

Co-optation or Challenge: How Sustainable Is Florida's Growth Management?

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Editors' Note: For the previous issue of Carolina Planning, we interviewed John DeGrove, who has been involved in much of the sustainable development and growth management legislation and policy that has been implemented in Florida over the past few decades. In the interview, we focused on two fairly new efforts within Florida: Eastward Ho! and the Sustainable Communities Demonstration Project. We decided to continue the discussion of growth management and sustainable development in Florida by asking Jay Jurie to critique these programs and build on a related article he wrote for Planners Network. This is a discussion we would like to continue in future issues of Carolina Planning, and we welcome any thoughts on the topic or article ideas.

Eastward Ho! and Sustainable Communities are innovative programs meant to creatively address the challenges of integrating economic development into the planning process... We hope they will become models for responsive and adaptive approaches to growth management, both within Florida and throughout the country. [Murley 1997b:10]

Over the past three decades, rapid population influx and urbanization in Florida have prompted concerns about the management of growth and the long-term sustainability of the environment. Beginning with the Florida State Comprehensive Planning Act of 1972 and the Florida Environmental Land and Water Management Act of 1972, an iterative succession of legislation led to the passage of the Omnibus Growth Management Act of 1985 (O'Connell 1986). The

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Growth Management Act (GMA) required localities to formulate comprehensive plans in conjunction with state and regional plans, limited plan amendments, and set forth the doctrine of "concurrency" whereby, in accordance with level of service standards, necessary infrastructure was to be provided simultaneously with the impacts of growth. The GMA clearly sought to impose limits on noncontiguous "leapfrog" development and urban sprawl: "...development shall be directed to those areas which have in place, or have agreements to provide, the land and water resources, fiscal capabilities, and the service capacity to accommodate growth in an environmentally acceptable manner" (O'Connell 1986:23).

Since that time, local governments and developers have argued that compliance with GMA and related growth management requirements was not only burdensome but hampered various forms of economic development. Originally promulgated in the Environmental Land and Water Act of 1972, the "development of regional impact" (DRI) concept has especially come under fire. DRI's are developments that exceed specified size thresholds and would have a substantial effect on a large number of citizens. They require a special permit and regional planning council review (Ewing 1993; O'Connell 1986).

"Developers have reacted with strong criticism of the DRI process for being unreasonably expensive, time-consuming, and unfairly burdensome to the large developer" (O'Connell 1986:17-18). Indeed, a "Florida Quality Developments" (FQD) program imbedded

within the GMA allowed developers to opt out of the DRI process (O'Connell 1986). Large scale development was allowed to continue unhampered so long as project developers provided all onsite infrastructure and contributed what was termed a fair share toward the cost of off-site impacts, among other specifications.

The state and localities similarly sought to "expedite" review and permitting processes, "streamline" comprehensive plan amendments, authorize exceptions to concurrency requirements, and reduce burdensome level of service standards ("Executive Summary" 1993; Murley 1997a).

Influenced by the powerful Florida Home Builders Association, the Florida Legislature in the Spring of 1997 passed a measure prohibiting local governments from stopping growth due to school overcrowding (Kennedy & Lancaster 1997). A "Memorandum of Agreement" signed in the summer of 1997 by several state-level agencies, regional planning councils, water management districts, and including local governments at their option, created an "expedited review process" exempt-

ing economic development projects above a defined employment threshold from various DRI and local comprehensive plan amendment review provisions (Cornelius, Blakeslee and Hopping 1997).

Critics, including environmental organizations, have contended that easing GMA and related planning requirements circumvents or thwarts the rational growth management intent of the GMA and allows Florida's natural resources to be placed at risk (Winfree 1996). A dynamic tension thus continues to shape the debate over the fashion in which growth should be managed and environmental sustainability maintained. Two of the most recent governmental responses, the Eastward Ho! revitalization plan formulated under the auspices of the South Florida Regional Planning Council, and the Sustainable Communities Development Project (SCDP) at the state level, are illustrative of official planning response

to these pressures. Sharply in contrast to these perspectives is *A Vision of a New Central Florida*. Known as the *vision statement*, this plan was released by the Florida Chapter of Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), a national organization which addresses environmental and sustainability issues among other concerns. This *vision statement* presents an alternative regional plan for the area surrounding the City of Orlando. Following an overview, the implications and possible effects of these initiatives will be examined and assessed relative to the future of growth management and deployment of the concept of sustainability in Florida.

Eastward Ho!

