

Interviewee: Bidlingmaier, Ann
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O'Donnell: Today is Thursday, September 27, 2007 and this is Shannon O'Donnell interviewing Ann Bidlingmaier at her home in Tallahassee, Florida. To begin with, briefly what is your background in environmentalism?

Bidlingmaier: Back in 1981, I formed a group called Tree Watch to protest the destruction of Tallahassee's trees. With the help of Urban and Regional Planning Department professor Dick RuBino, I went on to be appointed to the City's task force to write a City environmental ordinance and I also helped re-write the County's environmental ordinance back in the '80s. Since then I have been a three time-chair of the Canopy Roads Citizens Committee, the City of Tallahassee Code Enforcement Board, the City of Tallahassee Environmental Variance Board, Sign Ordinance Committee (there's been about a dozen others) so I kind of accidentally fell into the environmental role as a result of my interaction with Professor RuBino and then went on from there. Once you get a little bit of experience with something like that, then different boards and City government and County government usually will draft you to work on other things.

O'Donnell: Sounds like you have very extensive experience. So we're talking about Fallschase. Fallschase has been in the works since the 1970s in Tallahassee. When and how did you first get involved with the development?

Bidlingmaier: I got involved with the development, or actually opposing the development actively, during the past couple of years when negotiations were brought into play under Commissioner Bill Proctor. At that time I knew it was going to be bad. I mean he had absolutely no pro-environmental record at all. Bob Rackleff is the County Commissioner who should have been in charge of the negotiations because that's his district, but because of some petty rivalry on the County Commission, the County Commission at the time voted to put Bill Proctor in charge of negotiations: mainly because Proctor didn't negotiate at all, he just gave them carte blanche and told them they could do whatever they wanted. Because Fallschase is a PUD, it does not fall into the regular restrictions and ordinances that most developments would come under. But I originally became aware of Fallschase when I first moved here in 1979, and the more I read about it the more horrific it seemed. Lamar Bailey was one of the developers, and Gene Brown, I believe, and it just seemed as they were trying to sidestep any kind of restriction. This was before the City and the County environmental ordinances were improved or written. So it just started off as a really bad project, and it has escalated into even worse than that.

O'Donnell: How exactly have you been involved in opposing the development?

Bidlingmaier: Just basically writing articles for the paper and protesting on site. I did meet out on Mahan Drive with the Buckhead Neighborhood Alliance and showed them what good landscaping berms and planters look like. The landscaping plans for Fallschase are not up to code, they are not under the best management practices, but Bill Proctor agreed to whatever the developer wanted. The landscape planting that they're going to put in will not support trees. They can plant a tree. It might last maybe five to ten years but it's going to die. What they need to do is have 1,200 cubic feet of planting space for each tree and they don't have that; they have about 150. So I got involved with a meeting out in the parking lot of the Staybridge Hotel which has a very good example of proper landscaping. I wrote one Op Ed piece, and nowadays it's so much easier to network with email. But I've been pretty outspoken in terms of the fact that it's a very, very bad project. It never should have been passed. It doesn't even have to meet the county's Environmental Management Act restrictions. I mean they can just go in there and basically do whatever they want. They have removed all the buffers. And the neighbors, I don't think, are quite prepared for what is going to be the final product.

O'Donnell: So you've mentioned Fallschase going around different restrictions. How do you feel about it being a special taxation district?

Bidlingmaier: Well, I don't know if it really matters because they have done so much destruction on the property. I don't think any amount of taxes will bring anything back. And certainly the amount of money that Fallschase will pay will not compensate for the massive environmental destruction and decay that we're seeing out there.

O'Donnell: You mentioned your Op-Ed piece in the Tallahassee Democrat. What sort of response at all did you get from that?

Bidlingmaier: I got very, very positive responses except for Carlos Alvarez, who was one of the Bucklake Alliance neighborhood people. Now Carlos has been in an environmentally active stance for quite some time. And I was really shocked that he went ahead and signed off with the Fallschase developers and the agreement. I wasn't surprised that John Dew of Bucklake Alliance signed off because he does not have the experience in dealing with these kinds of developers. But Carlos Alvarez did, and he wrote me a very scathing letter saying he had lost all respect for me because I did not support him. However, this problem with the neighborhood is rather complicated. The Fallschase developers threatened to build in part of the lake bottom, and this scared the neighbors, even though the developers would never ever get permitted for it. But they had the neighbors just frightened to death that they would have buildings in the lake bottom. DEP and the Water Management District would never sign off on that. I've talked to people in the City and in the County and storm water regulation and environmental regulation and they've all said that Fallschase could apply for permits like crazy and they would never get them. But Fallschase had the neighbors buffaloed and cow-towed to the point that when they offered just a measly concession saying that "Well, we'll stay out of the lake bottom if you will give us everything else we want." And I was just shocked that the neighbors fell for it. I understand in a way that they have been terrified for years that they're going to end up with something hideous,

but guess what? It's worse than hideous.

