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County's burden: Get ready for crush

Osceola leaders huddle to talk about a population expected to more than double by 2025.

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KISSIMMEE -- Move over, Osceola residents. You're about to get a whole bunch more neighbors.

Those who feel crowded now will feel the squeeze even more in 2025, by which time the county's population is predicted to mushroom from the current 225,000 to 525,000.

Elected officials say they must plan for the inevitable growth and are working to reach a consensus on how to do that.

County commissioners and key staffers huddled Tuesday at the Gaylord Palms Resort and Convention Center to discuss the county's exploding growth and how to manage it.

Planning is important for an area that County Manager Edwin Hunzeker said someday could develop "every piece of dirt" between Kissimmee and Kenansville.

The session began with a presentation by R. Randolph Lyon Jr., president of Xentury City and chair of myregion.org. Lyons is part of a task force representing seven Central Florida counties planning for the year 2050. County officials used Lyons' presentation in helping to prepare a comprehensive growth plan, which is due in December.

Lyon's presentation, "Developing a County Agenda Within a Regional Framework," highlighted the nation's and region's growth patterns, as well as specific information pertaining to Osceola.

"People will satisfactorily enjoy commuting 30 minutes," Lyon said. He said most people don't want to commute beyond that, which means Osceola will continue to attract more suburbanites who drive to Orlando to work.

Lyon said that 70 percent of what will be built by 2030 doesn't exist today. "We will build more things in our community in 25 years" than has been built here so far. He said the key to planning for growth is cooperation among local governments in the region.

The average density for Central Florida is 1.44 dwelling units per acre, but people are more spread out in Osceola, where the average is 1.1 homes per acre.

"We're worse," Commissioner Atlee Mercer said. "That is absolutely unsustainable."

Mercer said the city of Kissimmee should change its height restrictions, so that more commercial building can go up and not sprawl out so much.

According to commissioners, one problem when planning for growth is that so many residents don't understand that growth is inevitable but must be managed well so that urban services can be provided efficiently. Mercer warned that sprawl would make it more costly to serve new residents if utility lines, school buses and fire engines have to cover more ground.

With a projected population increase of 133 percent by 2025, planning needs to take place now, officials said.

"There is a disconnect perpetrated by the media on growth," said Commission Chairman Paul Owens. "They think if we stop building it, they'll stop coming. But that's not true."

After the session with Lyon, Mike Kloehn, the county's division administrator of growth management, discussed amendments to the comprehensive growth plan.

But not all commissioners agreed on how to handle growth.

"I don't want to live in Osceola County when 525,000 people are here," Commissioner Ken Smith said. "Are we rolling over and accepting it? Or is there anything we can do to slow growth?"

Mercer said the real issue is to decide how growth should occur -- whether it will sprawl out or be more densely packed.

County Attorney Jo Thacker said she couldn't tell commissioners how to legally manage growth, without their providing a clear explanation of their wishes.

"I am concerned and frightened that this conversation didn't take place before the comp plan was made last year," she said. "If we can't agree on where we're going, there is no way the staff can get you what you want."

Commissioners were divided on how severely they can restrict or manage growth, with Smith leading the campaign to put the brakes on growth and Mercer advocating better management to avoid sprawl.

"We must accommodate [growth] in a way that doesn't make people want to move out," Mercer said. He

suggested a quality-of-life impact fee be imposed to provide amenities such as more parks and green space.

Commissioners agreed that the county needs to start building more roads faster to accommodate the population, citing congestion on Pleasant Hill and Neptune roads.

"We have a horrific long-term issue to face, and if we don't connect as a county and as a community, then as a result of that we will be in trouble," Mercer said.

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