Created by Executive Order 94-54, the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida "...was charged with insuring that a healthy Everglades ecosystem can coexist with and be mutually supportive of a sustainable South Florida economy" (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996). The Eastward Ho! Revitalizing Southeast Florida's Urban Core initiative was recommended by

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the Governor's Commission in its October 1995 Initial Report. A report also called *Eastward Ho! Revitalizing Southeast Florida's Urban Core* was created to guide the Eastward Ho! effort. Formulated by the South Florida Regional Planning Council in conjunction with the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, this 49-page document seeks to employ the concept of sustainability in a "...study area that once was Southeast Florida's untamed frontier wilderness" (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996).¹

Eastward Ho! comprises 44 specific points that "...will encourage infill and redevelopment of lands...[and] will protect the environment and encourage compact, efficient development patterns; and will forge a public/private partnership to promote compact urban density..." (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996: ii). Three outcomes are envisioned in the report: the broadening of consensus

concerning revitalization strategies, the assistance of local government and others to implement revitalization and quality infill development, and the redirection of development "...away from Southeast Florida's remaining environmentally sensitive prime water resources and prime agricultural lands into eastern areas that were passed over, underutilized, or allowed to deteriorate" (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996:iii).

Not only has the southeastern slice of buildable Florida land wedged between the Everglades and the Atlantic Ocean experienced explosive growth over the past eighty years, "tremendous population growth" is projected for this region over the next decade. While *Eastward Ho!* argues that completely halting or reversing westward movement is "unrealistic," the report asserts that "...the objective of eastern urban restoration should be to capture a greater percentage of that projected growth than is now anticipated" (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996:5). The "ultimate goal" of *Eastward Ho!* is defined as the creation of "...sustainable communities in Southeast Florida that use resources to meet current needs while ensuring that adequate resources are available for future generations" (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996:6). This definition is derived from the Governor's Commission description of "sustainable communities" as those that "...seek improved public health and a better quality of life for all residents by limiting waste, preventing pollution, maximizing conservation, promoting efficiency, and developing local resources to enhance the local economy" (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996:6).

The *Eastward Ho!* document, in addition to introducing and identifying the study area, consists of three sections devoted to the physical characteristics, human characteristics, and infill and redevelopment in the study area, followed by a conclusion and description of related efforts to address a variety of Southeast Florida issues. The first 16 of the 44 recommendations are located within the physical characteristics section, and include transportation related measures, such as expansion and enhancement of rail services; improved interconnection and coordination of rail, bus, bicycle, and pedestrian routes; and incentives for alternative fuel vehicles. Other recommendations in this section include public acquisition of available open space, maintenance and extension of urban development boundaries, and upgrading infrastructure.

The human characteristics section features nine recommendations, including enhanced job training and

opportunities, community building and indigenous leadership development, strengthened public safety, effective code enforcement, and provision of a range of housing types and prices.

Most of the recommendations, a total of 19, are concentrated in the infill and redevelopment section. These include assessment and removal of obstacles to revitalization, creation of a streamlined review process for comprehensive plan amendments, the use of accelerated or fast-track permitting for "appropriate infill and redevelopment applications," elimination of "slum and blight" determinations necessary before public funding may be made available, and the reduction of development-related fees.

The State Goes Sustainable

Building upon the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida conditions as set forth in *Eastward Ho!*, the State of Florida further expanded the existing body of growth management legislation through the passage of a measure that conferred official status on the concept of sustainability (Mullins 1997). Section 15 of House Bill 2707, entitled the Sustainable Communities Demonstration Project, was enacted in 1996 "to further six broad principles of sustainability." These are "...restoring key ecosystems; achieving a more clean, healthy environment; limiting urban sprawl; protecting wildlife and natural areas; advancing the efficient use of land and other resources; and creating quality communities and jobs" (Murley 1996). Several additional criteria were to be used in the designation of a "sustainable community". These were grouped into two categories, the first of which, labeled article (3)(a), included the setting of an urban development boundary "or functionally equivalent mechanisms." Among the goals encouraged for an urban development boundary were urban infill "at appropriate densities and intensities," separation of urban and rural uses, discouragement of sprawl, preservation of public open space, and "buffer-type land uses". Similarly set forth were protection of "key natural areas" and agricultural lands, and the cost-efficient provision of public infrastructure and services.

The second category of criteria (article (3)(b)) sought to "consider and assess the extent to which local government has adopted programs in its local comprehensive plan or land development regulations" that the SCDP defined as sustainable in orientation. Goals established relative to this second set of criteria included prioritized permitting processes for infill, low-income housing, "effective" intergovernmental

coordination, economic diversity, open space provision, public transit, community identity, redevelopment of blighted areas, disaster preparedness programming, fiscal solvency, and comprehensive plan enforcement.