O'Donnell: It sounds like you've been fighting a lot of negative; tell me about the positive reinforcement that you've been getting with the work that you've been doing. Has there been any?

Bidlingmaier: Oh, people call me all the time and say "Oh, thank you for what you've written in the newspaper, now I have a problem in this area." In fact, I get calls-- probably two or three a week -- from people who say "I don't know where else to go but I was given your name, and could you help me?" I got a call yesterday about a canopy road; I got a call the day before yesterday about another canopy road. I got a call about a zoning issue a couple weeks ago in this neighborhood. And usually I know where to refer them, so I get calls, as I said, a couple of times a week from people who say "Well, I know that at least you'll tell me how to go and to get there." I can't always solve the problem, but at least citizens are willing to call me.

O'Donnell: In terms of your activism, I know that you have presented your views about the development at several County Commission meetings in the past. How has this tactic worked for you?

Bidlingmaier: Well, our County Commission has historically been divided four/three. Four to three has been on the environmentally losing side, the three votes good votes. I made my stand known and people do see it on t.v. or they read it in the paper, and then they'll call me about something else. The commissioners who are going to vote anti-environmentally continue to do so. And there's nothing that I can really say that's going to change their minds, except help get them dis-elected. I have worked on a number of campaigns where we've seen a change in the profiles of the county commissioners. So by making it public and having citizens call me for more information, I just like to get out there. Public appearances seem to at least bring it to the forefront in the community's eye.

O'Donnell: So it sounds like your activism has been effective.

Bidlingmaier: Yes, I would say so in some ways. We're still facing a major battle out here in the Summerfield development, which the Department of Community Affairs has voted and vowed to oppose, and we just need one more vote to swing in the other direction. But, of course, that vote is clouded by the fact that the county chairman is a lobbyist for the developer out there, and he did not disclose that fact. We're hoping that the county commission will not go to court against the Department of Community Affairs, because that's going to bring more publicity to the fact that our county chairman is a lobbyist for the firm that he voted with.

O'Donnell: In terms of going back to Fallschase, in your opinion, what will be upset ecologically in terms of the development?

Bidlingmaier: Lake Lafayette will be polluted. They have lost a whole lot of habitat for wildlife. We're seeing a lot of deer, foxes, rabbits, birds, and other animals displaced, and they

end up dead in the highway. The biggest thing is that there's not going to be any room to grow any trees. They don't have big enough landscape berms. So we're not going to have the shade, we're going to see the temperature rise out there, we're going to see a whole lot of heat. The massive asphalt they're putting out there is a real problem. According to a registry that comes out every year, the number one carcinogenic pollutant is the combination of auto emissions running across asphalt and running into lakes and yards. We're going to see a whole lot of auto emissions and asphalt combinations in storm water polluting the whole county. We might even see something come up in Wakulla Springs, that's unknown. That storm water runoff has to go somewhere. And of course Lake Lafayette and Piney Z are going to be affected.

O'Donnell: So as we know, Fallschase is already under construction, in development-- are you going to continue your activism once it has been built? You mentioned the car emissions, maybe fighting against —

Bidlingmaier: Well, one thing that has come out of this is that now the developer who has bought Tallahassee Mall is saying that we need to get the city and county governments to contribute money to help rehab the Tallahassee Mall. Dillard's is leaving the Tallahassee Mall and it's going to relocate in a free standing building out near the Fallschase area. So what we are seeing is not only an environmental repercussion, but an economic one, because now that Fallschase is going in, some of the retailers are probably going to leave Tallahassee Mall and maybe Governor's Square and go out to Fallschase, even though Governor's Square Mall is a much nicer mall, and so is Tallahassee Mall because it's got trees and landscaping and shade, and Fallschase won't. But when Dillard's left Tallahassee Mall the developer wants the city and the county to donate the money to retrofit it. So my feeling is that Tallahassee Mall is being Fallschased out of the community. We're going to see more of that with retailers moving into Fallschase. It's pretty far out there, but as our development moves in that area, we'll probably see more people going out there, even though I have heard many people say that they will never step foot on Fallschase property. There's been talk of a boycott. When it comes right down to it, if it's convenient, people won't boycott it even though they should.

