

NewsRoom

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Is Sarasota's system rigged for developers? It's obvious

September 22, 2026

The problem is that developer money and influence has corrupted our politics and politicians and this has manifested itself at the staff level.

I am a proudly pro-development, pro-business capitalist who recently finished serving three years on the Sarasota city planning board as a volunteer.

During my service, I experienced that developer money and influence had corrupted our development process.

So at the end of my last meeting earlier this year – on June 10 – I described my experience of service both positively and negatively.

I was not seeking attention but simply telling the public what I found during three years of service.

It seemed to strike a chord, however, because many people reached out to me to thank me for my remarks including office holders and public officials.

Then, months later, I read a Sept. 13 guest column from an individual who derives his income from development and developers – and who mischaracterized what I said and misstated the facts.

I would like to address his assertions but first I would like to celebrate our common ground.

System is rigged in Sarasota

Yes, developers are very important stakeholders.

Yes, the absence of development makes our community profoundly poorer.

Yes, it is vital that we maintain a regulatory environment where developers want to invest in our community.

But that is not where we find ourselves today.

We find ourselves living in a community ignoring reasonable limitations on development and operating through administrative approval without public input.

We see severe infrastructure strain causing catastrophic flooding and overwhelming roads and utilities.

We see a loss of quality of life, destruction of rural character and plenty of bad development.

We see a wholesale attack on home rule and local democratic oversight.

We are angry and frustrated because we do not seem to be heard when we make such factual observations.

We find ourselves wondering: Do we actually have a government of the developers, by the developers and for the developers?

Is the system rigged?

My observation was "yes."

It is rigged against you and me – and in favor of the developers.

Fingers are on the scale

I began my June 10 remarks by thanking city staff, the Sarasota city commissioners and my fellow board members for their hard work, friendship and service.

City staff is full of dedicated hardworking people who serve our community every day.

As I stated, however, it was my experience that city planning and development services staff have their fingers on the scale – and it's not for you and me.

The problem is not ideology, but the role of our government to protect the public interest over the individualized interest of a developer who directly profits from a particular project.

The problem is also not exactly developers themselves.

I have tremendous respect for the individuals who risk their capital for a project that, with proper government regulation and oversight, greatly benefits our community.

In my experience, having represented numerous developers, they are attempting to maximize their interest – as they should.

However, large projects that affect the public realm require government oversight.

The problem is that developer money and influence has corrupted our politics and politicians and this has manifested itself at the staff level.

Members of the Sarasota Planning Board make their decisions based largely on the documents provided by and the expertise of the city's planning and development services department staff.

It became immediately obvious to me when I joined the board that staff was not simply interpreting the code in a neutral manner – or even in the public interest – but rather that they had their fingers on the scale in favor of developers.

That surprised me.

In my day job as an attorney, I have to identify bias and get to the facts.

But my attempts to do this were regularly frustrated by staff.

I expected at times to battle applicants for truth – but not city staff.

I found that staff reports were often slanted toward the development applicant.

I found that most of all that staff had often taken a position, and they were committed to that position almost always in favor of the developer.

In other words, they were often acting as an advocate for the developer.

The staff would regularly intervene from the dais during a meeting or during the application process to protect a development interest – but they would not do so to protect the public interest.

Difficult to get straight answers

As a planning board member, city resident and taxpayer paying the salaries of development staff, I found that the most infuriating issue was simply the inability to get straight answers from staff to direct questions.

Getting straight answers to direct questions asked in a public meeting by a planning board member should never be an issue.

I also found that staff had often not provided necessary information.

It is for these reasons that I decided not to seek an additional term on the planning board.

As a planning board member, representative of the public and Sarasota taxpayer, it was my expectation that planning staff should not be biased in favor of developer interests and that they should be accountable.

But that was often not my experience.

Daniel DeLeo is a Sarasota lawyer and a partner in the law firm **Shumaker, Loop** & Kendrick LLC. He served three years on the Sarasota Planning Board and has been active in the community for more than 20 years.

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Your Turn

Daniel DeLeo

Guest columnist

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