The legislation authorized Florida's Department of Community Affairs (DCA) to designate up to five local governments as "sustainable communities" under this project. According to DCA Secretary James F. Murley, "If a local government is designated as a sustainable community, the Department will substantially reduce its oversight of local comprehensive plan amendments and developments of regional impact within the local government's jurisdiction," and "...state agencies will give increased priority to programs and projects that assist designated local governments to create and maintain self-sustaining communities" (Murley 1996). Elimination of state and agency review was one of three specific "benefits" sustainable community designation conferred upon local governments. The second benefit granted exemption from review of developments within urban development boundaries and outside the coastal high-hazard area. Participation of the Governor's Office with other departments in "...programs that will assist local governments to create and maintain self-sustaining communities" constituted the third benefit.

By January, 1997, the five demonstration communities had been selected out of 28 applicants. These were Hillsborough County (including Tampa), Martin County, and the cities of Ocala, Orlando, and Boca Raton. The application for and subsequent awarding of a "sustainable community" designation to the City of Orlando offers a case study of SCDP implementation. Orlando's 38-page "Statement of Interest" application described specific planning and program activities the city was undertaking to address the state's principles and criteria.

Orlando defined sustainable communities as "...those that prosper because people work together to produce an excellent quality of life" (Planning & Development Department 1996:37). Following introductory material on the historical context and background of the city, the next section of Orlando's application responded to SCDP article (3)(a). The city argued that the establishment of an inter-local joint planning agreement with surrounding Orange County served as the "functional equivalent" of an urban development boundary. In accordance with its "future land use philosophy," Orlando articulated its "...primary future land use goal is to promote quality mixed use development and accommodate growth while

enhancing and protecting neighborhoods..." (Planning & Development Department 1996:7).

Orlando's application then proceeded to respond point by point to the criteria outlined in article (3)(b) of the SCDP. Excerpts from several of these responses provide an insight into the overall nature of the city's application. Concerning infill development, the city responded that existing programming "...provides incentives and assistance to spur economic development, promote infill development and redevelopment...In addition, the Mayor's Business Assistance Team typifies the City's pro-business attitude by acting as a liaison between the business community and the City" (Planning & Development Department 1996:10).

An overarching "goal" of the economic diversity and growth component of Orlando's application "...is to ensure that its citizens are able to benefit from the growth and prosperity that will transform Orlando into a world class city" (Planning & Development Department 1996:21). In response to the SCDP article concerning public urban and rural open space, the city wrote: "The Recreation, Open Space, and Cultural Element of the GMP (Growth Management Plan) provides for open space and park level of service standards which are designed to ensure that 20% of Orlando's land area remains as open space" (Planning & Development Department 1996:24). Orlando's transportation response was defined as providing "...the optimum in travel choices for its residents, visitors, and workers by developing a multi-modal transportation framework" (Planning & Development Department 1996:28).

The city's response to the use of urban design principles relied in part on the deployment of "new urbanism/neo-traditional town planning" concepts to create "...a community which is more diverse and accessible, leading to greater opportunities for social interaction and growth" (Planning & Development Department 1996:31).

A Vision of a New Central Florida

A different approach to sustainability, entitled *A Vision of a New Central Florida* was released as a 28-page booklet in 1996 by the Florida Chapter of Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility. This approach was guided by a very simple definition of sustainability: people should live in a way that does not sacrifice the resources available for future generations, taking only what can be supported by the planet we live on and giving back

what it needs to endure.

ADPSR's vision statement was constructed around nine so-called "pieces of the puzzle", which were identified by members of the group as the most crucial elements of a sustainability-oriented plan. These nine elements were land use, transportation, growth management, energy, economic development, housing, agriculture/food, water (potable, waste, and recharge), and conservation/recreation. The plan articulated by the vision statement called for the adoption of a new way of life, one which did not preclude either economic or population expansion, but sought to accommodate growth and urban development at a human scale within existing service area boundaries and physical limits based upon "no net loss" of natural resources.

The booklet included vision statements on various sustainable design principles, as well as discussion of current conditions and specific proposals. Alleviation of Orlando's dependence upon a tourist economy, development of in-state energy sources sufficient to serve all energy uses, and increasing reliance upon conservation and energy-efficient technologies were among the recommendations. Supplanting auto-centered transportation with public transit alternatives and the accommodation of growth pressures through dense infill centers within existing urban areas were some of the specific actions.

