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4-1, with Lee Weberman dissenting.

Far from a done deal, however, the issue resurfaced around 4 p.m. when several senior citizens pleaded with commissioners to reconsider their vote. After hearing the possible financial hardships the denial might cause the owner of both the arcade

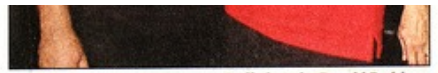
Bahia residents had written commissioners complaining about the potential noise and traffic, Commissioner Susan Valliere, termed their opposition as a "compatibility" issue.

"The residents in the adjoining condos find this use offensive, and I don't blame them," she said.

both approved the zoning change and usage—she was so sure of the commissioners' approval that she took out a second mortgage on her home and invested \$300,000 in the business.

Both left the meeting disappointed in the morning

▶ See ARCADE, A13



Staff photo by Donald Rodrigue

John and Mary Ann James pose in the Venetian Arcade on Monterey Road the day after the majority of Martin County commissioners changed their minds to permit the rezoning request for the Plaza del Mar, enabling the arcade to open.

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## Public defender's offender programs endorsed by law enforcement

By NEVA NEWTON  
 For Hometown News

Law enforcement agencies rarely approve of the actions of the public defender's office. It's usually an adversarial relationship, but Diamond Litty's public defender's office has managed to win the support of local lawmen by initiating two programs designed to lower recidivism among offenders.

Ms. Litty's office handled over 21,000 criminal cases last year, so the programs are a public safety issue and the initiative to break the cycle of crime is essential.

The Client Services Program was implemented in 1999 to offer misdemeanor clients and clients identified with mental illness individu-

alized rehabilitation plans for sentencing.

This program helps people while they are within the system and addresses other problems as well, such as offenders with special needs, mental illness and educational limits.

It helps people adapt after their sentencing in county or circuit court. Some funding comes from the efforts of state Sen. Ken Pruitt, who helped pass the legislation to finance this program.

Local charitable groups such as the Exchange Club CASTLE, the Homeless Coalition, Weed and Seed, and the United Way have offered volunteers and funding.

The Offender Re-entry Program, introduced in 2003, is a unique collaborative effort between law enforcement agencies and Ms. Litty's office.

Sheriff's departments in St. Lucie, Martin, Indian River, and Okeechobee counties, as well as various city police departments and the Office of the Public Defender of the 19th Judicial Circuit, have joined in the effort to keep inmates from re-offending.

The re-entry program targets minor offenders serving four- to 12-month sentences by helping them reintegrate into the community after serving their sentence.

The percentage of recidivism among criminal offenders statewide is nearly 47 percent according to the public

defender's office, but 16 percent for offenders who participate in the client services and offender re-entry program.

"When these people are incarcerated, most lose everything, their jobs, their lease if they rent, or their house if they have a mortgage, and some end up homeless. We try to help them in order to keep them on the right track," said Ms. Litty.

"Ex-offenders take an active role in their ultimate success, resulting in more successful job placements, a higher percentage of job retention, a lower percentage of school dropouts, and recidivism. The immediate needs for treatment of medical, dental, psychological, and substance abuse problems, as well as housing are important to the process."

Major Patrick Tighe with the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office said that jail is very different from prison.

The sheriff's department realized that some inmates had nowhere to go after release, so they appealed to religious leaders who had been volunteering their time at the jail.

They responded and now there are 23 halfway houses in the community.

In a collaborative effort between the law enforcement and charitable organizations, other issues are addressed.

"For instance, former

inmates have to find employment within thirty days of release. We pick up used, abandoned or stolen bikes, take them to work farms for repair and offer them as transportation for ex-inmates at the public defender's office, the C.O.R.E. office, as well as the bike rack at our office," said Tighe.

"I also keep people busy while they're here, by offering culinary school and a Florida Food Service Diploma, substance abuse and life skill programs and a GED program. It's behavioral modification as well as learning a job skill."

Lieutenant Jenell Atlas of the Martin County Sheriff's Department works very closely with the public defender's office in setting up the inmates to attend a two-hour-a-week class.

In 2006, 143 inmates participated in the class on a regular basis and as of this date, 160 inmates regularly attend the weekly classes. All inmates being released receive an updated resource list, as per department policy.

Increased numbers of ex-offenders working rather than committing crimes benefits the community and saves the costs of arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating them. The wages earned and taxes paid by the ex-offender benefit the state and the community, and reduce the need for state support for the ex-offender's family.

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