



Smart Growth for Florida's Future

March 2009

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SMART GROWTH FOR FLORIDA'S FUTURE: THE FLORIDA SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ACT

March 2009

The “perfect storm” has hit Florida. The housing market is in crisis as prices plunge and homeowners are unable to find buyers for their homes in countless sprawling subdivisions across the state. Florida is second in the nation in foreclosures. Overdevelopment in high hazard areas and a recent history of major storms have left Florida’s insurance industry in shambles, with citizens footing the bill. Gasoline prices are fluctuating dramatically, with many residents unsure if they will be able to afford long commutes to their workplace, schools and shops. Residents in some parts of the state are facing severe water shortages. If there are not significant changes in the patterns of development, Florida stands to lose another 7 million acres of natural lands over the next 50 years. Topping it off, global climate change promises to require fundamental changes in the ways Floridians live their lives and shape their communities.

If Florida is to meet these economic, energy, climate change and environmental challenges, we must drastically reduce water and energy consumption, and also reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A major key to all this is to change the way we accommodate growth and development in our state. Instead of continuing patterns of sprawling low-density development into Florida’s rural lands, we must learn to accommodate growth primarily within our existing cities. This will have many positive benefits, including helping to save Florida’s rural lands, reduce our dependence on automobiles, save taxpayer dollars on infrastructure, and cut down on energy and water use. It will also help our cities evolve into great urban places, with space to work, shop and play.

With increased densities in the right places, our consumption of energy and water will be reduced as we will travel shorter distances (sometimes as pedestrians or cyclists) and replace irrigated private lawns with public open space and recreation areas. Our health will benefit as we walk more and drive less. Through incentives and smart growth legislation, we must promote affordable, energy-efficient housing close to jobs, schools, parks, and shops. Recycling historic and older buildings for new uses can save energy and help maintain a community’s unique identity. Promoting cultural and recreational opportunities is essential. These must remain high priorities if our cities are to flourish.

The resulting mosaic of vibrant cities and healthy rural and natural lands will make Florida the envy of every other state. It will also help offset the impacts of climate change. Such smart, sustainable development can only be accomplished through careful oversight and thoughtful incentives administered by a dynamic and improved statewide growth management agency—the Florida Department of Community Affairs.

1000 Friends has worked with some of Florida’s leading conservation and planning organizations to develop a series of proposed reforms to the state’s growth management process and chart a new course for Florida for the 21st century. The underlying goals are to:

- save money for the citizens of Florida
- promote sustainable economic development
- create healthy, sustainable communities
- protect the state’s rural and natural lands
- offset the impacts of global climate change
- ensure that growth and development pays for itself
- restructure the state’s economy to be less dependent on growth

Strong and decisive leadership is needed to bring Florida into the 21st Century. In this time of economic hardship and declining natural resources, no longer can we afford to pay the high costs associated with sprawling, automobile-dependent development. The basic tools are in place. We must now focus on making better use of them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Transportation

Decisions about the placement and timing of roads are the primary factor in shaping the design and quality of life in our communities and state. Better linking transportation and land use planning to promote compact, transit-oriented communities will save gas dollars, reduce vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions, and end unsustainable development practices. If we design compact communities and invest taxpayer dollars in alternative transportation—including passenger rail, buses, bike paths, multi-modal trails, and sidewalks—we can help jumpstart the economy by saving residents’ gas money, provide transportation choices, and create jobs with the construction of these alternative facilities.

Recommended measures include to:

- Merge Florida's Regional Planning Councils (RPCs) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) to create 8 or 9 new regional planning offices for the state. This will require changes in federal legislation.
- Allocate state and transportation funding to first meet the needs of existing residents in existing communities, including alternative transportation.
- Encourage and assist local governments in revising their transportation impact fee rates to reflect vehicle miles of travel for those living in different parts of the community, such as downtown and exurban areas.
- Redirect state funding to better support passenger and freight rail.
- Reevaluate road building standards so that transportation investments improve community livability and save taxpayer dollars.

