

Florida's Panhandle Opportunities and Challenges

Changes are coming to Florida's Panhandle, the vast woody region that stretches roughly 250 miles from Pensacola to Jefferson County, just east of Tallahassee. For decades, this has been an agricultural region, with uncrowded, two-lane roads running through pine plantations, farm fields, and wild beaches.

But now, huge chunks of land in the Panhandle will become housing developments and shopping centers and workplaces. New roads are going to be carved through the countryside. The St. Joe Company, the largest landowner in the area with Panhandle holdings roughly the size of Delaware, has made a shift from forestry company to real estate firm. St. Joe owns hundreds of miles of frontage on Panhandle waterways, with nearly 40 miles of Gulf of Mexico coastline, including about five miles of beachfront. The company has big plans for the Panhandle region in the coming years, with several massive development projects — including new highways and a regional airport — planned in the 16-county region.

Development in Florida is not a new story. South Florida has grown from a swampy backwater to a sprawling megalopolis in a single generation. Residents there are paying the price: crowded roads, inadequate water supplies, packed schools, and vanishing wildlife habitat.

But the Panhandle's story could have a different ending. There is an opportunity, perhaps unique in our country, to bring many interests together to guide change. The region has a chance to make better choices. Citizens and planners have new, stronger tools to help guide growth. The developments of St. Joe's and others are already attracting people to the Panhandle. The key is for that development to be timed and located appropriately to better protect sensitive natural areas and community character.

Creating a New Future

This guide will outline some innovative planning strategies that have been used elsewhere to help keep the essence of a place when the development pace accelerates.

It includes contact information for groups and state agencies that can give guidance on conservation and planning strategies. Networking is one of the best tools around, and planners, citizens, and developers who have tackled tough growth problems are usually willing to share what worked and what didn't.

First, a brief look at this unique region, and what's at stake.



Northwest Florida is one of the six most important places for diverse and rare species in the country.

A Natural Wonderland

From an environmental standpoint, Florida's approximately 12,000 square-mile Panhandle is like no other part of the state. In fact, the assemblage of plants and animals here occurs nowhere else on earth. Northwest Florida (and adjoining land in Georgia and Alabama) is one of the six most important places for diverse and rare species in the country, according to *Precious Heritage*, a 2000 Nature Conservancy survey of biodiversity in the U.S.¹

A few of the Panhandle's ecological credentials:

- Along the border of Florida and Georgia sits the largest remaining longleaf pine forest in the world. Before they were logged in the late 19th century, longleaf pines once covered the southeast. The forests were replanted with fast-growing slash pine for lumber production.
- The Western highlands between the Perdido and Apalachicola Rivers are hilly uplands that contain the highest elevations in Florida — 345 feet in northwest Walton County. Moving east, the Marianna Lowlands feature rolling hills and valleys dotted with limestone, including significant fresh water springs and key bat habitat in the Marianna Caverns.
- The Red Hills region, spanning 300,000 acres between Thomasville, Georgia and Tallahassee, is one of the highest recharge areas for the Floridan aquifer, the underground drinking water supply for millions of Florida residents. The Red Hills' tree farms and quail-hunting plantations are home to rare species such as the red cockaded woodpecker and gopher tortoise. It is one of the largest privately-held conservation areas in the eastern U.S.
- The Panhandle contains the largest number of streams in the state, and three of Florida's largest rivers — the Escambia, Choctawhatchee, and Apalachicola.
- The region also has some of the most ecologically important bays left in the southeast, including Apalachicola Bay, which drains nearly 20,000 square miles reaching from the southern Blue Ridge mountains to the Gulf of Mexico.
- At St. Joseph Bay, a place targeted for new development, scientists in 1993 measured the highest productivity of invertebrates (amphipods, mussels, worms, etc.) ever recorded in Gulf of Mexico seagrass beds. It is also home to some of the highest populations of stone crabs, scallops, horse conchs and whelks in the Gulf.²
- St. Andrews Bay, near Panama City, is home to a species of crayfish found nowhere else on earth. Apalachee Bay, south of Tallahassee, has sponge and soft coral habitats that "are the most understudied areas in the near shore waters of the Gulf of Mexico," according to the 2000 study by The Nature Conservancy, which estimates the area "may well be the most species-rich of any habitat in the Northern Gulf of Mexico."

Panhandle Statistics

(By County)

COUNTY	POPULATION (2002)	POPULATION (2030)	LAND AREA (Square miles)
Escambia	299,485	363,200	893.9
Santa Rosa	124,956	217,200	1,155.3
Okaloosa	176,971	245,000	1,082.1
Walton	45,521	79,300	1,238.1
Bay	152,186	205,300	1,033.4
Holmes	18,708	23,600	488
Washington	21,649	29,200	615.8
Jackson	47,707	58,000	954.7
Calhoun	13,231	16,700	574.4
Gulf	15,202	17,700	755.8
Liberty	7,157	9,700	843.2
Gadsden	45,911	51,600	528.5
Franklin	10,161	11,900	1026.5
Wakulla	24,217	45,500	735.8
Leon	248,039	348,700	701.8
Jefferson	13,261	20,800	636.7
TOTAL	1,254,587*	1,743,400**	12,681.5

Unemployment rate for 2002: 4.2 percent

Median home price for 2002: \$97,900 (12 percent below state average)

*Source for 2002: Enterprise Florida, Florida's Strategic Plan for Economic Development; Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research, 2000 Forecast

**Source for 2030: Florida Statistical Abstract, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, University of Florida, 2002

The Human Tide

This rich landscape has drawn fishermen and hunters for thousands of years. Numerous archaeological sites are strung across the Panhandle. Mastadon bones have been found in the bottoms of rivers and springs. Native American burial mounds and the remains of old Spanish settlements are scattered across the landscape.

Historical resources are rich in Panhandle towns like Pensacola, Defuniak Springs, Apalachicola, St. Marks, Quincy, Monticello, and Tallahassee. The charm of history, the lushness of the region, and its new status as the last Florida coastal area that's "undiscovered," will bring new residents in droves.

Today, 1.2 million people call the Panhandle home. Two out of three residents are natives. About 7 million visitors come to northwest Florida each year, from places such as Atlanta, Birmingham, Little Rock, Dallas, and New Orleans.

With 30 million people living within a day's drive, there is plenty of room for growth. Growth has already begun to speed up. Some of the panhandle counties grew 45 percent from 1990 to 1999. Between 2000 and 2020, growth is projected to increase the region's population by 36 percent.