Other specific actions included the adoption of guidelines for compact growth, maintaining the integrity of established urban service area boundaries, and the creation of rural area density standards through the transfer of development rights. Likewise, the purchase and protection of conservation and agricultural lands was advocated, as was the assertion of public ownership and control of utilities, and the promotion of sustainable forms of industrial development, such as energy-efficient products, renewable energy equipment, eco-tourism, and enhanced recycling efforts. The goal of this approach was to produce an "alternative regional plan" and move Orlando and Central Florida toward a sustainable future.

Sustainability and Growth Management Reconsidered

Considerable diversity concerning sustainability and the relationship of that concept to growth management is revealed by contrasting the different perspectives adopted by *Eastward Ho!*, the SCDP, and the *vision statement*. Implicit throughout is the assumption that sustainability is integrally related to growth management. While this may be taken as a valid assumption, growth management is certainly as much a precursor as a complement to sustainability. Without effective growth management in place,

sustainability amounts to little more than window-dressing for the *status quo ante*.

Eastward Ho! offers a relevant definition of sustainability, and some specific recommendations linked to the concept, but the linkage of specific

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recommendations to the attainment of sustainability or the contribution of those specifics to growth management is limited. *Eastward Ho!* acknowledges that the plan would do virtually nothing to halt expansion westward from the study area, but through revitalization seeks "...to capture a greater percentage of that projected growth than is now anticipated" (South Florida Regional Planning Council 1996:5). Beyond recommendations to acquire additional conservation lands through unreliable funding sources, or depend upon uncertain political will to firm up urban development boundaries, there is little to prevent westward expansion from proceeding apace with study area redensification.

One of the implicit effects of revitalization and redensification will be to push property values upwards in the study area. *Eastward Ho!* identifies the population base in the study area as possessing a higher proportion of African-Americans (27%) than the region as a whole (17%), higher unemployment levels, and significantly higher poverty rates than the surrounding area. The African-American population is also poorer than the overall population. Florida Atlantic University/Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems Director John DeGrove has expressed concern that

gentrification is "A major, major issue" (Bryant & Inerfeld 1997:4). According to DeGrove, the Florida Atlantic University Center for Urban Revitalization and Empowerment holds a contract with DCA to work with existing low income communities.

Florida Atlantic Political Science Professor Robyne Turner has likewise suggested that provisions to ensure the viability of the existing population base need to be strengthened. Turner recommended "patchwork financing" made available for nonprofit and other housing developers as one means for the maintenance of affordable housing. She further recommended nurturing the capacity of existing communities through homeowner associations, community development corporations, and other neighborhood-based organizations and programs (Turner 1997:11-12).

It remains to be seen whether or not low income communities will be displaced should the redevelopment envisioned by *Eastward Ho!* occur. Measures intended to safeguard the interests of this existing population appear dubious at this point. For instance, no mention has been made about the provision of rental property for those who even with creative financing may be unable to become homeowners. Only one of the nine recommendations in the human characteristics section of *Eastward Ho!* makes reference to strengthening existing neighborhoods, community building, and grassroots leadership. Nowhere is it suggested that existing communities should be asked if *Eastward Ho!* reflects their own dreams, nor were they asked to play a leading role in determining their own destiny. Beyond convening a public forum to consider public safety issues, no steps were recommended for putting into place a permanent citizen participation mechanism for implementing *Eastward Ho!*

A significant issue involved with the use of sustainability as a planning tool is that everyone has their own definition of sustainability. One source outlines 10 characteristics of sustainability, including the placement of a high value on life, respect for the natural environment, the use of appropriate technology, the optimization of key resources, recognition of life cycles, and preservation of heritage (Geis & Kutzmark

1995). These are fairly different from the six principles outlined in the SCDP, which illustrates that there are different definitions of sustainability.

Beyond the six principles and other SCDP criteria, the State of Florida did not articulate any clear definition of "sustainability" or "sustainable communities" (Pelham 1997). The six principles are not synthesized into a whole that might be greater than the sum of its parts. Nor has the state, at least not in the case of the City of Orlando, given increased priority to any activities supporting or maintaining the "sustainable communities" designation.

The impact of this approach has been reflected in

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Orlando's application and subsequent designation as a "sustainable community." The connection between the six SCDP principles and Orlando's application is weak. This does not reflect a failure of Orlando's application so much

as a process that requires existing programs and policies be conformed to sustainability rather than starting with sustainability as a premise. While possessing a variety of programs broadly geared toward comprehensive planning, Orlando lacks a coherent approach to sustainability.

