential advice from three South County groups – the Environmental Conservancy of North Port, which is working to save and protect vacant lands; the North Venice Neighborhood Alliance, which is waging a lawsuit against developer Pat Neal; and Venice Thrives, which recently led a successful campaign to displace two Venice City Council candidates unresponsive to resident input.

**PEN Sarasota recently held its first official meeting; it was a session that saw about two dozen teachers, educators and concerned citizens – from Support Our Schools, Families for Strong Public Schools, the Sarasota League of Women Voters, the youth-driven SEE (Social Equity Through Education) Alliance and the parent-led Protect the A – gather to strategize next steps.**

"There are several grassroots organizations that have popped up in recent years because of what's going on in the public education system here," said Theoni Soublis, a professor of education at the University of Tampa and one of PEN's nine founding members. "We don't need to re-do their amazing work. But they are all silo'd. How can we amplify their voices and connect everyone?"

PEN's number one concern, Soublis said, is "privatization under the guise of charter schools and the dismantling of public education by defunding public schools." But in the months leading to the Sarasota County School Board primary in August, the group's focus will be on supporting candidates who meet their "ideal characteristics": live in the district; have high ethical standards; value stakeholder input; be transparent; support all students and families; and understand the current threat to public education funding.

Vice Chair Jill Lewis-Spector, who taught in public universities for more than 40 years, said no organization that signs on to PEN's "memorandum of understanding" need give up any of its individual autonomy or activities. **But all will likely benefit from the wider network.**

"What do you get?" she asked. "More exposure. A wider audience. Shared expertise, research and access to information and data. Connections with school teachers and administrators and parents. Strategic planning. And a wider dissemination of critical information."

**An informal survey of participants at the first meeting revealed three priorities: full funding of traditional public schools; separation of church and state; and the reestablishment of diversity, equity and inclusion programming.**

It remains to be seen if these attempts to share research, advice, experience and people-power will result in the desired outcomes. But working toward a more informed and collaborative community where residents have a meaningful seat at the table certainly can't hurt.

Often I'm asked by readers concerned about Sarasota's direction – as it continues to grow in size while diverging in consensus – where they can go to stay abreast of what's happening here. These groups would be a good place to start.

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