

Man plants palms to cover billboard

By AMELIA DAVIS
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LARGO — A new billboard on West Bay Drive may prove to be a tough sell now that six palm trees were planted last weekend directly in front of it.

The 30-foot-tall, Sabal palmetto palms are in the northeast corner of the grounds that surround Casa Contenta Furnished Apartments, a complex owned by J. Luther Carroll.

The base of the 30-foot-tall billboard sits about three feet from the palms in the northwest corner of Ernest Mortham's Belleair Custom Interiors lot.

Just west of the property line and the billboard, Carroll is building a formidable-looking concrete block fence, a symbol of the friction between the two neighbors.

"My neighbor is building that nice wall along there," Mortham said. "He hasn't liked anything I've

done for the past 10 years."

Ric Goss, head of Community Development for Largo, said Carroll especially didn't like it when the billboard went up about a month ago.

Carroll and other neighbors who also thought the billboard was an eyesore contacted the city to see if there was anything that could be done to get it removed, Goss said.

"He asked if he could plant trees in front of it," Goss said. "I told him, 'Of course. We are a tree city.'"

Goss said he thought Carroll was thinking more along the lines of shrubs and had no idea he had towering Sabal palms in mind.

"Aren't they beautiful?" Goss said. "I think they're the most beautiful palm trees I ever saw."

Carroll could not be reached for comment this week.

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Tammy McKnight, co-owner of Amplex, which sells plants wholesale to landscapers, said she sells the palms for about \$75 each. Landscapers traditionally double the price to customers, she said.

Carl Lasch, owner of Carl's Landscaping in Clearwater, said the Sabals are among the heartiest of the palms.

"They're probably going to be around for a long time," Lasch said.

Goss said Mortham had every right to put up the billboard on his land, and Carroll had every right to plant the palms on his.

Goss said Mortham contacted the city to inquire about leasing his land for a billboard before the passage last spring of a new sign ordinance. The new ordinance forbids billboards on West Bay Drive. The old ordinance allowed billboards on any piece of land zoned for offices or businesses. Mortham's land is zoned for offices.

Since Mortham's application was received before the passage of the new ordinance, his billboard got grandfathered in, Goss said.

Broker Jerry Coone said he recently sold the billboard to a Texas company called Stonehurst.

According to records at Largo City Hall, Mortham's property was zoned residential until 1984 when city commissioners voted 6-1 to change the zoning to an office designation against the recommendation of the city's planning staff and the Planning and Zoning Board.

Only Commissioner Scott Heninger voted against the change.

Voting to approve the zoning change were Mayor George McGough and Commissioners Jim Miles and Bob Jackson, and former Commissioners Edwin Ford, whose law office is across the street from the billboard, Joe Mangus and Sandra Mortham.

Mortham, now a state representative, is Ernest Mortham's niece by marriage.

Ernest Mortham said this week that he sees "nothing wrong with the billboard." The billboard company that is leasing his land "helps pay my taxes for which I am grateful," he said.

No one has signed up to advertise under the palms.

Jerry Coone with Genesis Commercial Services, a broker in Odessa, said he recently sold the billboard to a Texas company called Stonehurst.

Coone said the new owners had not been told about the palms.

"It's bad. I hate it," Coone said. "Somebody is going to have to call and talk to our clients about it."