Florida's population stands at about 16.5 million now, and it is projected to grow to 24.5 million by 2030, a 53 percent increase. In the Panhandle, the population is expected to rise from today's 1.2 million to more than 1.7 million in 2030. Clearly, developers will be looking to North Florida's empty lands to accommodate new residents.

Florida Population Trends

2000: 16.5 million

2010: 17 million

2025: 20 million

2030: 24.5 million

The Economy

The influx of new residents could spell major changes for the Panhandle economy.

Today, the Panhandle's economy is largely dependent on:

- **The military.** Eglin Air Force base near Niceville, as well as Navy installations in Pensacola and Tyndall Air Force Base in Panama City, all provide economic benefits to the Panhandle. According to a report by Fishkind and Associates, Eglin Air Force Base alone adds over \$2.3 billion to Florida's economy each year, which multiplies to over \$5 billion to the state and region. Today, the military accounts for approximately 34 percent of the region's economy.³
- **Nature-based tourism.** Panhandle

Creating a New Future

“Ironically, sprawling rural development does not necessarily signify a healthy economy. In fact, in many regions scattered, haphazard development occurs where the rural economy—particularly in traditional town centers—is deteriorating . . . Many rural areas that attract vacationers or homeowners seeking a natural setting or small-town atmosphere become victims of their own success.”

Barbara Wells,
Smart Growth at the Frontier: Strategies and Resources for Rural Communities

counties are well known to visitors who enjoy hunting, fishing, bird watching, photography, boating, canoeing and kayaking, hiking, biking, swimming and tubing.

- **Agriculture, silviculture and rangeland.** Panhandle residents have worked the land for generations. Farming, forestry and ranching continue to be an important component of the region’s economy.
- **Commercial fishing and seafood production.** The region’s abundant waters are another traditional source of livelihood for area residents. Apalachicola Bay produces 90 percent of the oysters harvested in Florida — and over ten percent of the U.S. harvest.
- **Second seasonal home and retirement living.** The Panhandle’s popularity is booming, and increasing marketing efforts by major developers and the economic development group, Florida’s Great Northwest, are working to ensure that this trend continues.

Growing Smarter

As the region grows, will the existing and strong land-based economies of nature-based tourism, military, and agriculture be displaced and lost to other economic realities? Will sprawling communities eat up the countryside and push out the coastal fishing fleets?

Sprawl is already a problem. According to the Brookings Institution, in 1997 Panama City was the 19th lowest-density metropolitan area in the nation, with only

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2.02 people per urbanized acre. From the period from 1982-1997, Fort Walton Beach was the 10th fastest urbanizing metropolitan area in the nation, with a 106.6 percent increase in urbanized land.⁴

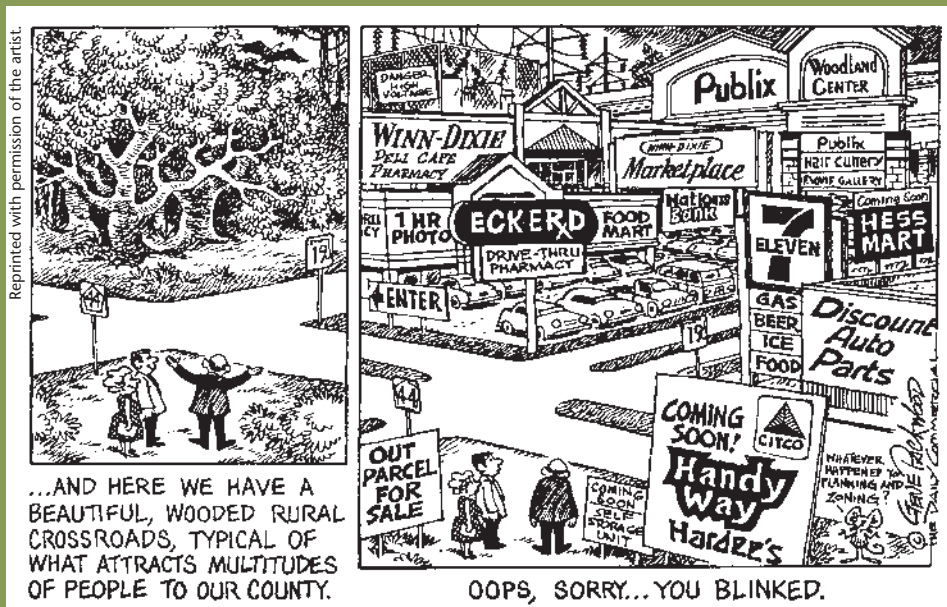
The Panhandle's citizens and leaders have an opportunity to move away from sprawl and grow smarter. The goal is to revitalize small towns, link natural resource protection with resort and residential development, maintain working landscapes, and coordinate with regional development.

To prevent more damaging sprawl in the Panhandle, communities must answer some hard questions before it is too late. As the healthy debate continues over how — and how fast — Florida's Panhandle should develop, the best way to react to individual development proposals is to have a regional framework in place to evaluate them. Communities should prepare a regional, vision-based plan that embraces the area's history, culture, natural environments, economy, and regional linkages.

A Vision for the Future

In too many communities, residents have found themselves constantly reacting to development proposals as they come along. The debate becomes more about what they DON'T want, instead of what they DO want.

There is another way. Communities can work together to come up with a vision of how they want to grow. Then, they can evaluate whether an individual development proposal fits with that vision. It sounds simple. Yet, too many communities have not taken the time to create a vision for their future.



“Visioning is less about you and me today than it is about how and how well our children and our grandchildren will live years from now.”

Dr. Michael Conrad, planner, Florida Department of Community Affairs

Getting Started

The first step is to reach out to all stakeholders in the area. A vision created by a narrow group of interests won't have community-wide support.

Here's a sample checklist to use to start a community-building process in the Panhandle. It might be good to include:

- Landowners
- Farmers
- Community developers
- Commercial and sport fishermen
- Resort owners and operators
- Small town businesspeople and corporate leaders
- Environmental groups
- City, county, and school officials
- Transportation planners
- The military
- Park and forest managers
- Nature-based tourism operators, and biking and hiking clubs
- Hunting groups
- Civic organizations, including the Chamber of Commerce, PTAs, church groups, etc.
- Affordable housing advocates
- Bankers
- Realtors
- Historic preservation advocates

Tips for Success

Communities that have been successful in visioning have some things in common. Some tips for success:

- **Strive to engage many citizens.** Seek out the previously disengaged,

the people who don't go to public meetings and who do not vote. Find partners who are visible and respected in diverse communities and constituencies. Use them to communicate to the constituencies who will listen to them uniquely.