Rural Lands

Currently about 17 million of Florida's 36 million acres can generally be described as rural due to their current land uses in agriculture, forestry or natural areas. Florida's rural lands offer the greatest potential for carbon sequestration, the development of biofuels, the protection of the last remaining natural areas in the state, and the creation of passive recreation opportunities. Most experts agree that Florida's long-term population growth will continue to bring pressure to convert these lands for development purposes. Steps to protect this state's rural lands from inappropriate development include to:

- Establish meaningful urban growth boundaries (UGBs) that delineate areas appropriate for development and steer clear of significant natural areas. The DCA should have review and veto power over both the delineation of such boundaries, and measures to change the boundaries.
- Use the CLIP (Conservation Lands and Water Identification Project) map (being developed jointly by the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida and the Florida Wildlife and Conservation Commission) to help identify natural areas inappropriate for development that should not be included within UGB boundaries.
- Establish minimum density standards within the UGB, and focus DCA review primarily on planning and development activities outside of the UGB, except where state priority issues are involved.
- Require the permanent conservation of significant blocks of land in return for the right to convert existing rural lands to urban development, including the potential for appropriately placed sustainable new communities in rural areas.

New Communities

New communities should only be allowed in rural areas when there is a demonstrated need and only in return for public benefit. However, some trade-offs may be appropriate for sustainable new development of the highest caliber. There should be no "free density" in rural areas. Recommendations include to:

- Establish flexible, reasonable criteria to evaluate the need for a new town in the specified location.
- Establish an alternative state review process for new communities in rural areas, incorporating the best of the Florida Quality Development provisions, Rural Land Stewardship Areas, Developments of Regional Impact, and Sector Plans.
- Establish minimum standards for new communities in rural areas; as an example, a small percentage of a 100,000-acre parcel (owned by one or more landowners) could be developed in return for permanent conservation of the remaining land when initial approvals are given in concert with a long-term management plan that is consistent with the local comprehensive plan.
- Position conservation lands to maximize wildlife, habitat and natural area protection and connections to surrounding lands, and should be dedicated at the time of project approval.
- Eliminate current prohibitions on transferring density from RLSAs to urban areas.
- Establish standards to address air quality, water quality, density and other measures for new communities, and have flexibility built into the process.
- Require that new communities have a Sustainability Plan that identifies the critical mass needed to support the community's job center, schools, parks and recreation, and stores, and plans for the community's incremental growth to build out, including provisions that if work centers are not constructed as planned, the project is halted in order to limit sprawl.

Community Design

Whether designs are labeled smart growth, new urbanism, transit-oriented development, or walkable communities, this is the development pattern that must be promoted in both existing and new communities, large and small, if we are to be successful in saving taxpayer dollars, reducing greenhouse gases, protecting natural lands, and improving our health. We must pay special attention to Florida's vulnerable coastal areas, which are integral to the state's tourism-driven economy and are highly sensitive to both storm events and the sea rise associated with global climate change.

Recommendations include to:

- Heighten DCA review of coastal areas, paying particular attention to large increases in density, public access, and greenspace.
- Reevaluate the state's coastal investment policies, and begin a long-term phase out of public subsidies now being provided.
- Direct state resources to support appropriate infill development, and retain a state oversight function to ensure that neighborhood compatibility and protection are priority considerations.
- Establish appropriate community design templates, including minimum densities. These should be a "safe harbor" incentive, such that projects meeting agreed-upon design standards will be given a quicker, simpler approval path, especially within approved urban growth boundaries.
- Develop incentives to promote appropriate infill development design, and remove regulatory or planning barriers. Features should include: encouraging downsized and multi-story options for schools, retail stores and other facilities; allowing by right a second unit on every single-family lot within the UGB to save money and lessen energy consumption; encouraging the use of transfer of development rights to shift development away from sensitive natural and historic areas within UGBs; and encouraging the use of conservation subdivisions to protect sensitive micro-systems within the UGB. However, conservation subdivisions should not be used to introduce suburban densities into rural areas unless they replace and improve upon previously authorized sprawling development patterns.
- Promote energy conservation in the design of new and existing development, including use of drought tolerant native landscaping and other water conservation measures, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) or other appropriate certification for construction, reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure, and other measures.

STATE LAND PLANNING

Given the reality of less funding and staffing than was anticipated when the 1985 Growth Management Act was passed, DCA needs a more focused role. In addition, the following recommendations should be considered:

- To better integrate state planning and economic development, merge both the Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development (OTTED) and the Division of Emergency Management into the Department of Community Affairs.
- Strengthen Florida Forever's Florida Communities Trust agency which, through its grants, empowers local governments to maintain healthy vibrant natural areas and parks for their residents, and review and revise their comprehensive plans.
- Establish state priority issues, which could include greenhouse gas emissions, vehicle miles traveled, coastal development, affordable housing and similar issues involving state investment.
- Use the CLIP (Conservation Land and Water Identification Program) Map being developed by the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida to guide decisions by DCA and other agencies.
- Empower and fund the new regional planning authorities (merged MPOs/RPCs) to identify resources of state and regional interest and develop meaningful regional visions. These should guide revisions to the local comprehensive plans, establishment of UGBs and other local planning. DCA and other state agencies should use these regional visions when evaluating local and regional projects.
- Adopt the Citizen Bill of Rights (available at www.1000friendsofflorida.org) to increase citizen participation in the local planning process.