O'Donnell: You mentioned the trees at the other malls, and you mentioned that they're going to have a problem with sustaining the growth of trees in Fallschase. Is there anything that can be done or anything that you will try to do?

Bidlingmaier: I have talked to the developer in Alabama, and I have explained to him that you can't have a tree growing in a 150 square foot median. It takes 1,200 cubic feet. I have talked to the local landscape architect and they should know better. They are certified arborists, they should know what it takes to grow a tree. I haven't seen the final plans, but I'm hoping that maybe they'll reconsider and do the landscaping right. But they don't have to. If the county's not making them do it, then there's no reason that they want to.

O'Donnell: So once they finish planting, there's not much that can be done?

Bidlingmaier: No.

O'Donnell: Who has been the most helpful or the most problematic with your

involvement in Fallschase?

Bidlingmaier: The newspaper has been very helpful because they publish what I write. There is an email group called C-U-R-G, and that's a network of people who can discuss these things. That helps get the information out there. The county Environmental Management Act people, the EMA — the city's Environmental Ordinance is called the EMO, for Environmental Management Ordinance, the county is the EMA. The county people have actually been quite nice because they didn't want to permit it from what I can gather. But Bill Proctor just forced it through. I would say the people who have been the least helpful have been the four County Commissioners who voted against it. One of them is no longer here, that's Tony Grippa, he's gone. The Commissioners who voted against it have not been willing to see the objective harm that this is going to cause. They're telling us, "It should have been permitted a long time ago." Yes, it should have been, but no permit application has never been adequate. They have never, ever, submitted a proper permit application for that development. There has always been huge flaws in it. It just got to the point where it's still hugely flawed.

O'Donnell: You mentioned that you've been involved in Fallschase for the past several years. Was there one specific incident that got you involved with it? You were talking about the county commission meetings.

Bidlingmaier: I think it was appointment of Bill Proctor to be the liaison and the mediator. Mediator is not the right word for him. He went in and went tango uniform. They got whatever they wanted. That's what really got me. If Bob Rackleff had been the mediator, I think that we would see a vastly different project. But because of the small-mindedness of some of the commissioners who disagree with Bob Rackleff's views on issues, as a mean-spirited, vindictive act, they kept Bob out of the negotiations, which never should have happened. And the County Attorney didn't step in and set things right, either. I would say the County Attorney is as much at fault.

O'Donnell: You mentioned earlier most of your work with the Bucklake Alliance has been helpful in this matter, or no?

Bidlingmaier: No, the Bucklake Alliance people have been too frightened. They just kind of threw their hands up and said "We'll take whatever we can get." They were not helpful at all. They should have stood up to Fallschase, and they could have, but they didn't. They took whatever settlement Bill Proctor and the developers offered and just thought, "Oh, thank God for small favors, at least they're not going to build in the lake bottom," which they couldn't have done anyway. But if Bucklake Alliance had held their ground at least with the basic things like making the development follow the rules of the Environmental Management Act, that's a small price to pay. At least make them follow the environmental laws. That would have improved the project tremendously.

O'Donnell: Who do you feel has been the most helpful in terms of activism? Do you think it's been you personally, being the strongest voice in Tallahassee?

Bidlingmaier: No, I've not been strong enough. If I were we'd have a different project.

I don't think anybody has been really helpful, because the developers have come in and they've just terrorized these people. I don't think I can point to any one person who has been a strong advocate for the area. The neighbors who came out and protested, when they had these wonderful protests that remind me of the seventies [laughs] when we went out and held placards, the neighborhood folks were concerned, but unless we get support from the County Commissioners, we can't do anything. They're the ones who voted on it.

O'Donnell: Have there been any other citizens groups that you know of that have been involved with the opposition?

Bidlingmaier: The Sierra Club and 1,000 Friends of Florida have opposed this. But again, it went to the commissioners to vote on. They're strong lobbying groups and they can be very effective, but it didn't do any good.

O'Donnell: How do you think the Fallschase development will affect the future of Tallahassee?

Bidlingmaier: It's going to be ugly, and people are already saying that Tallahassee is looking more and more like South Florida. I think it's going to be a big detractor. There certainly isn't anything pleasant out there that's going to draw people except for people who want to use their credit cards to buy stuff, because it used to be a really beautiful area, a nice place to hike and see wildlife. I think it's going to be very detrimental to the whole character of Tallahassee. Tallahassee used to be known for its trees and canopy roads and its water bodies, and that's a huge chunk. Flying over it in an airplane and you look down, it looks like the Mojave Desert down there. It is just scraped bare.

