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Central Florida's most powerful: Part 1



Bill Sublette, Orange County School Board chairman, makes a high debut at No. 11 as the first person elected to this new countywide position. (Red Huber/Orlando Sentinel / December 28, 2010)

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Scott Maxwell

8:46 p.m. EST, December 30, 2010



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What a difference a year makes. E-mail Print Text Size

Gone from this year's list of the 25 Most Powerful People in Central Florida is one of America's most outspoken and divisive politicians — as well as someone who used to hold the No. 1 spot.

New this year are up-and-coming business executives and politicians with victories behind them and big plans ahead.

2010 represented a year of change in Central Florida. And this year's list reflects that.

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This exercise isn't to stroke egos. It's to better inform you about who's pulling the strings in your community.

Nor is it my list. It was created by a panel of 13 plugged-in observers — leaders from the business, nonprofit, political, education, government and grass-roots sectors of our community.

The panelists cast their votes. I just tallied them.

So let's get started.

25. (Tie) Jacob Stuart, Central Florida Partnership president (Last year: 19th), and Craig Ustler, Ustler Development (Last year: Not

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mania swept the country. But with Republicans riding a wave, our panelists expect Leonhardt, 61, to again hold sway with state and local policy-makers.

21. **Harris Rosen**, hotelier (15th). Central Florida's homegrown success story hasn't been as vocal since he lost the battle to block the arena, arts center and Citrus Bowl deal. But he's still a kingpin in the region's tourism industry and a major philanthropic force to boot.

20. **Lars Houmann**, **Florida Hospital** CEO (N/R). Houmann's appearance on this list is significant in that it marks the first time any health-care CEO has made the cut. Panelists seemed to particularly respect the way Houmann, 53, deftly balances an expanding health-care empire with increasing political connections.

19. **John Morgan**, attorney (23rd). Mr. "For the People" may hound you with the radio and TV ads that hawk his firm's legal services. But many politicians hound him for fundraising help. He has hosted everyone from **President Barack Obama** to state House Speaker Dean Cannon at his home. If money talks, Morgan, 54, says plenty.

18. **Jerry Demings**, Orange County sheriff (22nd). Demings' office has taken some high-profile flak this year — most notably making national news by jailing dozens of barbers for cutting hair without a license. But panelists still respect Demings, 50, for his clout as the region's top lawman.

17. **Val Demings**, Orlando police chief (11th). As the other half of the only power couple on this list, Val Demings' no-nonsense approach to crime-fighting earns her praise. One panelist even went so far as to describe Demings, 53, as "one reason I'm proud to live in Orlando."

16. **Mike Haridopolos**, state Senate president (N/R). As one-half of the legislative leadership tag-team, Haridopolos, 40, is the first **Brevard County** resident to make this list. With Democrats an afterthought in Tallahassee, he and House Speaker Dean Cannon of **Winter Park** have unfettered power. How they use that power — on behalf of residents or the moneyed interests prevalent in Tallahassee — may determine their future rankings ... as well as their legacies.

15. **Jim Pugh**, developer/philanthropist (8th). The push for a new performing arts center is Pugh's baby. And right now, it's struggling. But few panelists count him out. One even suggested the center's popularity with the public (versus a renovated Citrus Bowl, for instance) gives Pugh, 72, leverage with the polis. So does his fundraising prowess.

14. **Ron Blocker**, Orange County Public Schools superintendent (18th). There may be a new elected top dog in the school system. But Blocker, 57, is still the man best known for running the nation's 10th-largest school district. He's set to retire within the next two years, leaving big shoes to fill.

13. **Clarence Otis**, Darden Restaurants CEO (10th). The leader of Central Florida's largest home-based company will almost always find a place on this list. Otis, 54, isn't as high-profile as some CEOs. But he controls Orange County's only Fortune 500 workforce. And his restaurant chain, which includes **Red Lobster** and **Olive Garden**, is involved philanthropically with many of the region's most worthy efforts.

12. **Rasesh Thakkar**, Tavistock Group (21st). As the eyes and ears of Tavistock's camera-shy billionaire CEO, **Joe Lewis**, Thakkar is the front man for the company that owns Isleworth and is helping develop east Orange County's burgeoning Medical City. One panelist said Thakkar, 49, has the luxury of big money that gives him "big influence — without all that messy political stuff."

11. **Bill Sublette**, Orange County School Board chairman (N/R). The former state legislator makes a high debut at No. 11 as the first person elected to this new countywide position. He has a tall task ahead with a position that's bigger on title than power. But Sublette, 47, seems ready and enjoys a reputation as hard-working pragmatist.

Off the list

The most noteworthy departure is Orange County Mayor **Rich Crotty**, who has been a top-of-the-head mainstay for this list's first six years and ranked second in 2009. If the term-limited mayor gets a new gig, that may change. Others that dropped off this year's list: U.S. Reps. **Alan Grayson** (previously 8th) and **Corrine Brown** (14th); state Sen. **Paula Dockery** (17th); Massey Services CEO **Harvey Massey** (20th), County Commissioner **Bill Segal** (24th) and State Sen. **Lee Constantine** (25th).

Just missed

Crotty and Brown are two of those who just missed this year's cut. Others who would've made an expanded list include consultants **Dick Batchelor** and **Kelly Cohen**, Visit Orlando CEO **Gary Sain**, ORMC President **Sherril Sitarik** and state Sen. **David Simmons**.

Want more?

To learn more about how this list was compiled — including the identities of all the panelists and their rules for voting — visit OrlandoSentinel.com/takingnames.

Coming Sunday

The Top 10 — as well as interesting tidbits about the sports, religious and media personalities who command clout.

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ranked). Perhaps this tie represents a passing of the torch in Central Florida's business community. As the head of the hydra that is Orlando's chamber of commerce, Stuart's ranking has dropped in recent years. But the 62-year-old is still a go-to guy among the CEO circuit. Ustler, 41, is the up-and-comer whose fate will largely rest on the Herculean task of turning the old arena property into a massive mixed-use development. If he pulls it off, his stock will rise. If not, it probably won't.

24. **Deborah German**, UCF College of Medicine dean (12th). If Central Florida is truly intent on diversifying and improving its economy, then German, 60, is a key spoke in the wheel. She's respected, attracts money and has managed to avoid missteps and controversy. One panelist described her as "a fireball of energy and determination."

23. **Belvin Perry Jr.**, chief circuit judge (N/R). America is getting to know Orlando's Perry as the judge presiding over the Casey Anthony case. But locally, Perry, 61, is a sober and contemplative jurist who is involved in combating everything from homelessness to the state's shameful record on wrongful convictions.

22. **Fred Leonhardt**, Gray-Robinson partner (N/R). The **GOP** rainmaker was a regular on this list until last year, after Democratic



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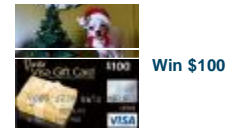
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wgatorfan1 at 2:06 PM January 01, 2011
Did Val find her gun?

sofakingright407 at 9:35 AM January 01, 2011
All listed are great people except for the following....

- #23 belvin perry jr
#18 jerry demmings
#17 val demmings
#13 clarence otis
#12 rasesh thakkar

All those guys are scumbags, the rest are great people.

Rebel32835 at 2:58 AM January 01, 2011
I dont know any of these people just heard of a few names. I guess none of them belong to the same YMCA as I do.

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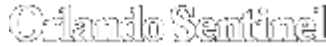
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