

[Back to article](#)



Printed on page B1

Lakeland economic development council

Group Thanks Mayor for 16 Years of Service

Buddy Fletcher, who leaves office next year, accepts surprise award.

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THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | The Lakeland Economic Development Council accomplished a rare feat Monday: Pulling off a project without Mayor Buddy Fletcher knowing about it.

The LEDC surprised the outgoing mayor with an award presentation during its monthly meeting at the Polk Theatre.

LEDC Chairman Scott Franklin handed Fletcher a model locomotive symbolizing the mayor's role as the force propelling the city's economic engine during his four terms in office.

Fletcher, who first took office in 1993, will depart as mayor in early January.

Both of the men contending to replace him, City Commissioners Jim Verplanck and Gow Fields, attended Monday's gathering of about 150 people.

"Scott knows I don't like surprises and this is a surprise," Fletcher told the audience after accepting the award. "I've always said this is not an 'I' city, this is a 'we' city."



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Lakeland Mayor Buddy Fletcher was honored Monday afternoon at the Polk Theatre following a meeting of the Lakeland Economic Development Council. Seen here during the reception are, left to right, Lakeland Mayor Buddy Fletcher, his Administrative Assistant, Chris Chadwell, and his wife Weetsie Fletcher.

Steve Scruggs, the LEDC's executive director, said the award previously only had been given to the LEDC's departing chairman.

The model locomotive included a plaque inscribed, "Thank you for providing the leadership that guided our engine down the tracks to economic development success."

The presentation, not listed in the meeting's agenda, included a slide show set to Frank Sinatra's "My Way." The show included photos of Fletcher and other LEDC leaders in fact-finding trips to Austin, Texas, and other cities.

There were also photos of Fletcher wielding oversized scissors at ribbon cuttings and planting shovels at corporate ceremonies, including the groundbreaking for the current Publix Super Markets headquarters in Lakeland.

The presentation drew a standing ovation as Fletcher's wife, Weetsie Fletcher, joined him to accept the award.

In his brief address, Fletcher said he has followed the maxim of a previous mayor that "we can disagree without being disagreeable."

Franklin said Fletcher's leadership will be missed.

"He's definitely been a pro-business mayor and I think he's been the reason for a renaissance in Lakeland," Franklin said after the meeting. "He's been the only mayor I've known in my professional life. He's had a hand in all the good things that have happened in Lakeland."

Scruggs said Fletcher has coordinated efforts among different municipal and business groups.

"He's always emphasized that we need to work together and everything will work out," Scruggs said. "He said it, he meant it, he lived it, and that's one thing that made Lakeland what it is.

"He puts people together and sometimes makes them work together," Scruggs said.

Franklin said Fletcher usually knows about everything happening in Lakeland, so he wasn't sure the mayor could be kept in the dark about Monday's presentation and award.

"To catch him unawares is a rare accomplishment," Franklin said.

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This story appeared in print on page B1

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