O'Donnell: Now are the ecological effects of Fallschase going to be localized or do you think it will affect all of Tallahassee?

Bidlingmaier: It will affect the whole karst area, probably the whole region, up to the Georgia line, maybe. Maybe down to the coast, we just don't know. It's really hard to predict that.

O'Donnell: Tell me about your concerns about possible future developments. Does this open a door?

Bidlingmaier: It might, especially if another PUD comes in and they're using Fallschase as a precedent. Unless we have commissioners who are not going to cave in, we might see another one. I'm not sure where it will be because we're running out of room. But we might just see another one like this. The Governor's Square Mall came under fire back in the late eighties when they were going to take out a lot of trees. So I wrote a letter to the editor which appeared – in fact I went to the public hearing, and the piece appeared the night before the County was going to give approval to removing trees, and it didn't. The mall manager was upset because he'd gotten some bad publicity about Governor's Square Mall. So they left the trees in. We did a couple of Arbor Day plantings out there to refurbish what was done. Governor's

Square has been left alone for the most part and has been able to recover its greenage. Tallahassee Mall is doing okay. But I don't see that there's any room for that to happen at Fallschase because there's no room in the landscape.

O'Donnell: Do you plan to continue your work in activism in future developments?

Bidlingmaier: I can't stay out of it [laughs]. Even if I wanted to quit, the citizens wouldn't let me. I get calls, as I said, all the time. And right now we're involved with this latest Summerfield development across from Lake Jackson. The developers want to put in thirteen three-story apartment buildings right across from the lake. It's illegal, it's not allowed to be done, but we had four Commissioners who voted for it, including the Commission chair who is a lobbyist. So I think we're going to be able to get that stopped. And if we can get that one stopped, it will at least make me feel better about Fallschase in terms of a second one that's not going to happen, we hope.

O'Donnell: In the past, have there been any similar situations that you have dealt with that you can compare to Fallschase?

Bidlingmaier: No, Fallschase is much, much bigger than anything I've ever done.

O'Donnell: What are the biggest projects you have worked on?

Bidlingmaier: Mainly it has been legislative in nature with the City and serving on various boards: preserving canopy roads and trying to improve canopy road development. We've been very successful at that. When I was a three-term chair of the Canopy Roads Citizens Committee, we reviewed a lot of the projects going in, especially along Centerville Road, and were able to recommend changes that the developers actually took seriously, and we ended up with a much better project. I would say the canopy roads developments are better than they would have been had they not been reviewed by us. Other developments? It's piecemeal. One pops up and you knock that one down and another one pops up over here. I first got involved in the tree issue when I lived over on John Knox Road. I had a friend visiting who was the special advisor to Governor Bob Graham. The Springtime Tallahassee run was the next day, so I had gone out to go for a run through the woods around there and I saw a bulldozer knocking over trees. I went up to him and I said "Where is your permit?" I knew he had to have a permit. He said, "Well, I don't know nothing about no permit," and I said, "Well, you have to have to have a permit to do this." Then I ran upstairs and talked to the Governor's special advisor. I said, "What should I do?" and he said, "Just go back down there and make sure he stops. Just get in front of the bulldozer, stop the bulldozer." I guess he called somebody at the newspaper and they did a front page spread, "Tree Vigilantes At Work," with my boyfriend standing with his foot on this massive live oak. And that's when everything went nuts. This was before the days of computers and emails, and I had two hundred people call me as a result of that piece in the paper. That's when we got a group together to rewrite the County's Environmental Ordinance, and the City went on to devise its own because it didn't like what the County was doing. So that's basically how I got started.

O'Donnell: So environmentalism has been really a passion —

Bidlingmaier: No, not really [laughs]. I just saw this happening, and being from South Florida, thought, “I don’t want this place to turn into another South Florida,” and it was that one incident and the marvelous press we had that got people calling me like crazy.

O’Donnell: Speaking of press, do you think that Fallschase received enough press before—

Bidlingmaier: No_ Not at all.

O’Donnell: Tell me about that.

Bidlingmaier: Well, there has not been enough investigative reporting. The *Democrat* has been short-staffed for years. I think if they had done more investigative reporting they would have uncovered a lot more of the negotiations that were going on among the commissioners and among the developers, between and among. But the *Democrat* just doesn’t have the staff to do it, nor do I think they have the desire, because the publisher wants to sell papers and advertising. If they had uncovered anything amiss at Fallschase, their advertising budget could have been affected. That’s what I’ve seen County-wide. We have some good reporters who are willing to get out there and do some legwork. But if it’s going to affect the budget and advertising, the newspaper doesn’t want to do it because times are really tough for newspapers; now that they’re in competition with the internet. Selling papers is getting harder and harder to do, so they don’t really want to make themselves unpopular with merchants and advertisers.

