

Orlando Sentinel

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COMMENTARY: KELLY GRIFFITH

Did growth just jump up and bite us?

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February 27, 2005

It's really a shame that all this growth caught local politicians so off-guard. Obviously, they had no idea it was coming.

But like a burst appendix, here it is, right out of nowhere. Everything was fine one second and then, wham, right in the gut.

Of course, Polk and Lake government leaders could not have known all these people were coming. Could they? If they had, we wouldn't have so many little kids trying to cram into the same buildings to learn to read.

I can't imagine anyone would do that to a little kid. I mean, putting twice as many students in a school as it was built to hold? Middle schools with more than 1,600 students in them? Lunch before 11 a.m. because there are so many shifts of kids who need to eat? Come on, no one would let that happen if they'd only known. Would they?

And the roads? I'm sure State Road 50 in Clermont wouldn't look the way it does at 3 p.m. on any given weekday if anyone had a clue these lovely chain-of-lakes communities would attract more people than mosquitoes.

And the Four Corners shockeroo? Good grief, Las Vegas should have had a line on that one. That'd be like trying to predict Paris Hilton would become a star.

Bless those poor politicians' hearts! We dumped all these people into the area -- almost like inviting the Fantasy Football League for dinner and forgetting to tell the wife.

Dear readers, dear voters, dear newbies-who-just-arrived-and-have-no-idea-that-it-hasn't-always-been-this-way, I hate to burst your bubble, but county officials have known this growth was coming for at least 20 years. A shock it isn't.

Sometimes they sit in one meeting, wring their hands and wipe their brows about growth and say they

care about this community and the children in it, and then turn around, take contributions from developers and keep approving more and more. They already know impact fees here fall far short of growth paying for itself.

Next time, hand them a little gold statue. They deserve an Oscar more than Leonardo DiCaprio.

In Polk, impact fees on new homes are a fraction of those in the other three Four Corners counties -- even though we know the schools are in dire straits with all the growth.

Here's a bit of study from the *Orlando Sentinel*, circa 1986:

"But [Clermont City Manager] Wayne Saunders is confident that Clermont will see radical changes during the second half of the decade. By 1990, he said, its 6,000 population could grow by as much as 50 percent.

Developers are looking at acres of skeletal citrus trees, and planning to build stores, houses and condominiums, he said. The Clermont of the 1990s will be a bedroom community for people who work in Orlando and at Walt Disney World, he said.

Such predictions worry long-settled Clermont residents, who fear that growth will overrun their town with ticky-tacky homes and back-to-back strip shopping centers."

Sound familiar?

I kept reading. There was also a story about Lake schools, offering the presumption "that new families moving into the area would have school-age children." Imagine that. The year published: 1986. I guess the government people thought the home-school trend was really going to go gangbusters around here.

As for today's crowding, South Lake High School in Groveland will add 440 students in the fall, pushing the student population to 1,885 kids. East Ridge High in Clermont will have 2,812 students. For the youngest schoolchildren, there's no break: Lost Lake Elementary will have 1,623 students in the fall.

In Polk County, they've announced their student population projections are off by years with the current growth rate. Officials are trying to retool long-term projections now.

I read an interesting Letter to the Editor from 1986 in which the writer dreamed of a place where all the lakes were clean enough to swim in; organic farming techniques replaced pesticide use; a light-rail train carried commuters from the suburbs into Orlando; and controlled growth created a community that seemed like one.

I wonder what the writer dreams of now, if not a moving van.

The population of five south Lake cities -- Clermont, Minneola, Groveland, Mascotte and Montverde -- collectively boomed about 54 percent between 2000 and 2004. That's not counting Four Corners. Seems Mr. Saunders wasn't too far off in his projections nearly 20 years ago.

Likewise, in Polk County, areas such as Davenport, Haines City and the extreme north have so many people moving in that even the politicians in faraway Bartow occasionally venture up here.

The newcomers in these areas have the ability to steer the area's course if they want to. A lot of people seem to think it's out of their control -- that what will be will be. We accept too-crowded schools as if they were as typical as those tiny milk cartons. We look at south Lake's hills getting sliced off the map, making way for another stretch of storefronts to get our nails done and hair cut, and we hardly seem to realize what we gave up to get it.

Along U.S. Highway 27, we accept zillions of traffic accidents and way too many deaths casually, as if it's just ho-hum life on an urban highway. We seem to forget this is supposed to be suburbia.

I'm not against Central Florida growing. I chose to come here myself. But letting so many houses get built without something as basic as enough school space goes beyond irresponsible.

The neat thing about America is that if we really care, what happens next is up to us. If we don't like it, we can get somebody in office who dares to do it the way we want. Demanding a visionary isn't so crazy.

If we don't, what will they say about us in 20 years? Will our kids read our newspaper headlines and wonder what could we possibly have been thinking?

I hope not.

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