- **Be visual.** The word “vision” suggests seeing literally, and this is essential. A picture, a photo, and a map — they all can tell a thousand words. Get a volunteer team of photographers together to take pictures of neighborhoods, downtowns, parks, and other community assets. Hold a slide show to get discussion going. Sometimes it helps to look at your community through snapshots — like a tourist.
- **Communicate.** Use newspapers and other media, web sites, schools, churches, chambers of commerce, community groups, and other networks to market the progress of the visioning process. Be clear, concise, and consistent in how the visioning process is advertised.
- **Use technology.** Communications technologies create many opportunities to tap public involvement that were not possible in the past. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can greatly increase one's ability to “envision” different scenarios.
- **Identify several scenarios.** It's very likely that a final community vision will not be easily apparent at the beginning of the process. Progress will require defining and evaluating various scenarios as to how a community will grow and change.
- **Encourage innovation.** There are

A Vision for the Future

almost no bad ideas. A visioning process can always improve or be better tailored to its community. The more that individuals are encouraged to contribute and add to the process, the more innovative it can become.

- **Form small working groups and task forces.** While visioning, by its nature, is public and non-technical, technical advisory committees may have to be created to tap specific expertise. One potential tool is a “charrette,” a small workshop of experts and stakeholders that focuses intensely on specific (usually design) issues to build consensus.
- **Be Patient.** Visioning takes time — often as long as a year or two. It is more important to fully engage the public and produce an accurate vision than it is to complete the process in a specified amount of time.

In the Panhandle, several communities are using visioning to chart their futures. Here’s a look at three of them: Jackson County, Wakulla County, and Franklin County.

Jackson County: “Imagine Jackson”

Several years ago, the leaders of Jackson County began to realize they had a problem. This rural, inland Panhandle county with a population less than 50,000 — and growing — had no zoning ordinances and was experiencing “rural sprawl.”

“We were having more and more problems with the comprehensive plan,” says county community development director

Rick Pettis. “We were asking it to do more than it was ever designed to do.”

More than adding zoning or amendments to its already overworked plan, the county needed to guide its growth with a vision of its future. How could land use decisions be made without a larger sense of what the county should look like in years to come?

With the support of the board of county commissioners and county planning commission, Pettis and others brought together a group of stakeholders, including a member of the school board, a utility executive, a banker, and an environmentalist. This steering committee raised private funds that the county planning department used as seed money to get grant and public funds. The money went to hire a consultant to coordinate the visioning process, called “Imagine Jackson.”

During 2002, surveys went out to every household in the county. A series of public meetings began: sixteen workshops, open houses, and countywide forums. To make sure people could attend, organizers provided rides to meetings, food, and child care.

Jackson County citizens came up with a vision statement:

The people, businesses, organizations and governments of Jackson County are unified in their commitment to three cornerstones: livable communities, a healthy economy, and a high-quality environment. These cornerstones drive the decisions we make and the actions we take. They are the benchmarks by which we measure our progress.

The vision statement was backed up by three “action tracks:” physical and civic development; land use planning and management; and infrastructure and transportation.

Imagine Jackson decided that it would seek broad endorsement of the new vision. The county commission and each of the county’s eleven municipalities approved it by a public vote. With this substantial statement of public support, the steering committee in 2003 formed a county council of governments, started creating a sustainable tourism strategy, and decided to make Imagine Jackson a permanent, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

“I really believe visioning works,” says Pettis. “In Jackson County we can see the future, and we are shaping it.”

To Learn More:

Imagine Jackson at
850.718.0438,
or www.imaginejackson.com

Wakulla County

Wakulla County has tremendous natural assets: Dozens of underwater caverns and fresh water springs, including Wakulla Springs State Park; wild rivers like the Sopchoppy, Ochlockonee, and St. Marks, and a stretch of coast that’s filled with marine life. The county also has pressure to develop, as Tallahassee sprawls southward.

For the first time, citizens in the county have begun to meet to define a common vision. In the Wakulla County town of Panacea, part of the state’s Waterfronts Florida program, residents are meeting to

**“Imagine if all
elected officials felt
they needed to run
for office on
fulfilling the
Imagine Jackson**

Vision.” Dale O’Daniel,
President, Chipola
Junior College

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talk about how they want to grow. Among other things, Panacea is planning a waterfront park where children will be able to fish from a public pier. There's a plan to ask school students to do art on a public wall, featuring mosaics of the local fish and plants in the area. Citizens are talking about how to best protect the rare Kemp's-Ridley sea turtles that use Wakulla's near-shore waters.

Panacea is taking the first steps to define itself as a unique community. And it is doing it before development steamrolls over the local flavor.

To Learn More:

Apalachee Ecological Conservancy at 850.926.7439 or www.apeco.org

Franklin County: Development Wake-up Call

Franklin County has a population of about 11,000 people. It also has a stunning coastline within easy driving distance of fast-growing Tallahassee. Visioning in Franklin County began when a large development was proposed for a wild part of the coast. The St. Joe Company proposed the SummerCamp development—499 houses, an inn, and commercial buildings on 784 acres near the Alligator Harbor Aquatic Preserve.

Concerned citizens noted that the county had not updated its comprehensive plan since the plan was first adopted in 1991. To deal with this large development, the county needed to ask and answer some key questions about growth.

With support from St. Joe, 1000

Friends of Florida, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Apalachee Conservancy, and Apalachicola Bay and Riverkeeper, the county contracted with Florida State University's Department of Urban and Regional Planning and the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium. The Consortium held public meetings to solicit input on updating the comprehensive plan and, more broadly, on local concerns about development and land use.

Citizens started exploring the county's need for infrastructure like roads, water and sewer. Some wrote a "dark skies" policy to limit outdoor lighting. Residents considered whether they want to allow high-rises on the coast. Citizens also worked with St. Joe to prepare a vision plan for St. James Island.

It is a beginning. The next step? Rewriting the county's comprehensive land-use plan, the county's growth blueprint, to incorporate these and other recommendations.

To Learn More:

Franklin County at 850.657.9783

Apalachicola Bay & Riverkeeper at 850.670.5470 or www.abark.org

1000 Friends of Florida at 850.222.6277 or www.1000friendsofflorida.org

Moving a Vision into the Real World

Once communities develop a vision, then planning decisions can be made within the frame-

work of the state’s 1985 Growth Management Act, which requires every local government to write a comprehensive plan to guide growth. The comprehensive plan has the force of law and governs all decisions by local government that affect land development.

When the intentions of the community vision are incorporated into a comprehensive plan, they move off the page and into the real world.

