

They are cities in all but name, three confederations of the communities that make up southwest Palm Beach County. Today, the oldest of these uniquely Florida institutions turns 30, with a record to brag about and new problems to worry about.

The West Boca Community Council was formed in 1979 to get a handle on growth spreading north from Broward County. In the Northeast and Midwest, where many new South Florida residents had grown up, all land was in cities or towns. Florida counties, though, have large swaths of unincorporated areas. Three decades ago, "West Boca" had plenty of subdivisions and shopping centers but no local government. Enter Fran Reich, founding president of the West Boca Community Council.

The group became a model. Two years later came the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Associations (COBWRA). In 1995 came the Alliance of Delray Residential Associations. If they were cities, they would be major ones: West Boca (202 communities and 145,000 people), West Delray (64 communities and 70,000 people) and West Boynton (88 communities and 95,000 people.) All have discussed incorporation, and all have rejected it.

So West Boca Community Council President Sheri Scarborough, whose day job is property manager, is the unofficial mayor of West Boca. Delray Alliance President Richard Schulbaum fills that role for West Delray and COBWRA President Ken Lassiter does the same for West Boynton. They meet once a month, and their combined organizations make up the South County Partnership. Singularly and collectively, the groups are a potent political force.

In 2007, for example, the West Boca Community Council won its long fight to block extension of University Drive from Broward County. The road would have brought lots of outside traffic. Because the state was involved, the campaign was tough. "We had hundreds of meetings," Ms. Scarborough recalled. "I remember going to bed at 2 or 3 in the morning, then being up at 6. We were so thrilled when we won." Previously, the council forced Palm Beach County to abandon plans for a landfill far west of Boca. The county sold the land for a \$30 million loss.

These days, the pressing issue for the partnership is foreclosures. "It's huge," Ms. Scarborough says. She notes that all the member communities are part of homeowner or condo associations, and estimates that 90 percent of the West Boca communities have foreclosure problems. With fewer homeowners paying dues, communities have cut maintenance and beautification. The council sprayed one brown lawn green. Mr. Lassiter complains that squatters are living in foreclosed houses, and COBWRA can't do anything "because we can't find the owner."

Input from such organizations will become even more important as Florida grows and communities mature. What the West Boca Community Council started continues to provide guidance. Recently, communities in the Lake Worth Road area of unincorporated Palm Beach County organized into a similar, smaller organization. Mr. Lassiter says that communities in the Northlake Boulevard area may do the same.

All residents of unincorporated areas in Florida get representation from county commissioners, but organizations like the West Boca Community Council, the Delray Alliance and COBWRA give a closer, stronger voice to those who choose not to become a city. All three groups will celebrate the West Boca Community Council's birthday. They have reason to celebrate, and stay involved.