

City, county and chamber form ombudsman team

BY DAVID S. RODOCK
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VALDOSTA — Lowndes County, City of Valdosta and the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce (COC) have recently announced a cooperative effort in the formation of the Special Ombudsman Response Team (SORT).

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an ombudsman is someone appointed to receive and investigate complaints made by individuals against abuses or capricious acts of public officials.

"Initially what led to this committee was different entities, construction folks and business leaders who had some of the same issues they were trying to work through and the chamber put the committee together to narrow down what the concerns were and see what solutions could be made," said local business owner and SORT member, Bill Slaughter.

The committee was suggested

by local leaders as a method of addressing the city's Land Development Regulation (LDR) and Lowndes County's Unified Land Development Code (ULDC).

"It's a process in the works — we addressed the issues that were at the table at the time and we have committed to continue to look at future issues," said Slaughter.

According to Slaughter, individuals from out of town or those who are unfamiliar with the planning review process found that it could be overwhelming to understand all that needed to be done in order to establish their business within city and county guidelines.

"I think it boils down to a lack of experience with any planning review process and until you're comfortable with that process, it can be burdensome because there are hurdles, or gates that you have to open to move through," said Slaughter.

According to Slaughter, the planning review process is similar to other communities that are

experiencing a similar amount of growth.

"We hope to smooth the process so the individual can move right in and feel comfortable with the process," said Slaughter. "The whole process involving the LDR and ULDC was thoroughly involved with public input, for 12-18 months. Everyone had the opportunity to input into the creation of the document."

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Myrna Ballard

Chamber president

"Our local governments have been very responsive to these initiatives that the chamber has brought forward," said COC president, Myrna Ballard.

"These are not cosmetic changes; these truly are transforming the process."

"If this is a small-business owner's one-chance to go forward for their entire career, we've tried to identify and mark out the individuals that will assist them in doing so," said Jason Davenport, Lowndes county planner.

"I think it's a good idea — anything that anyone can do to help the City of Valdosta decrease some of the regulatory burden through the LDR system is a step in the right direction," said Valdosta businessman Roger Budd III. "If all they're trying to do is get people to adhere to the LDR, I'm not in favor of it — we need to reduce some of these regulations that are needlessly time consuming."

"This city is known as the most unfriendly city when it comes to business. I've had people from Atlanta and all over Georgia tell me that; the regulations are just terrible, with the hoops you have to jump through," said businessman Roy Taylor Sr. "What we got out of that meeting is the city employ-

ees being a little more polite to us. We were looking for the city to change ordinances to make things easier for businesses to get set up; jobs are what we need in Valdosta, not any more committees."

According to Ballard, since 2007, the COC has undertaken a strategic planning process to determine what community leaders think the chamber should be working on to have the greatest impact on the community. A number of them requested an enhancement of the pro-business environment by creating a rapid-response team to address business issues. The SORT committee is what was created in response.

Members were appointed by the COC and include Sue Cox (Chairperson), Dean Blevins, Alan Dear, Richard Hill, Bill Slaughter, Chuck Smith and Al Turner. "We wanted well-respected business leaders who have experience in the business process who would be constructive," said Ballard.