CALL FOR A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ACT

Florida needs a Sustainable Community Development Act to implement the recommendations in this paper. Under this act, any new development or redevelopment in Florida should meet the highest standards in terms of energy efficiency. They should be required to keep greenhouse gas emissions to 1990s level, be certified as drought tolerant, be energy efficient with the goal of meeting LEED certification, and meet other such standards. They should be compact, with a mixture of shops, homes, offices, recreation, and community services. Homes should be affordable to those with a wide range of incomes, and transportation alternatives should be available to all ages and incomes. New communities and infill development should be transit-oriented and walkable in design. They should protect sensitive natural areas and significant historic resources. Such growth and development should pay for itself. In return, new development meeting these criteria should be eligible for a shorter, streamlined review process and should be priorities for state funding.

Strong and decisive leadership is needed to bring Florida into the 21st Century. In this time of economic hardship and declining natural resources, no longer can we afford to pay the high costs associated with sprawling, automobile-dependent development. With the impacts of global climate change fast approaching, we must find new ways to shape our communities and promote healthy lifestyles. If the suggestions outlined in this paper are implemented, we will save our citizens money, stimulate the economy, protect limited natural resources, and help limit the impacts of climate change. The time to act is now.

WHAT IS SMART GROWTH?

Smart Growth America defines smart growth according to its outcomes — outcomes that mirror the basic values of most Americans. Smart growth is growth that helps to achieve these six goals:

- 1. NEIGHBORHOOD LIVABILITY** — The central goal of any smart growth plan is the quality of the neighborhoods where we live. They should be safe, convenient, attractive, and affordable for all people. Sprawl development too often forces trade-offs between these goals. Some neighborhoods are safe but not convenient. Others are convenient but not affordable. Too many affordable neighborhoods are not safe. Careful planning can help bring all these elements together.
- 2. BETTER ACCESS, LESS TRAFFIC** — One of the major downfalls of sprawl is traffic. By putting jobs, homes and other destinations far apart and requiring a car for every trip, sprawl makes everyday tasks a chore. Smart growth's emphasis on mixing land uses, clustering development, and providing multiple transportation choices helps us manage congestion, pollute less and save energy. Those who want to drive can, but people who would rather not drive everywhere or don't own a car have other choices.
- 3. THRIVING CITIES, SUBURBS AND TOWNS** — Smart growth puts the needs of existing communities first. By guiding development to already built-up areas, money for investments in transportation, schools, libraries and other public services can go to the communities where people live today. This is especially important for neighborhoods that have inadequate public services and low levels of private investment. It is also critical for preserving what makes so many places special—attractive buildings, historic districts and cultural landmarks.
- 4. SHARED BENEFITS** — Sprawl leaves too many people behind. Divisions by income and race have allowed some areas to prosper while others languish. As basic needs such as jobs, education and health care become less plentiful in some communities, residents have diminishing opportunities to participate in their regional economy. Smart growth enables all residents to be beneficiaries of prosperity.
- 5. LOWER COSTS, LOWER TAXES** — Sprawl costs money. Opening up green space to new development means that the cost of new schools, roads, sewer lines, and water supplies will be borne by residents throughout metro areas. Sprawl also means families have to own more cars and drive them further. This has made transportation the second highest category of household spending, just behind shelter. Smart growth helps on both fronts. Taking advantage of existing infrastructure keeps taxes down. And where convenient transportation choices enable families to rely less on driving, there's more money left over for other things, like buying a home or saving for college.
- 6. KEEPING OPEN SPACE OPEN** — By focusing development in already built-up areas, smart growth preserves rapidly vanishing natural treasures. From forests and farms to wetlands and wildlife, smart growth lets us pass on to our children the landscapes we love. Communities are demanding more parks that are conveniently located and bring recreation within reach of more people. Also, protecting natural resources will provide healthier air and cleaner drinking water.



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