

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

MONDAY PROFILE | KEITH LAYTHAM

Ex-IBM Executive Pushes Change in Poinciana

By [Tom Palmer](#)

THE LEDGER

Published: Sunday, May 29, 2011 at 9:11 p.m.

POINCIANA | When Keith Laytham was an IBM executive, he stirred things up by advocating for customers.

Today he's doing to same thing for residents in Poinciana and sometimes makes waves doing that, too.

Poinciana is a sprawling, unincorporated community that stretches for miles across sections of Polk and Osceola counties.

Laytham, 63, said about 83,000 people live in and around Poinciana, and he and other volunteers have worked with county officials to make life better.

They've secured money and help for park projects, a teen center and just an overall better recognition that Poinciana is no longer a small, isolated community, but is instead a place that deserves as much attention as local cities.

NEW JERSEY NATIVE

Like many Florida residents, particularly residents in relatively new communities created by modern development companies, Keith Charles Laytham is from somewhere else.

He was born June 19, 1947, in Passaic, N.J., the son of Victor and Barbara Laytham, a building contractor and a homemaker who dabbled in insurance.

He was a math major at Randolph Macon College near Richmond, Va., when he became involved in installing a campus computer, an IBM 1800, that had been introduced in 1966.

The project became a success and an IBM recruiter interviewed him for a job. He took the job and remained with the corporation for 33 years.

"I became a scientist, then an engineer, then a peddler because I found out that each step paid more money," he said.

At one time, he worked in offices in Paris and Hong Kong to take care of clients in Europe and Asia.

He came to Florida to work at IBM's office in Boca Raton, which involved regular trips to California's Silicon Valley.

"I racked up 3 million miles on Delta," he said.



ERNST PETERS | THE LEDGER

Keith Laytham stands recently in a children's park that he advocated for in Poinciana. Laytham is a "spring training fan," with front-row seats for the Atlanta Braves games at Lake Buena Vista.

But an economic downturn led to a buyout offer in 2001.

Laytham said he took it and when he opened his first pension check, he realized he didn't need to look for another job.

That eventually changed.

"When you retire, for the first couple of years, you play golf, swim and go to the country club," he said. But that changed when he and his wife moved to Solivita, a gated community in Poinciana, in 2008 to be nearer his son and grandchildren.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

In 2008, Laytham helped to organize a group called Poinciana Residents for Smart Change.

Their initial effort involved opposing a planned major development near Poinciana on Lake Hatchineha whose traffic would have overwhelmed the local road system.

The Polk County Planning Commission recommended denial of the project and before it could reach a vote, the development plans were withdrawn through a deal brokered by The Nature Conservancy. The ranch is now the site of a mitigation bank.

But if there was unanimous support among Poinciana residents in opposing Hatchineha Ranch, Laytham's next project divided the community.

He was one of the leaders in an unsuccessful effort in 2009 to get legislative approval for a referendum to turn the sprawling community into a city.

He and others thought it would be a way to bring more services to Poinciana residents who are now dependent on county services.

Jeffrey Goldmacher, who lives in one of the communities adjacent to Poinciana that would have been part of the incorporation effort, said although Laytham may mean well, his approach leaves something to be desired.

"In a way, he has a good cause, but he gets information he doesn't understand and he spreads misinformation," Goldmacher said.

But Jeanette Coughenour, manager of the Association of Poinciana Villages, credits Laytham for his interest in trying to do more to provide activities for Poinciana's young people.

"He's a high-energy guy; he enjoys what he does," she said. "He's done a lot of positive stuff for Poinciana."

Some of the youth projects in which Laytham has been involved, along with others in the community, include a new athletic field planned in the southern end of Poinciana, a Boys & Girls Club and improvements to Harmon Field in the older section of Poinciana.

Laytham said the facilities not only fill gaps in the community's recreational offerings, but improve conditions in the community generally.

"Idle minds can be a problem," he said, referring to reported crime problems in Poinciana, which has been helped through residents' work with local law enforcement officials in Polk and Osceola counties.

Former Polk County Commissioner Jean Reed, who regularly brought concerns from the Poinciana community to her colleagues, credited Laytham for helping to make those concerns known.

"I am impressed how he has helped to make Poinciana residents aware of the public process and how to participate in their county government," she said.

BASEBALL FAN

Keith Laytham's life is not all community projects, especially during baseball season.

"I'm a spring training fan," he said, saying he has front row seats for the Atlanta Braves games at Lake Buena Vista. The only reason he doesn't go to the Houston Astro games in Kissimmee is because of the traffic.

During the regular season, he watches the Tampa Bay Rays.

Why baseball?

"I think it's a great thing," he said, adding he coached Little League when his children were young.

His devotion to spring training is pretty intense.

He tells a story of agreeing to attend a business meeting in Tokyo, but only if it was scheduled to allow him to fly back to the United States to catch a game.

Laytham's home backs up to a conservation area along Lake Marion Creek, providing him with an opportunity to watch alligators and great blue herons when he's not watching fastballs and fly balls.

OPTIMISIM FOR POINCIANA

Ever the salesman and marketer, Laytham said he's committed to helping to improve Poinciana.

"I think the future of Poinciana is absolutely great," he said.

For one thing, it is a diverse community.

"There are a lot of first-generation residents," Laytham said, referring to people who have moved to the United States mainland from Puerto Rico.

He said there are cultural stresses in households where parents speak Spanish and their children prefer English, which is something to which he can relate.

"My grandmother spoke Dutch all of the time," he said. "That's the American story."

Although Laytham has no plans to revive the fight for incorporation anytime soon, he said something has to happen eventually.

"This is not a rural area," he said, a fact that residents who face daily traffic jams don't have to be told.

"Something has to happen to meet the needs of the people," he said, adding Poinciana Residents for Smart Change could be a catalyst for that effort.

But he acknowledges he and the other members of the small group still have to prove themselves to the community.

"It's real easy to talk a lot," he said. "Don't judge us by what we say; judge us by what we do."

Former Commissioner Reed said Laytham will remain involved.

"We have discussed the need to change land uses, thus providing an opportunity for jobs for the nearly 40,000 Polk Poinciana residents as well as convenient shopping and services. No doubt Keith will also be involved in this effort, too," Reed said.

[Tom Palmer can be reached at tom.palmer@theledger.com or 863-802-7535.]