



## Planning for Quality Growth and Economic Prosperity for Florida's Future December 15, 2010

Florida is at a critical juncture. To meet Florida's severe economic challenges, strong leadership and clear vision are required. Florida's conservation and land planning community recognizes the need for change in how this state plans for the future. Its leaders have identified some key issues facing this state, and are proposing strategic reforms to promote cost effective land development, environmental conservation, and economic growth.

Successful corporations plan for the future. Florida should too. Florida's environment is this state's most important economic asset. The three major engines of Florida's economy—agriculture, tourism, and land development activity—all depend on and impact the environment. Protecting the state's vital natural resources is essential to ensure that these engines and others, including industry and the military, continue to flourish in the twenty-first century. As the old farmer's adage goes, "Don't eat your seed corn."

At this point in time, Florida needs to seek viable and sustainable economic development opportunities—including needed land development in appropriate locations—that truly build the economy, promote long-term job growth, and enhance this state's quality of life. Alternatively, projects that require taxpayer subsidies and further drain this state's vulnerable economy should be avoided.

Sound land use planning can be a dynamic tool to enhance Florida's quality of life and to support a vibrant economy for the 21st century. It can direct economic growth and associated land development to geographic areas that are less harmful to Florida's natural resources and to areas where public infrastructure can be provided at the lowest possible cost. In this way, Florida will preserve natural resources and save tax dollars so that future economic activity can be supported. Good planning also contributes to a better quality of life, which is a key factor in a corporation's decision to locate in a particular state or community.

Innovative planning opens new market opportunities to stimulate the economy and create new jobs. As an example, demand for compact, walkable communities currently exceeds supply. Florida can jumpstart its economy and accelerate new job creation by incentivizing such development for already developed areas, while existing development continues to meet the needs of those who prefer a suburban lifestyle. Likewise, well-planned, compatible rural development in appropriate locations which provides clear, long-term protection for the state's ecosystems and Florida's farming community can enhance Florida's quality of life.

Sound land planning also protects the taxpayers' interests. When new development does not pay for itself, taxpayers must either subsidize that development through higher taxes, or suffer from a decline in community infrastructure and services. The average Floridian's most valuable asset—his or her home—is best protected by approving only that new construction which fulfills unmet needs or results in clear, compelling and lasting environmental, social and quality of life benefits to the public.

**Now is the time to improve Florida's system of land planning.** As a result of the Growth Management Act of 1985, each of Florida's more than 470 local governments now has a comprehensive plan and has revised its plan multiple times on a jurisdiction-wide basis. State review of amendments to local plans has led to better development proposals that have reduced infrastructure costs for local governments, developers, and taxpayers, and reduced impacts on sensitive natural resources. Nevertheless, management of land development has not produced the on-the-ground results many Floridians expect or desire.

A quarter century after the state's current land planning program was established, Florida faces unprecedented economic and environmental challenges. A number of questions must be addressed to improve the state's planning functions in the twenty-first century:

- What role should the state play in the review, analysis, and amendment of local comprehensive plans?
- How can the state nurture future economic growth in Florida and steer land development toward the most beneficial locations?
- How can state planning better protect essential resources, ecosystems, and ecosystem services, and prevent local decisions from harming those resources important to the state as a whole?
- How can the state encourage cost-efficient land development and infrastructure to improve the quality of life without requiring taxpayer subsidies?
- How can the transactional costs and approval times for land development be lowered for developers, landowners and others to stimulate economic recovery?
- How can opportunities for citizens to participate in their local planning process be improved?

The state's planning role must evolve while maintaining the fundamental concepts of the 1985 Growth Management Act: protection of private property rights; the legitimacy of the comprehensive plan in directing land development activity; meaningful protection of natural areas; full public participation in the comprehensive planning process including the authority for citizens to enforce planning laws and comprehensive plans; land development paying for the full costs of its infrastructure and service impacts and demands; and providing certainty to landowners and the public about where, when and how land development and other land uses shall occur.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### **Protect significant statewide interests**

- Place increased emphasis on protecting major state interests including major ecosystems, significant natural geographic areas and sufficient and viable corridors, and water quality and supply, and reducing state risk associated with hurricanes, floods and other natural disasters.
- Task the state land planning agency with greater focus on identified state resource areas including Aquatic Preserves, Areas of Critical Concern, the Everglades, the Wekiva Basin, viable wildlife corridors, river corridors and springsheds, and publicly owned lands.
- Protect military investment in Florida by ensuring that development adjacent to military lands does not harm its ability to fulfill its mission.

## **Save taxpayer dollars**

- Ensure that new development covers the costs of associated infrastructure and services so that taxpayers do not subsidize that development or face insufficient infrastructure and services in their communities.
- Recognize locally designated and state-approved urban development boundaries, infill areas and growth corridors, reducing the need for state review or approval of amendments or development orders within those boundaries except where boundaries are proposed for expansion or projects impact multiple jurisdictions.
- Waive state need, DRI and transportation concurrency requirements in local government-designated urban infill and redevelopment areas within appropriately defined dense urban land areas, provided a multi-modal transportation plan is developed for the area within two years of the waiver being granted. Provide sufficient resources for state planning staff to provide technical assistance to local governments developing these plans.
- Take advantage of the state's changing demographics and incentivize cost-efficient, compact development forms utilizing transit-ready, walkable, pedestrian-friendly community design to meet the projected need.

## **Streamline the state planning process**

- Maintain an independent state land planning agency, but incorporate within it appropriate economic development activities related to tourism promotion, corporate recruitment, energy programs, and other efforts to support compatible land development that builds upon and maintains Florida's unique attributes and needs.
- Refine the state's planning role to better focus its limited budget and personnel on the "edge" where outward movement of the developed areas threatens greatest damage to ecosystems and produces sprawl.
- Create a vision-based state comprehensive plan to promote cost-efficient land development with multiple housing choices, jobs and mobility options in the appropriate locations, based on the need for such development.
- Recognizing that a "one size fits all" approach to planning will not work for significant ecosystems, establish a stakeholder-driven effort placing all affected parties and local governments at the table to develop consensus on appropriate development and environmental protection measures for defined geographic areas of special interest.
- Link state transportation investment decisions to priorities in the state comprehensive plan and within identified dense urban land areas.
- Identify appropriate hubs and corridors for industrial development and appropriate and compatible rural development to ensure more efficient use of state infrastructure dollars and safeguard sensitive natural areas.
- Enhance the role of an independent state planning agency in providing technical and grant assistance to local governments to incentivize local planning initiatives—e.g. the Florida Communities Trust.

Sharpening the focus of the state's land planning agency on those things most important to the state as a whole, and empowering local governments to make local decisions within appropriate areas that do not threaten resources significant to the state will provide multiple benefits for all Floridians. Florida can create new jobs, speed the process of approving needed economic development in the right places, better protect the natural areas that embody the state's environmental legacy for future generations, and save taxpayer dollars by encouraging sound development decisions.