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Money is the key, growth panel told

State lawmakers hear familiar laments as they take advice on how to handle the future's expansion.

By JEFF HARRINGTON, Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA - For more than one speaker, the trip to the microphone was accompanied by a troubling sense of *deja vu*.

The topic was this: how does Florida better handle its growth with a population on pace to surge from 17-million to more than 25-million by 2030?

Joyce King, president of the Audubon Society chapter in St. Petersburg, recalled a similar session in 1995 and again in 2000. "We're still grappling with the exact same questions we have been grappling with," she told a Florida Senate committee assembled in a USF conference hall.

The panel, following the lead of Senate President Tom Lee, came to Tampa Friday morning for the first of three hearings into a proposed overhaul of the state's growth management plan. Its counterparts in the House have held four hearings elsewhere in the state.

Few doubt that Florida has to do a better job managing its growth, said Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, who oversaw the hearing as chairman of the Community Affairs Committee. Gridlock is common, schools are overcrowded, precious water resources need protection and developers complain of lengthy and unnecessary steps through bureaucracy.

"I'm really not interested in criticism. Everybody in this room knows we have a problem," Bennett said. "What we're looking for is input."

Developers, property owners, conservationists and area politicians sparred over the best next steps. But there were several recurring suggestions:

Protect Florida's water tables and other natural resources.

Use modern technology to create statewide maps that show development density and pinpoint natural resources in detail.

Retool the state's 11 Regional Planning Councils. Some councils are seen as less sophisticated than others, with smaller budgets and staffs. Under one proposal circulating in Tallahassee, the Department of Community Affairs would shift review of big development projects away from the state to the regional councils.

Several speakers said the state's system for managing growth and keeping development in balance with environmental priorities has its strong points. The problem is the state never bothered to provide communities with enough money to cover the cost of new development.

"The only thing that has stopped our growth management from moving forward for 20 years is funding," said community activist Denise Layne of Lutz.

Added Polk County Commissioner Paul Senft. "The reason (the current growth management plan) has failed is financial. Cut to the chase."

Don't worry about the politically poisonous stance of increasing direct state funding, Senft and others suggested. Just give counties and other local authorities the power to impose more taxes and fees on their own to handle the crises of crumbling roads, dwindling water supplies, sewer problems, aging buildings and overcrowded schools.

"I don't think it's your responsibility to fund it," said Roger Dearing, superintendent of Manatee County schools. "I think it's your responsibility to allow us to generate the funds to do it."

Senft noted that Polk County is running an \$800-million deficit and has nearly exhausted the ability to impose more taxes.

He suggested raising auto tag fees by \$25 or \$50 to bring Florida more in line with other states. Drivers "will get that money back" in other ways, he said. "Roads that are paved probably will not chew up tires so fast."

Feedback was mixed over the common practice of charging developers with impact fees to help pay for water, sewer and other infrastructure needs caused by big projects.

One speaker urged a large increase in the use of impact fees; others questioned its fairness. The Tampa Bay Builders Association said impact fees should be scrapped for broad-based fees on everyone who uses roads.

"Impact fees do not pay for growth," Bennett added. "Ninety percent (of the money raised) pays for correcting yesterday's problems."

All but seven of the 30-plus speakers who had signed up had a chance at the microphone before a three-hour time limit for the session ran out.

The next public hearings are slated for Feb. 18 in West Palm Beach and Feb. 25 in Pensacola. Bennett said he intends to draft a bill before the legislative session begins March 8, working closely with House leaders.

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