

Growth study points out need for overhaul

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A decade ago this county was referred to derisively as Pass Go because of the ease of pushing through proposed development projects.

Then came a string of ordinances intended to make the county more aesthetically pleasing; an aggressive impact fee schedule to finance schools, roads and other services; a tougher Development Review Committee headed by the county administrator and a rewritten comprehensive land plan to guide growth for the next 20 years. All of which coincided with a multiyear housing and retail boom.

The result is a stressed county development review process that is arduous and in need of an overhaul to move to being proactive from being reactive, outside consultants recommended. The group of nine members of the Urban Land Institute presented its findings Friday morning after a week of interviews with more than 100 people and a tour of the county.

County Administrator John Gallagher acknowledged the county planning process is fragmented and in need of reorganization. His pledge of a cooperative staff to make it happen drew applause from those gathered at Pasco-Hernando Community College.

The lengthy presentation, however, went beyond the county government's organizational shortcomings. It also put the onus on the private sector to consider its own priorities. The private sector must be willing to:

- Accept expensive impact fees to cover the costs of growth as long as they are reviewed in a timely and consistent manner;
- Abide by urban service areas for infrastructure or foot the entire bill if it won't;
- Rethink planned products in order to preserve more open space to sustain the quality of life that makes Pasco attractive; and
- Forgo/delay development entitlements in central Pasco where the county has approved more housing than expected demand. The alternative is sprawling, run-of-the-mill subdivisions battling for market share.

Left unsaid by the consultants, but an obvious consideration is shared expense. In light of shrinking property tax revenue from Amendment 1, the private sector should be willing to pay higher application fees to finance a reorganized planning department if it requires additional personnel.

Significant investments also will be needed to spur redevelopment in west Pasco and to build ready-to-go commerce centers to help attract industry to southern Pasco.

"This is not free," warned panelist Martin Cramton, a planner from Charlotte, N.C. "This will take additional time and additional money."

Indeed. It is a significant to-do list that will take years to accomplish. Some of the items have been considered previously — a

special taxing district to help redevelopment (rejected by the city of New Port Richey for Main Street Landings) and a central Pasco airport (an unlikely priority with an airport up the road in Brooksville). Others are outside the control of the locals — an expanded Pasco-Hernando Community College, for instance, needs state approval.

But, the exercise was valuable in helping to define Pasco's strengths to exploit and weaknesses to improve. Turning numbers in a chart to people living, working and playing in an area with a rich quality of life is an admirable goal. It will require political will from the commission dais, leadership from the county staff and cooperative private-sector interests appreciative of the big picture not just big profits.

The alternative is undesirable — just another economic development study sitting on a shelf.

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