

Think tank solves cities' problems

FAU, FIU academics leave ivory tower to stress regionalism

By JEFFREY WEISS

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When the city of Sunrise was left in a political shambles after discovery of the illegal escapades of former mayor John Lomelo, city leaders needed somewhere to turn to help pick up the pieces.

There was only one place to go.

Families with problems turn to therapy. Cities in South Florida turn to the little-known but highly respected Florida Atlantic University-Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems in Fort Lauderdale.

In Sunrise's case, the center was called in to help rewrite the city charter after Lomelo was convicted of channeling city money to a lobbyist and conspiring to extort money from a nursing home.

Both the City Commission and the voters approved the result.

"It was the redistribution of the power base," current mayor Larry Hoffman said. "They did a good job. No problem."

That's what planners and political leaders have come to expect from the 13-year-old study center and its director, John DeGrove.

For those who agree with DeGrove's policies, he and the center have been a sort of colony of planning wizards, spinning out practical suggestions about the way Florida's government should be run.

For a group almost unknown to the public, its influence has been persistent.

"County commissioners and state legislators may come and go, but the Joint Center remains," said Talbot "Sandy" D'Alemberte, former state legislator and current dean of Florida State University law school.

Powerful county planning agencies, influential regional planning councils, statewide attempts to form coherent growth manage-

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ment policies — these are the hallmark of the center.

"I call [DeGrove] the apostle of regionalism," D'Alemberte said.

The center was born when D'Alemberte, then-State Sen. Bob Graham and other legislators were mulling over the role of FAU and the newly formed FIU.

The joint center was a way to offer academic help to the planners of the entire South Florida region. The idea was to create a focus for applied research, pulling the theories of government out of the ivory tower and into law.

Since December 1986, the center headquarters has been in a tower that owes more to steel and glass than ivory. University Tower in downtown Fort Lauderdale is a combined project of Boca Raton-based FAU and North Dade-based FIU.

The clutter of the center's offices makes it tough to believe that this place has an international reputation for government planning.

"I didn't design it nearly big enough," DeGrove acknowledged cheerfully.

DeGrove has the name that lends luster to the center's work.

He is a former FAU provost, former secretary of the Florida Department of Community Affairs, friend and adviser to more than 15 years of state officials. Associate director Lance deHaven-Smith is a

former research associate at Princeton University's Center for Urban and Regional Policy. He runs the center's public opinion surveys. He recognizes the grit of the political process.

"In some respects, you sit here in the ivory tower and you see the solutions are very simple. And you go out to try and bring people together and it's very difficult."

The center has about 20 full-time researchers and draws professors from both schools to help with specific problems. This year's budget is about \$500,000.

In just the past three years, the center has finished 52 research projects. But the highest visibility work has probably been a series of so-called retreats for officials of several governments — including Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach County, and West Palm Beach — where people from the center guided generally combative groups into a consensus of needs and goals.

The center's offices are in general tumult, people sitting in small rooms, heads over computer terminals or stacks of paper. The apparent chaos reflects creativity, say officials who have worked with the center.

Tromping through political mine fields with "interesting proposals" is what the center does best. Its members do surveys, help restructure governments and propose new laws.

But the center isn't a sinister, powerful cabal, say officials who work with it. Just a bunch of people with good suggestions.

"I think the power they exert is the power of the pen and the power of the intellect," said Steve Light, policy director for the South Florida Water Management District. "It's only the power of those ideas that can sway the public officials."

Herald staff writer Richard Hart contributed to this report.

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The Miami Herald
Tuesday, September 8, 1987
