

Former Candidate Now Campaigns For Sensible Growth

By MARK HOLAN

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LUTZ - Denise Layne didn't dwell on her November defeat for county commissioner.

"I was exhausted and I was disappointed, of course," said Layne, a civic and environmental activist who also lost a 2002 bid for the Hillsborough County board. "It took me about a week, and I was over it."

What Layne couldn't shake from the campaign trail, she said, was "hearing the same cries from people in the inner city, Sun City and Plant City to do something about transportation, do something about schools, do something about growth."

So earlier this year Layne picked a "diverse, nonpartisan" group of community leaders, environmentalists, developers and business people and formed the Coalition 4 Responsible Growth. Layne wants the four interest groups to move beyond political differences and historical antagonism to focus on practical solutions to growth issues.

"All partisanship will be left out of this organization," she vowed as the group's executive director. The 25-member steering committee also represents Hillsborough County's geographic diversity, from Ruskin to Keystone and several Tampa neighborhoods in between.

The members have contributed from \$100 to \$500 each as seed money for Layne to keep an eye on growth management bills as a registered lobbyist in Tallahassee.

"She's not shy, and that works perfectly for her in Tallahassee," said coalition member Deborah Cope of the Tampa Bay Sierra Club. "You need a strong personality, and she knows a lot of people."

Early Lessons

Hillsborough has grown by more than 350,000 people, to about a million residents, since Layne bought her 1,500- square- foot house on Ayers Hill Court in 1979.

She moved to Florida about five years earlier after graduating from high school in Detroit. Her early 20s were occupied by a brief first marriage and tending bar around Sumter County.

Layne married her second husband, Charles, in 1978, and they settled in Lutz. She became active at St. Mary Catholic Church and started a paralegal career under the tutelage of former state Sen. David McClain, who got her involved in the Sertoma Club.

"He dragged me into public service," Layne said. "I learned how to run a meeting, how to talk to people and how to motivate volunteers."

She became president of the Lutz Civic Association and got embroiled in a battle over the location of a new high school. That experience sparked her interest in growth and development issues, which led to more activity with the Sierra Club and several county transportation and environmental committees. Layne also started her own company, Paralegal Associates Inc., which she still operates.

"It's taken my entire lifetime to get to the point of doing this," Layne said of her latest endeavor. "I could not have done this two years ago."

Layne said she walks several miles a day between committee meetings and private conversations with state lawmakers in Tallahassee, but worries that nipping candy on the run may undo such exercise. She keeps in touch with the coalition via e-mail, soliciting ideas and refining position papers.

``Remember to hit, `Reply All,' " she reminds the group.

Another Run For Office?

Back home, Layne also confers with Mark Sharpe, who defeated her in the November commission race. ``We've talked a lot," said Sharpe, who is not a member of the coalition. ``She's been very helpful getting me up to speed with regard to the [Cypress Creek Town Center] mall in Pasco and other growth issues. She is very professional."

Layne opposes the proposed 500-acre retail complex on the Pasco-Hillsborough county line near Interstate 75 through her association with the Sierra Club. The coalition has not taken a position on the project.

``Denise and I don't always agree," Sharpe said, ``but we both want to build and improve our community." Layne, who switched to the Democratic Party last fall after running the first time as a Republican, said she would not challenge Sharpe in the future. But she isn't ruling out another campaign for public office, either.

That wouldn't surprise coalition member Michael McKinney, who runs the public policy program at the county Cooperative Extension Service.

``I work with a lot of candidates and decision-makers," he said. ``A lot of good people who run for office and are not elected you never hear from them again. Denise is passion- driven and didn't let this defeat get in the way."

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