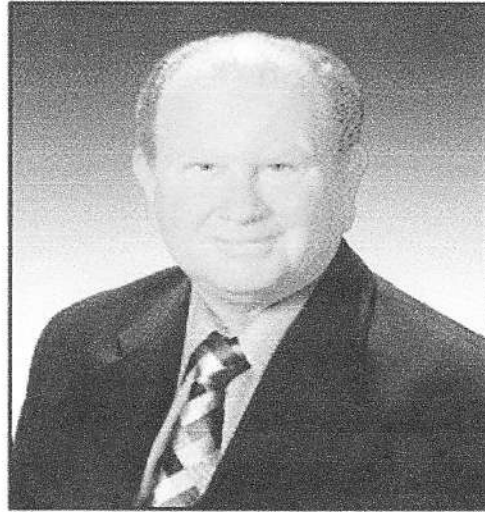




Vice Mayor Kathy Mortensen



Councilmember Stan Sofer

## Mortensen and Sofer Vie for Mayor In March Election

By Concetta DeLuco

With the municipal race upon the Tampa Bay region and the March elections fast approaching, Belleair Beach residents are left asking themselves - who will be the better mayor? Fortunately, unlike some cities such as Tampa where citizens have to narrow it down from five candidates, Belleair Beach only has two, Kathy Mortensen and Stan Sofer.

Both long term members of the city council, both passionate about the City of Belleair Beach and both ready to give their opinion on how it should be run and how hot topics like better code enforcement, the budget and beach re-nourishment should be tackled.

A five-year veteran of the city council, Mortensen calls Belleair Beach home having grown up and lived in the area since the 1950's. Retired from running her own business, she says she finally has the "time and energy to give back to a community she absolutely loves."

Embracing the term, "independent thinker," Mortensen said she prides herself on coming into the position without any preconceived notions or set ideas on how things should be done.

"I welcome community input and am always willing to listen to both sides and figure out what is best for the majority."

Her call for citizen opinion is not limited to helping her settle an issue she considers top priority code enforcement or the lack thereof in Belleair Beach. With an increase in home foreclosures and short term property rentals over the past few years, the poor upkeep of these homes has led to more and more complaints from neighboring residents, she said.

Earlier efforts to resolve this problem that until recently has proven less effective was the hiring of Jack Oimette as a part time code enforcement officer in 2008. Mortensen says when Oimette came on board he "looked at the ordinances, came before the coun-

## Mayor, From A1

munity.

"I am extremely happy with what code enforcement is now finally doing," he said.

An issue of bigger concern, however, on Sofer's agenda are the city's finances.

"They are number one to be reviewed on the hit list right now," he said.

He commends the staff on "doing a good job in keeping the budget as tight as possible," but acknowledges that since budget expenses can't be changed, revenue will need to be increased. Claiming to resent "drastic changes for the most part," such avenues for more money he is willing to explore include possible fees to be imposed on the marina, telephone or cable services and an increase in utility charges.

"Belleair Beach's utility fees are much lower than the surrounding cities," he said.

Sofer is also looking to profit off the new rental term ordinance, charging a higher fee per shorter rental term. Another option is the installation of additional parking meters for non-residents on the Beach. Currently, Belleair Bluffs charges beach goers \$2 to park on the beach and as a result, in the past more and more people have come to Belleair Beach to park for free.

Residents may also feel a tug on their pocket. Sofer says he is planning on raising the cost of parking stickers. "Right now, residents only pay around \$2 for the sticker which costs more to produce, so the city isn't making any money."

Finally, Sofer plans to make better use of the fairly unknown community center city hall or "diamond in the rough" as he refers to it. He says the facility has gone underused, but is ideal for weddings, luncheons, special occasions and meetings and "once the economy comes back and the beach expands" charging to rent the center will be a great source of income for the city.

Mortensen acknowledges the need for controlling city budget without raising mileage rates and wants to encourage more work sessions, and citizen input. "We only get a good turnout at city hall when we have a negative issue. That needs to change." What Belleair Beach residents can expect

Mortensen to take a more active role in is following through with infrastructure improvements such as storm drain, street and curb repairs. She said the city recently hired a new public works director from Seminole "with a lot of experience" who plans on meeting with the city in February to further discuss plans.

And when it comes to the controversial "Beach Renourishment" project, Mortensen calls it a "double edged sword." Re-nourishment refers to rebuilding and replacing of the sand on the beach worn away natural erosion, storms and public use. In order to get the \$35 million in federal funding for the project, the city needs an additional 24 parking spaces in the southern part of the beach to meet federal requirements. Plans for the entire project were expected to begin in early Spring 2011, but so far the city only has enough parking in the northern section, which has been cleared for re-nourishment.

Mortensen said there is no extra money to buy a lot, condominiums do not want to forfeit any of their empty spaces and there is no room for on street parking. Just a few weeks ago, the city magistrate had the Suncoast fire district come out and try and drive one of their "big rigs" down the street with only one side of street parking and it could not make it, she says, "imagine if there was parking on both sides of the street."

The county has to sign off on the inability to supply further street parking before the proposal can go to the state for further approval, but so far, have not, an action that confuses both Mortensen and Sofer who say for years the county has never had a problem with an issue like this.

"We're still working with the county to accept the parking conditions," Sofer said.

"It's not only for cosmetics," Mortensen said. "People don't realize how important beach re-nourishment is when it comes to hurricane season and protecting our homes."

With resolutions in the works, the debates go on, and in the meantime, residents can vote for their preferred Belleair Beach mayoral candidate on the March 8th election.

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