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A tale of three cities

By [Dale White](#)

MANATEE COUNTY -- Residents of Anna Maria Island recognize that their three cities have distinct and divergent identities.

With its artifacts-stuffed museum, quaint church and other historic structures, Anna Maria on the north end is the isle's reserved and dignified grande dame.

Holmes Beach, the bustling centerpiece, is home to most of the island's shopping and services.

And laid-back Bradenton Beach, the southernmost and youngest city, could be the margarita-toasting locale in a Jimmy Buffett lyric.

So, some islanders wonder if those identities would be sacrificed if the cities merge into one municipality.

"We could lose our autonomy," said Marsha Lindsey, a 40-year resident of Anna Maria. "People come here because we're unique. When you lump us together, we lose that uniqueness."

Like the Gulf of Mexico waves that roll onto the beaches, the consolidation idea has surfaced and subsided several times throughout recent decades.

This time, however, it's headed beyond mere talk.

Holmes Beach Mayor Carol Whitmore, Bradenton Beach Mayor John Chappie and Anna Maria Mayor SueLynn will compose a consolidation question for the November ballot.

"We want one sentence, something very simple," Whitmore said.

Tonight, the mayors and other city officials will discuss how to phrase that question.

If a majority of voters in each city reject the idea, officials say they will drop it.

If a majority in each city thinks the idea is worth exploring, they'll work on specifics to put in another referendum.

Proponents of consolidation think it's the fiscally prudent thing to do. Holmes Beach City Commissioner Don Maloney estimates the island's 8,500 residents could save about \$3.5 million a year.

That's a winning argument for Wendy Holcomb, who moved to Holmes Beach two years ago after vacationing on the island for more than 30 years.

"We have three small communities, and it seems like a duplication of efforts," Holcomb said as she left the Island Public Library with a stack of books to enjoy this summer with the sand and the surf.

But the new city would have to emerge from communities that have also long celebrated their differences.

Anna Maria, with no bridge to the mainland, is the island's oldest, quietest and most remote city. It's a

neighborhood of fishing piers and single-family homes that shuns high-rises and crowds.

Its residents like having to go to the post office to pick up their mail so they can greet one another and maybe gossip a bit.

"We like our town the way it is," said Margaret Chapman, a 25-year resident of Anna Maria who works with Lindsey at the history museum. "We like the small-town atmosphere."

Outside of Anna Maria, opinions about consolidation may be more favorable.

Holmes Beach is the island's commercial hub and crossroads, with shopping plazas, a couple of seven-story condo towers and most of the island's public services, including its school, library and fire station.

Bradenton Beach is a Caribbean-colored mix of surf shops, cafes, rental condos and cottages -- all within walking distance of the county's largest public beach.

Kathy Vande Vrede, an 11-year resident of Holmes Beach and a former 10-year resident of Bradenton Beach, thinks consolidation is overdue.

"We've got one Chamber of Commerce," said Vande Vrede, as she added more blue to a painting of a seaside village during her watercolor class at a public beach. "Holmes Beach and Bradenton Beach have the same ZIP code. But we have three post offices. Bradenton Beach has its own sanitation department but the other cities use Waste Management. It's all pretty inconsistent."

Other residents say consolidation could save money without sacrificing individuality.

"Having three cities is expensive," said Barbara Hines, a classmate of Vande Verde who became a full-time resident of Holmes Beach two years ago. "It's a small island. Even if it consolidated, it would still be a small city."

Robert Willis Jr., a Holmes Beach resident and a former Bradenton Beach postmaster, thinks most islanders would favor consolidation.

When his father, an attorney, drafted the incorporation papers for Holmes Beach and Bradenton Beach in the early 1950s, the communities were mostly populated by longtime homesteaders, Willis remembered. They were willing to pay for separate governments to keep their cities' characters separate as well.

"The demographics have changed," Willis said. "The majority of people probably haven't been on the island more than 10 years. They're more likely to approve it (consolidation) now because of the economics."

Most of the new city's commissioners could exclusively represent and be elected by the people of Anna Maria, Holmes Beach and Bradenton Beach, Whitmore suggested.

The new city's comprehensive plan could have zoning districts that mirror the existing cities' current comp plans, keeping in place the same density and land-use restrictions.

"There are ways to keep your identities," she said.