In general, the vision should guide changes to the future land use map. Development orders and land development regulations should conform with the community vision. That might mean requiring bike lanes along new roads, putting special restrictions on new development in areas that are environmentally sensitive, or protecting historic resources. It might mean changing the comprehensive plan to allow more intensive development in places where the community has decided that growth is welcome.

Some Panhandle communities, like Jackson County, have set a goal of providing more and better jobs so that young people don’t leave the region to work somewhere else. In the comprehensive plan, economic development policies can spell out the community’s intentions for new businesses. Land development regulations can include incentives to attract clean industry and services.

A plan can also set requirements for affordable housing. As the Panhandle grows, communities should plan ahead to provide affordable housing for residents, especially the local workforce. Second-home buyers along the coast are already driving up property values, making it difficult for many residents to afford a decent

place to live.

It’s important to remember that many high-growth Florida communities have already grappled with these questions. They have found, through trial and error, ways to use their comprehensive plans to support the community vision.

To Learn More:

Planning for Tomorrow: A Citizen’s Guide to Smarter Growth in Florida, (and other publications by 1000 Friends of Florida) at www.1000friendsofflorida.org

Florida Department of Community Affairs at www.dca.state.fl.us and other state agencies at www.myflorida.com.

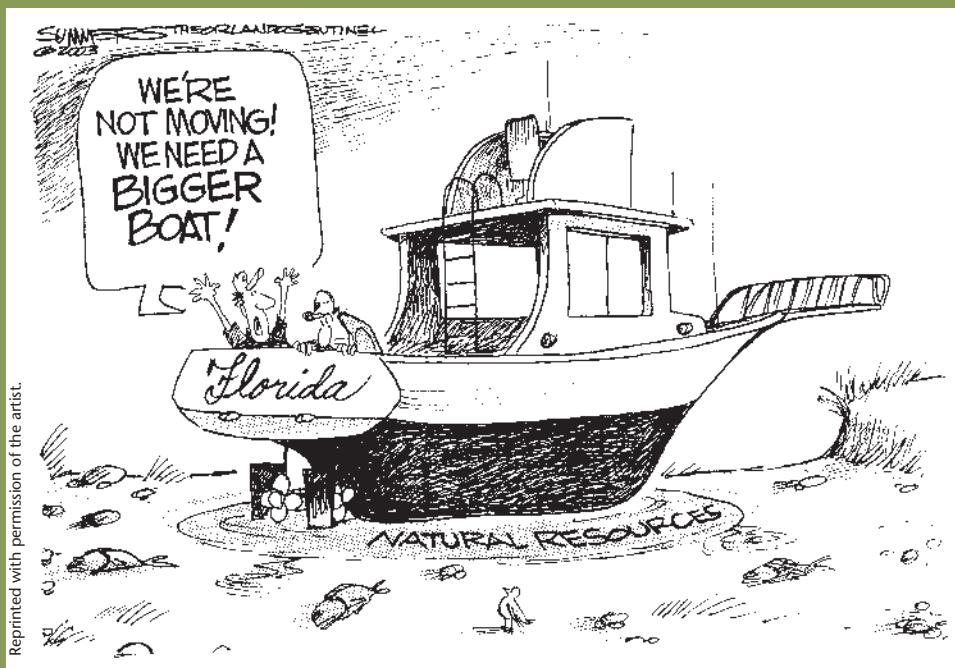
Florida League of Cities at www.flcities.com. To find the web site of your city go to “Links,” then to “City Links.”

Florida Association of Counties at www.fl-counties.com. To find the web site of your county go to “visit county web sites” and select your county.

Identifying A Inappropriate Areas fo

The very first task for Panhandle communities is to define areas where development is appropriate, and areas where it is not. In the places where development is appropriate, citizens must make sure it is timed appropriately, and that services are available to handle the influx of new people.

If new developments are allowed where roads and schools are crowded, everyone's quality of life will suffer. Development should be concentrated, not sprawling. Old town centers should be revitalized before new housing subdivisions cover the countryside, threatening working landscapes and important natural areas.



g Appropriate and as for Development

Identifying Sensitive Natural Areas

As the Panhandle's population increases and developers seek more places to build, elected officials and citizens will have to work together to protect wilderness and water resources. Saving the character of the region means protecting places for hunting, fishing and boating, and rich habitats where threatened creatures like black bear and Gulf sturgeon live.

In the Panhandle, there are many habitats to protect, including bottomland and floodplain forests and swamps, freshwater tidal swamps, springs, beach dune systems, coastal grasslands, maritime hammocks, barrier island scrub, blackwater streams, dome swamps, bogs, depression marshes, seagrass beds, seepage slopes, sandhill lakes, sand pine scrub, pine flatwoods and wet prairies. These ecosystems provide the region's green infrastructure.

The good news is that some of the most significant lands have already been purchased by the state, water management districts, and the federal government. With proper planning, these public lands can become sought-after community assets.

Walton County, home to the famous resort community Seaside, made a conscious decision to build its planning around public lands. Dense developments are clustered around spectacular public parks, including Topsail Hill State Park, one of the most gorgeous public beaches in Florida. People can bike on a greenway between towns and to the beach. Everyone has access to the area's record-high sand

dunes, not just people who can afford a beachfront home. For Walton County, the decision to set aside wild lands and carefully plan development around them paid off, both environmentally and economically.

Across the Panhandle, the time to identify lands that need to be protected is now, before development pressure becomes too great.

To Learn More:

South Walton Community Council at 850.314.3749 or www.southwaltoncc.org

Saving the character of the region means protecting places for hunting, fishing and boating, and rich habitats where threatened creatures like black bear and Gulf sturgeon live.

Identifying Appropriate and Inappropriate Areas for Development



When Land Needs to be Preserved

Florida has the nation's most successful conservation land-buying program, Florida Forever, as well as private groups working on conservation land-buying. Panhandle communi-

ties can use South Florida's experience as a lesson. In the Panhandle, the public has a chance to buy wild lands now, before they become too expensive.

Panhandle communities that are interested in preserving wild lands have a number of resources to choose from.