O’Donnell: Do you feel the same way about t.v. coverage?

Bidlingmaier: T.V. coverage is based on something sensational to get people’s attention, and they don’t do any in-depth reporting. That’s just basically fifteen second sound bites here and there. They’ve done some footage of the Fallschase development. I was out there on site a couple of times with reporters. When they call me I’ll go out and make a statement. They do what they can because they’re competing with newspapers too in terms of doing anything in-depth now.

O’Donnell: Has it been difficult to keep people’s attention because this has been such a long term project?

Bidlingmaier: Yes, it has. I think once it was permitted, I think the public just went “Uh_” It was because there was nothing we could do aside from getting new commissioners elected. If their platform will be, “We will not ever let a Fallschase happen again,” I think that will get them some votes. Now there is one person, and I can’t mention his name because it’s not for sure yet, but one of the people who settled on the Fallschase agreement is reputedly running for County Commission. If he does, he’s going to meet a lot of opposition from me and from citizens about “how could you possibly roll over and play dead for Fallschase?” So I don’t think he’ll go forward with his urge to run. If he hadn’t done this Fallschase fiasco, I think he

would have probably had a good chance, but that was a very, very poor lapse in judgement on his part.

O'Donnell: So you've been involved a lot with the politics of Fallschase. Do you think that it should have been voted on, or could it have been voted on?

Bidlingmaier: You know, I don't know if it could have been voted on in a referendum. This Hometown Democracy item that's coming up on the ballot—and I'm opposed to that—is going to end up putting the ballot language in the hands of developers, and the developers will advertise and sell out flyers and finance developments that are to be approved. This Hometown Democracy would put something like this on the ballot and ask citizens to approve it. Conceptually, it's a good idea, but it's very naive, because we know who's going to end up putting the money behind the campaign for these developments. And that would have been Fallschase if it had gone to referendum. The Fallschase developers would have put far more money into that than any environmentalists or neighborhood people could have done. If it had been put on the ballot, I think--no I'm sure--it would have failed. That doesn't mean that I want the Hometown Democracy Act to pass because I think it's a naive concept that's well intentioned, but I don't think it's going to work.

O'Donnell: Are there any future political actions that you can foresee that will be helpful?

Bidlingmaier: Right now we're waiting on the verdict about Summerfield up here on North Monroe across from Lake Jackson. That's been in and out of court for probably two years. So we'll probably hear something this week. And there should be a final meeting, I think November 9, on whether the county is going to go forth and sue to be allowed to build there anyway even though it's illegal according to Department of Community Affairs. It's the same four commissioners who were in the majority to the detriment of the environment. We have a pro-development commission. I mean it's develop, develop, develop. That's all they want to do.

O'Donnell: Does this make you want to stay in Tallahassee?

Bidlingmaier: Well, actually what makes me want to leave Tallahassee more than this kind of thing is the weather [laughs]. I went to Alaska in June for my fourth trip. You know, Alaska in the summertime looks more and more attractive. Yes, I'll stay. I can't think of any other area that I'd want to live in year round, even though the summers are getting hotter. Global warming, of course, doesn't exist according to the Bush Administration.

O'Donnell: In terms of the Fallschase project, what are your final thoughts about the development in general?

Bidlingmaier: People are going to be really sorry when they see the finished product. They're going to bemoan that Fallschase is turning out ugly: it's creating traffic problems, there's a loss of habitat, it's another South Florida out there. They're going to wonder what

happened. Not enough citizens really hammered on their commissioners to stop it. But I think the Commissioners, if we knew what was happening behind the scenes, would have changed their vote.

O'Donnell: There's nothing that you could currently do that would affect the Fallschase development?

Bidlingmaier: Encourage people to boycott it. Then we'd end up with big empty boxes. But then there's the possibility that they could turn it into more state office buildings--like we need them. I really hope that it does not thrive. I don't wish any merchant bad luck, but I'm a very strong advocate of small business here in town, and those guys out there aren't going to be small businesses. I'm just hoping that it will fail. They can't plow it back under, but it sure would be nice to think about that possibility.

O'Donnell: Where do you see Tallahassee heading? Do you think once the development goes up it will make people more aware and they'll become more active?