Tailored toward current realities, the most significant aspect of Orlando's application envisioned the city as "world class," meaning competitive in a cut-throat global economy in which sustainability is at the mercy of the whims of transnational corporations. Virtually no specific attention was devoted to the restoration of "key ecosystems," a "more clean, healthier environment," or the "protection of wildlife and natural areas."

Orlando's response to the section that deals with transportation, while referencing a "multi-modal transportation framework", would rely primarily upon the private automobile, and the limitation of urban sprawl would be accomplished through reliance upon weak inter-local agreements, such as those that comprise the "functional equivalent" of urban development boundaries (Planning & Development Department 1996:28). The experience of Orlando illustrates the risks of relying upon urban development boundaries that may be subject to amendment and extension on a piecemeal basis. According to Kay

Yeuell of ADPSR, urban development boundaries have not encouraged infill, have not assured protection of key natural areas, nor ensured cost-efficient provision of public infrastructure and services; the urban development boundary in Orange County has been moved every six months while another county extended the boundary far enough out into the rural areas as to be meaningless (Yeuell 1996).

While Orlando prided itself on "...the growth and development of the Orlando International Airport..." (Planning & Development Department 1996:28), no discussion of the manner in which air travel might relate to the concept of sustainability was offered—if indeed it does. There was no discussion of the fashion in which Orlando's "multi-modal transportation framework" would be integrated. The outline of various components of this "framework", including air, rail, bus, bicycles, and a "pedestrian-oriented streetscape", suggested no fashion in which these components might be prioritized with reference to sustainability.

Both "new urbanism/neo-traditional town planning" and design concepts that provide "a strong connection with nature and the built environment" were identified as pillars of Orlando's concept of urban design (Planning & Development Department 1996:31). These orientations may possess sustainable aspects, but are not necessarily synonymous with sustainability. New Urbanism and neotraditional planning principles have essentially been applied to new developments on the urban periphery rather than to infill or the existing built environment (Unger 1997). To date, it is difficult to uniformly identify recently developed areas in Orlando that meet these SCDP criteria. The city's description of "new urbanism" in the designation application: "Employment, shopping and services will be concentrated in neighborhood, village, and town centers that are compact and walkable" has not been reflected in recent subdivision approvals. Likewise, efforts to provide or maintain a significant natural emphasis have not been readily

apparent.

The ADPSR vision statement advocated no such strategy by which its recommendations may be attained. The linkage of these so-called "pieces of the puzzle" to ADPSR's definition of sustainability is nebulous. Nor are any means offered by which to measure possible implementation of these objectives in relation to the attainment of sustainability. Compared to the SCDP and Eastward Ho!, the overall approach of the vision statement nonetheless appears more internally consistent, with a tighter "fit" between means and the goal of sustainability. There is clearly

more of an intent to craft recommendations consonant with sustainability criteria such as "carrying capacity" rather than as co-opted buzzwords obscuring a roll-back of growth management in Florida.

Conclusion


Certainly the effect, if not the intent, of Florida's 1996 SCDP has been to alleviate the burden of a cumbersome development permitting process

imposed on the private sector and local governments under the 1985 Growth Management Act. Eastward Ho! was explicitly designed to facilitate the development process. Arguably, the effect of these initiatives is in keeping with the overall trend since the passage of the GMA to loosen restrictions on development rather than enhance stewardship over the environment or improve the quality of life of Florida residents (Pelham 1997).

There are no clear guidelines for the implementation of either Eastward Ho! or, as in the case of Orlando, the SCDP. Nor are there any benchmarks or goals by which to evaluate attainment of "sustainability." It is anticipated that efforts will be made to expand the SCDP beyond the five "demonstration project" communities well before sufficient time has passed to make any definitive assessments of its consequences. The implications of Eastward Ho! and SCDP are not overwhelmingly positive in terms of growth management policy that might effectively deploy sustainability as a planning

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concept.

ADPSR and other critics cannot match state or regional planning agency capacity to offer regulatory relief for the implementation of their vision of sustainability. Implementation of an alternative plan will require a departure from business as usual, for which ADPSR lacks sufficient political clout and for which there is little interest on the part of business and public policy decision-makers. ADPSR is working to change that through education and advocacy on behalf of its *Vision of a New Central Florida*. 

Endnotes

- ¹ Editors note: the Eastward Ho! study area was defined in the John DeGrove interview in the previous issue of *Carolina Planning* as the corridor in Palm Beach, Broward, and Dade Counties just west of the Florida coastline and between the Florida East Coast Railroad and the Chesapeake Seaboard Railroad.

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