To Learn More:

Land acquisition by the state: Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Land Acquisition at 850.245.2784, or www.dep.state.fl.us

State and local partnerships for land conservation: Florida Communities Trust program at 850.922.1710 or www.dca.state.fl.us

Florida's Greenways and Trails program: 850.245.2052, or www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt

Selling or donating land:

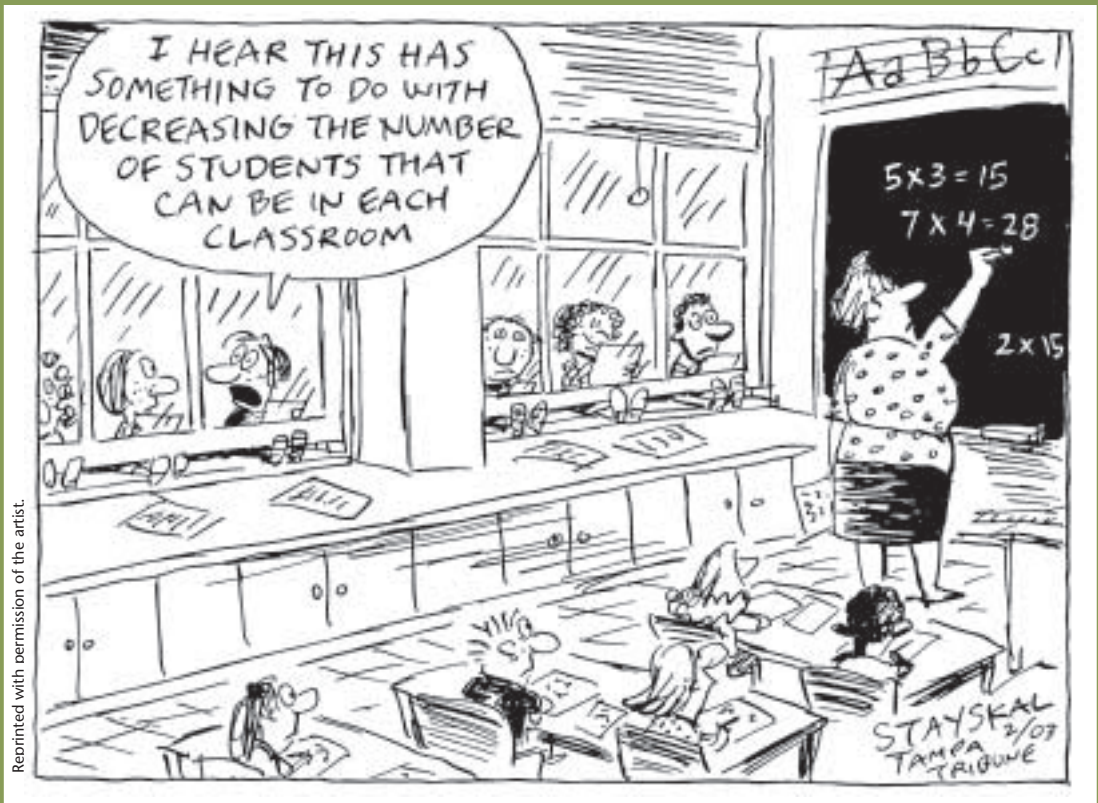
- The Nature Conservancy at 850.222.0199 or www.tncflorida.org
- The Trust for Public Land at 850.222.7911 or www.tpl.org.
- The Northwest Florida Water Management District at 850.539.5999 or www.state.fl.us/nwfwmd

Franklin County Land Acquisition

In Franklin County, Tate's Hell State Forest and the Apalachicola National Forest combine to preserve more than 800,000 contiguous acres of black bear habitat and watershed land for Apalachicola Bay, one of the richest shellfishing regions in the world. Until recently, however, this vast wildlife area had a hole in it—37,000 acres of privately owned timberland that enjoyed no protection at all.

In 2002, the state Department of Environmental Protection purchased the remaining 37,000-acre parcel using Florida Forever funding through the Conservation and Recreational Lands program. The acquisition realized a major state conservation priority—connecting existing protected areas and protecting a range of wildlife. Recreation and some commercial harvesting of timber will continue on the land. The St. Joe Company is also working on a series of similar land sales to the state.

Identifying Appropriate and Inappropriate Areas for Development



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Promoting Revitalization and Infill

One way to preserve the Panhandle's natural resources is to encourage growth in already developed areas such as downtowns. Towns can offer incentives to make it more attractive for developers to reuse buildings or land. Restoration of historic districts, rehabilitation of aging or abandoned buildings and former industrial properties, and development of vacant lands within existing communities increase property values and make neighborhoods more attractive.

Unlike many new developments, older towns and cities have a strong sense of community. They provide walkable environments, which cuts automobile use. Downtowns contain a mix of housing options, providing more opportunities for affordable housing. Historic preservation efforts — revitalizing traditional Main Streets, restoring older homes and neighborhoods, and encouraging heritage tourism, for example — bring economic benefits and enhance a community's sense of place. To foster these efforts, communities can develop strategies and incentives to promote historic preservation and compatible infill development.

Monitoring Infrastructure

As development comes, new infrastructure is going to have to be built to support it. Citizens should take a keen interest in who will pay for these new services, and where they will be located. As new roads are planned in the Panhandle, it is important to make sure that they don't stimulate inappropriate de-

velopment through direct and indirect impacts.

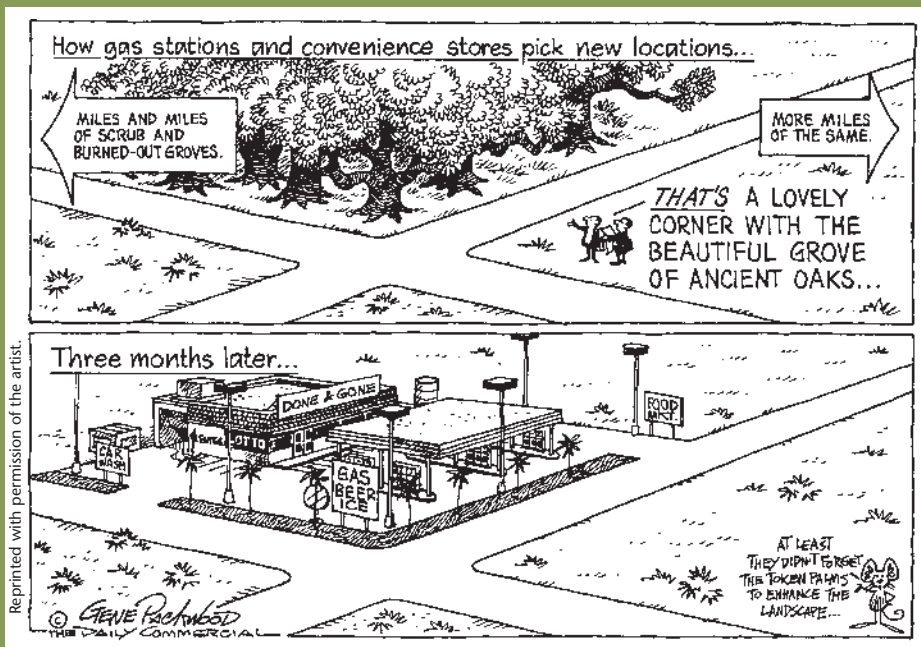
New residents will need water and sewer services. Existing water and sewer services should be monitored carefully, to make sure they are not stretched beyond compact urban boundaries. Septic tanks should not be located where they will impact sensitive waters.

