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For activist Hurchalla, 'fighting the good fight' never ended

"AARGH!"

That was the last line of the final email I received from Margaret "Maggy" Hurchalla, an environmental activist and former Martin County commissioner who passed away last week.

I got that email Thursday, two days before I learned she had died while recovering from hip surgery.

Maggy wasn't writing to complain about her health. Instead, she was expressing frustration the Martin County Commission appeared

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Three generations of women (from left), Patricia Bushman, of Palm City, her granddaughter Juliette Muzia, 3, and her daughter Kara Muzia, of Stuart, attend the Martin County Commission meeting Tuesday in Stuart. A group of environmentalists and supporters of former commissioner Maggy Hurchalla, who passed away Feb. 19 and was planning on attending the meeting, spoke out against a proposed land-use change. LEAH VOSS/TCPALM

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poised this week to undo a significant part of her legacy.

The commission had scheduled a Tuesday public hearing on a proposed land-use change that would make it easier to build upscale residential communities in parts of the county outside established urban services boundaries.

Some in the community, Maggy included, thought county officials hadn't given the public adequate notice about the proposed changes. On top of that, she was concerned the county's website wasn't properly loading the agenda materials related to the proposed changes so citizens could read them ahead of time.

In an earlier email, she had described the proposed "rural lifestyle" land-use designation as a "disaster" and predicted that if adopted, "it would spell the end of any 'comprehensive planning' in Martin County."

And that's the way I'm going to remember Maggy — as someone ready to fight "the good fight" until the bitter end.

I didn't know her well, but during the few short weeks in which our lives intersected, she made quite an impression.

Maggy and I had our first contact late last year, shortly before Martin County commissioners were scheduled to consider changes to the community's comprehensive growth plan, which I later learned she had been instrumental in crafting.

Maggy was one of several people who voiced concerns about the proposed changes during a conference call with our editorial board.

Our board agreed it seemed the changes were being rushed through the process without adequate opportunities for residents to learn about them or provide input. I wrote an editorial to that effect, which appeared in the next Sunday's newspaper.

Then I didn't see or hear from Maggy until a few days after New Year's. Max Chesnes, TCPalm's environmental reporter, had arranged for the three of us to go on a kayaking trip, launching from her waterfront home in Stuart.

Max had told me a little bit about Maggy's background, but at that point I wasn't well versed in her career. I didn't know her role in crafting of Martin County's comprehensive plan, with its limits on development, was considered one of her greatest achievements.

It's fair to say she didn't know much about me, either. I was just another one in a long line of people she had taken on hiking or kayaking trips.

It apparently didn't matter much who you were. If you were at all interested in experiencing the beauty of Florida's natural places, Maggy was willing to help you get there.

Before we launched our kayaks that day, I got a sense for what a meticulous planner she was. She produced a map of nearby waterways, then traced the path we would follow.

She synched our planned route with tidal flows so it never felt as if we were fighting a current during our excursion.

We spent a good portion of the trip traversing a "secret passage" through mangrove swamps I probably couldn't find again even if I were staring straight at the entrance to it.

That trip helped me snap out of a funk I had been in since my mother's death after Thanksgiving.

Maggy was trying to understand her adversaries' point of view, a tactic I've frequently employed myself when faced with conflict. She was clearly ready to go to battle to protect what she saw as a threat to Martin County's quality of life, as she had many times in the past.

I'm sure physical activity in the fresh air helped. However, looking back on it now, I also realize it's hard to remain mopey and downcast in the presence of someone whose life has been filled with such determination and purpose.

Along the way, Maggy occasionally stopped to point out wildlife or other features of interest. We talked about how well ibises had adapted to living among humans and shared a laugh about how ungainly sandhill cranes look when they are running.

At some point that day, Maggy mentioned the editorial I had written, expressing some surprise I had been able to cut through a lot of the technical jargon and "get it right." To be honest, I was surprised, too.

Over the last few weeks, we had been having similar conversations via email about the proposed "rural lifestyle" land designation, which would allow developers to extend water and sewer lines to rural Martin County.

Maggy described in great detail parts of the proposed changes that bothered her. Then she caught me totally by surprise by sending an email in which she appeared to be accepting the county staff's justification for the new land-use designation.

I asked her if she was having second thoughts about opposing the changes. Her answer was a resounding no.

"I tried to outline what I heard second hand about the staff's position in as neutral and friendly way as possible," she wrote. "I don't agree with any of it."

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When young people die, it's common to hear them described as being full of vigor. Maggy was 81, but the same could certainly be said of her.

If she had lived long enough to speak at the public hearing on the proposed land-use change, I'm sure it wouldn't have been pleasant for people on the opposing side.

The battle between environmentalists and development advocates is fierce and never-ending, particularly in fast-growing Florida.

Environmentalists lose ground, literally, every time they're unsuccessful in protecting some piece of land from being cleared, graded, and paved.

It must be frustrating, like a kayaker trying to fight against tidal forces.

If I learned anything about her, though, Maggy wasn't one to stop paddling.

This column reflects the opinion of Blake Fontenay. Contact him via email at blake.fontenay@tcpalm.com or at 772-232-5424.