



Sustainable Development More Important Now Than Ever

BY CHARLES PATTISON

As the national financial crisis deepens, Floridians are hurting. Our state is third in the country in the rate of foreclosures, and thousands of families are facing the loss of their homes. With today's higher gas prices, residents are paying considerably more for their everyday commutes to work, school and the store. The threat of climate change looms large here, as sea rise could displace millions by the next century. Even with slowed growth, we still expect to pass New York to become the nation's third largest state in the next several years, and after the recovery, perhaps a doubling of the current population in the next half century.

There is a common thread through all of this bad news—Floridians are paying the price for the way this state has grown and developed over the last 50 years. Taxpayers are subsidizing roads and sewer lines for unnecessary sprawling development, and then get hit in the pocketbook again when they pay for gas for their long commutes. The bills have come due for the “cheap”, “affordable” housing in the suburbs that has driven up the cost of living, making housing unaffordable in the midst of our biggest economic challenge. Because we do rely so heavily on automobiles for



all of our daily needs, transportation generates almost 40 percent of the state's contribution to greenhouse gases, adding to and speeding the impacts of climate change. If we continue on the same sprawling path of development for the next 50 years, the state could lose as much as another 7 million acres of rural open lands, permanently altering the face of Florida.

Some citizens are desperately looking for a quick fix to the state's problems, even going so far as to suggest the elimination or substantial curtailment of growth management, water and wetland protection laws, all in an ill-advised effort to “jump start” the economy. Unfortunately, this will just make our existing problems even worse.

Now more than ever, Florida needs sensible leadership and sane public policy to meet the challenges that lay ahead. If we are to save taxpayer dollars, promote sustainable economic development, protect natural lands and address climate change, we must drastically reduce water and energy consumption and lessen greenhouse gas emissions. To do this, we must change the way we accommodate growth in this state. We must shift to more compact, sustainable,



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growth patterns with a mix of uses instead of the single purpose, trip inducing development that is far too common.

Governor Crist has shown this kind of leadership in acknowledging Florida’s critical role in the climate change arena, and has made this a focus of his administration. He has laid the foundation for a new direction that recognizes how sustainable growth can positively affect us all, whether it is through power generation, transportation, building design and the use of renewable resources.

Instead of continuing costly, sprawling low-density development, our efforts have to focus on creating great urban places and keep Florida’s rural lands rural. We need to promote affordable, energy-efficient housing close to jobs, schools and shops. This new housing needs to take advantage of the latest “green” technology, using less energy and water to build and maintain. We have to locate our housing nearer to employment centers, and give citizens the kind of transportation alternatives to a car like public transit, walking, or biking.

Our communities need to be walkable and bike-able, not only reducing our dependence on the automobile but also helping our waistlines and health. We need to support public transportation to reduce our reliance on fossil fuel and give citizens alternative, less costly ways to get to their jobs. Public investment in the building of this new infrastructure can help create jobs and stimulate the economy while protecting the natural areas that make Florida so desirable.

We must maintain Florida’s quality of life in the face of growth. Vibrant cities include attractive and usable parks and recreation areas and protected natural features. Recycling historic and older buildings for new uses can save

energy and help maintain a community’s unique identity. Promoting cultural opportunities is essential. These must remain high priorities if our cities are to flourish.

In return, our rural lands can remain natural, providing opportunities for recreation for humans and habitat for wildlife. This state’s farmlands must remain productive, providing fresh and reasonably priced nourishment for Floridians and others. These undeveloped lands also offer the greatest potential for carbon sequestration to offset the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions.

All of this can only be accomplished through careful oversight and thoughtful incentives administered by Florida’s state growth management agency – the Department of Community Affairs. Now is not the time to dismantle these efforts. Rather we must refocus them to support smart, sustainable communities throughout our state.

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. We must find new ways to shape our communities and live our lives. Our very future depends on the success we must have to refocus our necessary and important growth management programs at the local, regional and state levels to bring this about. 



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