Another critical piece of infrastructure is the local school system. Too often, elected officials allow new developments in places where schools are overcrowded. Or, conversely, new schools are built in outlying areas where they become magnets for more sprawling development. It's important for local governments and school boards to coordinate to encourage compact, orderly growth.

Planning Strategies for Sensitive D

It won't be possible to buy all the sensitive lands that need to be preserved in the Panhandle. That's where conservation planning strategies can make a difference.

As communities grow, citizens can urge their elected officials to use creative approaches to guide development so that it can complement conservation. Across the Panhandle, agricultural operations are already using so-called "best management practices," such as natural buffers to keep runoff from fouling rivers and streams. In developed areas, forward-thinking communities may turn to approaches like density transfers, traditional neighborhood design, and overlay zones.



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Local Planning

Strategies to protect natural resources can be integrated into all levels of the local planning process. The first level is the local comprehensive plan, which provides the legal foundation to direct a community's future growth. All local government land use decisions must be consistent with the plan and the future land use map. Planning and design strategies to promote more sensitive development should be integrated into the plan's elements, which deal with such issues as conservation, recreation and open space, sanitary sewer, potable water, stormwater management, capital improvements and intergovernmental coordination. Each element includes specific goals, objectives, and policies.

The second level to integrate protection strategies is through land development regulations, including ordinances that govern such things as zoning, subdivisions, stormwater, and environmentally sensitive land.

The final level is the development order, by which local governments approve or deny a specific project. Development orders can include zoning changes, variances, as well as subdivision and planned unit development plat approvals. Development orders must be consistent with the local comprehensive plan, and should include ways to protect sensitive natural resources.

Overlay Zones

Once a community has identified its sensitive areas, one way to add special protection is through

an "overlay zone" or "overlay protection district." Overlay zones are used to preserve a particular resource, regardless of the zoning that's already in place.

Overlay zones are adopted as part of a community's comprehensive plan and land-use map. Communities may use overlay zones as a way to acknowledge unique local features. An overlay zone might be used, for example, to guide development in a historic district. Overlay protection districts might protect natural features like coastal areas and springs.

Sector Planning

The Florida Legislature created a new "optional sector planning" program in 1998 to encourage more innovative planning for large developments — those with a minimum of 5,000 acres in one or more local-government jurisdictions.

A sector plan is an overlay designed to encourage new planning strategies such as compact, traditional neighborhood design and so-called conservation design, which provides large areas of public green space. The sector plan also should address ways to offset the sizeable impacts from such large developments. The sector overlay designates areas as urban, agricultural, rural, and conservation, and the plan includes detailed 20-year specific area plans for regions 1000 acres and larger.

Bay County and the St. Joe Company are planning a new community of unprecedented size in the Panhandle — 75,000 acres in the western portion of the County.

Bay County's *West Bay Sector Plan* is one of Florida's five sector planning pilot projects. Created through a partnership that includes Bay County, the St. Joe Company,

Planning Strategies for Sensitive Development

Deer Point Reservoir Protection Zone, Bay County

In the early 1990s, Bay County was concerned about increasing development around the county's primary water supply, Deer Point Lake. County officials wanted a higher level of protection than was afforded by restrictive zoning around the reservoir and protective watershed regulations. The county created a protection overlay zone around the reservoir and its tributaries. The overlay prohibits gas stations, landfills, and some farming activities. It also includes a 75-foot setback for buildings, a 100-foot setback for septic systems, a limit on impervious surfaces, and minimum requirements for vegetation.

Wakulla Springs Special Planning Area

Wakulla Springs is one of the most sensitive natural features of Wakulla County. Underwater cave divers have mapped the underground flow corridors which spread out from the springs, under homes, streets, and businesses. Those maps became the basis for the Wakulla Springs Special Planning Area, an overlay zone on the county's comprehensive plan. On top of the normal zoning in the area, the plan now requires "that the land development regulations be amended to protect water quality at Wakulla Springs, educate the public on water quality issues; regulate land uses which may adversely impact water resources; identify toxic and hazardous materials; and prohibit the discharge of pollutants."

and the Panama City-Bay County Airport and Industrial District, the 75,000-acre proposed plan includes a 4,000-acre international airport and industrial complex, 28,000 housing units for an anticipated 71,000 residents, a village center, and a business center. The plan calls for making half the land available for conservation.

The success of this ambitious effort, as well as the federal environmental impact statement being prepared, remains to be seen.

To Learn More:

Bay County Sector Planning at
www.westbayareavis.com

Florida Department of Community Affairs Sector Planning at
www.dca.state.fl.us/fdcp/DCP/sectorplans/Optsectpln.htm

Transfer of Development Rights

Often a community wants to conserve natural, agricultural, historic, or other open space areas while also encouraging development in its town center or other more urbanized area. This situation may call for the use of a special market-based, legal device that permits the voluntary “transfer of development rights” (TDR) from one location to another.

TDR programs allow landowners to transfer the right to develop one parcel of land to a different parcel of land. Generally, TDR programs are established in the local comprehensive plan and map, and carried out through local zoning ordi-

nances. TDRs may be used to shift development from agricultural or other sensitive natural areas to designated growth zones closer to municipal services. The parcel of land where the rights originate is called the “sending” parcel. When the rights are transferred from a sending parcel, the land is restricted with a permanent conservation easement. The parcel of land to which the rights are transferred is called the “receiving” parcel. Buying these rights generally allows the owner to build at a higher density than ordinarily permitted by the base zoning.

TDR programs use market forces and the profit motive to achieve conservation and prioritized development. And they require little public funds for land acquisition or condemnation. However, TDR programs are complex and administratively challenging. They require a strong commitment on the part of the local government to adhere to strong planning and regulatory controls, to educate its citizens, and to engage developers.

Notable TDR successes around the country include Montgomery County, Maryland, where approximately 40,000 acres of farmland and other open space have been permanently protected, and the New Jersey Pinelands, where a regional land use authority has protected more than 6,000 acres.

