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August 30, 2005

Another warning bell

Brevard construction on record-setting path, but growth management falls short

It's no news to anyone that Brevard County is literally exploding with new homes, condos and apartments.

If the pace of building continues through December, the county's total this year will approach the record-setting level of 1985, according to the Home Builders & Contractors Association of Brevard.

That year, nearly 10,000 new residences were built. And since then, Brevard's population has jumped by more than half, to 520,000.

We know growth is inevitable, but unless it's well managed it will cause big problems. And so far, it hasn't been well-managed:

- Main roads have become dense and dangerous seas of traffic, not just at commuting time, but all day.
- The drain on the Floridan Aquifer is so severe that Brevardians and many others in the St. Johns River region will likely have to cut back hard on lawn-watering by December.
- Schools are packed and construction plans are struggling to meet demand.
- Public services are stretched, irreplaceable lands are being bulldozed and the Indian River Lagoon is being poisoned by pollution.
- The growth management "reform" passed by the Legislature in spring was a sham that even encourages urban sprawl.
- On top of all that, a recent FLORIDA TODAY study of planned construction projected that Brevard will have another 200,000 people in just 15 years.

Nothing could cast a sharper focus on the need, not just for planning for smart growth, but for local, regional and state politicians and agencies to stick to the plans once they're made.



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It also reminds voters to attend public hearings that help formulate the plans, support them publicly and vote for candidates who back wise policies, not heedless growth.

Thinking people know the capacity of our fragile ecosystem to absorb the stresses of population is not unlimited.

They know also know growth does not magically "pay for itself."

Palm Bay, which over the past few years has become the county's largest city with more than 94,000 people, understands that hard lesson.

That's why its had to propose a referendum on \$75 million worth of projects from road building to parks, to meet some of the city's near-overwhelming needs.

And while much has been said about the \$25 million "extra" Brevard County will collect this year due to rising tax rolls, that money is already legally obligated for referendum and taxing units.

The county still has no money to pay for many critical improvements, from expansion of a 40-year-old emergency operations center to a \$300 million backlog in new road construction.

Adoption of stringent regulations that require developers to shoulder much more of the cost of public needs is long overdue.

That includes passing the increase in transportation impact fees that makes growth pay for at least a fraction of the costs it creates, a move still rejected by an obstructionist County Commission majority.

Construction records are nothing to boast about, if all the development brings is a worsening quality of life.

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