In crowded Palm Beach County, the county government pioneered a TDR program in 1980. As with other TDR program, Palm Beach created a “bank” of development credits from which developers could purchase the right to build or increase densities in the “receiving zone” that the county designated. The credit purchases compensated landowners in the

Planning Strategies for Sensitive Development

“The benefits of working landscapes are becoming increasingly well known. Forested lands and open space protect watersheds, filtering water as it seeps into the ground and providing buffers for rivers and streams. These lands provide critical wildlife habitat, supporting complex ecosystems that require large acreage. They also afford ‘countryside,’ the outdoors treasured by urban dwellers for all sorts of recreation, from camping to berry-picking. Yet the vast majority of this land is privately owned, and individual landowners bear much of the cost of maintaining its benefits for the rest of society. To survive and resist the pressures to develop their land, they need access to a resource-based economy that supports working lands; planning and zoning that preserves a critical mass of working land; and the cooperation of urban and suburban neighbors.”

Barbara Wells, *Smart Growth at the Frontier*

“sending zone” to be protected. The county has protected approximately 6,573 acres of significant natural land through the TDR program.

Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and an easement holder (a private land trust or government agency) that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect natural, scenic, or historic resources. The owner retains title to the underlying land, but agrees to give up some of the rights associated with it. For example, the owner might give up the right to build additional structures, while retaining the right to grow crops, cut timber, or graze cattle. Future owners are also bound by the terms of the easement. A conservation easement is often donated by the landowner, who may receive financial benefit from a tax deduction.

Conservation easements can protect critical hunting, fishing, or farming land at a minimal (or no) cost to the public. They can be used to establish buffers around environmentally sensitive lands or working landscapes, promote conservation while keeping land in private ownership and on the tax rolls, and ensure permanent protection of required open space in subdivisions or other developments.

Purchase of Development Rights

In other cases, landowners find it financially advantageous to sell a conservation easement. This is often done to protect agricultural, timber, or other

What is a Land Trust?

A land trust is a group of private citizens organized as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization to protect land for a variety of purposes, including parks, wildlife habitat, working farms and forests, and historic properties.

Land trusts typically accept donations of land or conservation easements on land. Land trusts also purchase land and manage it. As non-government organizations, land trusts work closely with private landowners who may not be prepared to negotiate with government agencies.

There are more than 1,200 land trusts operating in the United States, including more than 35 in Florida.

Red Hills Conservation Program

There are several active land trusts working in the Panhandle. They are excellent sources of information about private land conservation, and can help shape growth in your community.

The Red Hills Conservation Program of Tall Timbers Research Station works to protect one of the most precious eco-regions of the Panhandle, the Red Hills north of Tallahassee. It acquires conservation easements from willing landowners who donate the easements. Landowners benefit from tax savings, which can offset the pressure to sell out for development.

Working on properties ranging from 125 acres to 7,000 acres across both north Florida and southwest Georgia, the Red Hills Program has protected nearly 63,000 acres of hunting lands between Thomasville, Georgia and Tallahassee. The region's lakes, uplands, and water supplies are preserved, while landowners continue traditions of hunting and farming.

To Learn More:

The Land Trust Alliance, Washington, D.C., at 202.638.4725 or www.lta.org

Red Hills Conservation Program, Tall Timbers Research Station, Tallahassee, at 850.893.4153 or www.ttrs.org

Apalachee Land Conservancy, Tallahassee, at 850.222.5350 or www.apalacheelandconservancy.org

Bay County Conservancy, Panama City, at 850.785.0535

Planning Strategies for Sensitive Development



“working” lands. This is referred to as a “purchase of development rights” (PDR) in order to differentiate it from a donated easement. The development rights are bought and “retired,” not to be transferred elsewhere.

Because of the extent of working agricultural land and sensitive natural areas in the Panhandle, PDRs — as well as conservation easements — are likely to be more widely used in the future to protect threatened landscapes.

Some funding for PDRs is available from existing local dedicated funding sources in Florida, and through Florida Forever. The state has also enacted — but not yet provided funding for — a Rural and Family Lands Protection Act that focuses specifically on maintaining the agricultural land base in Florida and preserving the hydrological and biological benefits that come from protected forest land. One of its essential components is the purchase of PDRs on working lands.

The federal Forest Legacy Program supports state efforts to protect environmentally sensitive forest lands with PDRs by supplying as much as 75 percent of the cost of a forestland easement. At least 25 percent of the total funding must come from private, state, or local sources. In 2003, Florida formally applied to join the Federal Program and in 2004 the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ Visions of Forestry program will begin accepting applications for forest projects in Florida.

To Learn More:

Florida Division of Forestry at
850.488.4274 or
www.fl-ag.com.

**Florida Department of
Agriculture and Consumer
Services** at
www.doacs.state.fl.us.

Impact Fees

New development, particularly new residential development, rarely generates enough new tax revenue to pay for the services it requires. So some local governments sometimes charge “impact fees.” Also known as “connection fees,” impact fees are one-time charges placed on new development to offset the cost of new services, such as schools, police and fire protection, roads, water and sewer. These fees can be placed on residential, commercial, or industrial properties. In addition to helping pay for new government costs, impact fees also tend to encourage developers and planners to locate new development as close as possible to existing infrastructure. This can be a valuable incentive to protect sensitive natural resources in rural areas.

Design Strategies for Sensitive D

Good land-use plans for communities—and for the region—are the first step toward preparing for development. In areas that are going to be developed, smart design can make the difference between livable, vibrant neighborhoods and depressing, cookie-cutter sprawl.

In the Panhandle, smart design can help communities hold onto local flavor and preserve the gorgeous countryside that's here now. One key is to promote compact development, either by revitalizing town centers with infill development and redevelopment, or by clustering development on large parcels.



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Compact Development: Traditional Neighborhood Design

Ironically, while no one likes the look and feel of Florida’s sprawling developments, local governments often continue to use zoning and building codes that make it difficult, if not impossible, to create the kind of traditional communities and neighborhoods that people love. Workplaces and businesses are separated from residential areas, spelling doom for the walkable corner store and making efficient public transportation an impossibility.

“Traditional Neighborhood Design” attempts to recreate the kinds of intimate and livable communities that seemed to happen naturally before the imposition of zoning and other codes. Traditional Neighborhood Design features walkable neighborhoods with sidewalks, higher densities, attractive streetscapes, public spaces, and mixed residential and commercial uses.

The Panhandle has been at the center of “new urbanism,” a version of Traditional Neighborhood Design, since the Walton County town of Seaside was built in the early 1980s. Seaside has a town center, varying and attractive architectural styles, and houses oriented toward pedestrians and parks.

Seaside’s popularity exploded, a testament to many people’s yearning for vibrant towns instead of isolating sprawl.

Low Impact Design

Cutting-edge environmentally conscious builders are working to reduce the impact of development right at the site. Panhandle commu-

nities that have sensitive springs and coastlines might consider including some of the principals of low-impact design in local regulations. Low-impact design integrates green space, native landscaping, natural hydrologic functions, and other techniques to generate less runoff from developed land. Developers are encouraged to preserve sensitive features, through clustered development and other strategies, and to use the land’s natural capacity to clean runoff.

Low-impact design not only minimizes environmental impacts, but also saves money by addressing runoff close to the source. Developers save money because low-impact design reduces imperviousness (such as road widths) which reduces stormwater runoff. Low-impact designers avoid impacts rather than mitigate them, and emphasize simple, nonstructural, low-tech and low-cost methods.

In one type of low impact development, stormwater is allowed to infiltrate into the soil or evaporate, helping to maintain the site’s hydrology and reduce stormwater pollutants. The retention areas, sometimes called “rain gardens” allow plants and soil to trap and treat petroleum products, metals, nutrients, and sediments. Integrated into a site’s landscaping, rain gardens are relatively inexpensive to build, easy to maintain, and add aesthetic value to a site. What looks like a nicely-landscaped area is in fact an engineered system for the storage, infiltration, and biological removal of pollutants. Low-impact designers find beneficial uses for stormwater, rather than exporting it as a waste product down storm sewers.

In exchange for using low-impact design, communities can offer developers the

Design Strategies for Sensitive Development

chance to develop more of their site, since large areas don't have to be set aside for stormwater retention facilities.

Large Lot Zoning

Local zoning ordinances and development standards control both the size and the use of individual parcels of land (residential, commercial, industrial, etc.), as well as the shape and size of buildings. Zoning can be a tool for well-planned communities, and it can also cause sprawl.

“Large-lot zoning” limits the total number of housing units on a particular parcel. The resulting low density — commonly one house for every 10 or more acres — can buffer rivers and streams, watersheds, and stands of trees from the impacts of development. Limiting the number of houses also reduces the amount of impervious surface, allowing the natural absorption of rainwater.

On the other hand, large lot zoning can cause development to spread out, consuming more and more land. This type of development costs more in taxpayer dollars, as new roads, schools and other infrastructure are built to serve it. The resulting sprawl undermines a sense of community and reduces residents' quality of life by wasting land, money and natural resources.

Cluster Development

One alternative to large-lot zoning is to cluster houses. Cluster development, or “conservation design,” creates new development that is

more compact than conventionally zoned development.

A cluster development embraces two seemingly contradictory goals — building to a parcel's highest allowed density, and conserving as much of the property as possible as protected open space. The developer and permitting government agree to cluster the houses in one part of the property, decreasing the open land around each individual house but resulting in the same average density for the property as a whole. But even this approach can promote sprawl if it is not located properly in relation to other land uses.

Home buyers consider the park-like open space an amenity, and developers can increase the price they charge over traditional developments. The contiguous open space is beneficial to wildlife, reduces stormwater runoff, and creates gathering-places for picnics, festivals, and community celebrations. The open space created by clustering should be coordinated across jurisdictions to maximize opportunities for habitat, recharge, and recreation.

The open space should be permanently protected through conservation easements or a conveyance to a land trust, local government, or other appropriate agency. This kind of development requires cooperation among the local government, the developer, environmentalists, and residents. Okaloosa County, for example, allows certain building densities within cluster developments but also controls the total number of rural acres being developed.

What is “smart growth”?

The National Governors Association, representing the nation’s 50 elected state chief executives (www.nga.org) has adopted the following ten objectives of “smart growth”:

1. Strengthen and encourage growth in existing communities
2. Include mixed uses
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
4. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas
5. Provide a variety of transportation choices
6. Foster walkable, close-knit neighborhoods
7. Take advantage of existing community assets
8. Promote distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place, including the rehabilitation and re-use of historic buildings
9. Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions
10. Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost-effective

To Learn More:

The Smart Growth Network, created by environmental and preservation groups, developers, and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), addresses community concerns about new ways to grow the economy, protect the environment, and enhance community vitality. (www.smartgrowth.org)

Grow Smart America, a nonprofit group, helps private and public groups and individuals engaged in promoting and affecting smart growth in their communities by providing information on policies and programs. (www.growsmartamerica.org)

The American Planning Association has written model smart growth planning and zoning legislation that prevents sprawl, protects farmland, promotes affordable housing, and encourages redevelopment. (www.planning.org/growingsmart/index.htm)

The National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education at the University of Maryland offers academic programs and training in growth management and land use. (www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/)

Design Strategies for Sensitive Development



Buffering Sensitive Features

Communities can protect sensitive landscapes by requiring buffers of undeveloped strips of land. Buffers stabilize soil, slow down stormwater and help control pollutants like nutrients and pesticides.

Buffers can help protect the Panhandle's rivers, lakes, marsh lands, and rare features like steepheads. In the long run, it is cheaper to protect sensitive waters from pollution than it is to clean areas up later on. Consider the billions now being spent to clean up the Everglades.

The Florida Springs Task Force, a group formed to advocate for the protection of Florida's vast network of fresh-water springs, recommends a 100-foot buffer around the sinkholes and springs which dot the Panhandle, because they connect to our underground water supply.

For years, forestry companies throughout the Panhandle have used buffers to protect waterways, and also to provide a visual screen along roadways when it's time to harvest trees. Park planners used buffers along the Wakulla and Leon Sinks Trail, seven miles south of Tallahas-

see. The trail lies within the Apalachicola National Forest, and has more than a dozen dry and wet sinkholes in the longleaf pine flatwoods and hardwood hammocks. To protect the springs, planners created a series of loop trails, each about three to four miles wide. The trails are permeable, made of hard-packed dirt and boardwalks, to protect the springshed from contamination.

To Learn More:

Protecting Florida's Springs: Land Use Planning Strategies and Best Management Practices, Florida Departments of Environmental Protection and Community Affairs and 1000 Friends of Florida, available at www.1000friendsofflorida.org under "Publications."

Toward Regionalism

There has never been a more critical time for the Panhandle to begin to work together as a regional force. Today's government boundaries chop up the 16-county stretch from Pensacola to Monticello into a mish-mash of regulatory jurisdictions for environmental, economic, and planning programs.

But with so much undeveloped Panhandle land being converted from timberland to residential and commercial development, it is important for citizens to develop a regional vision, and to pay attention to happenings in the other sixteen counties. A regional vision can help make sure that development in one county doesn't overwhelm the services of a neighboring county.



Taking the First Steps

With growth coming, Panhandle communities need to join together and ask three key regional questions:

- What lands are at risk for development in the next decade?
- Where should new development be concentrated for greater density and land-use mix?
- Where should transportation improvements be focused to promote increased density and development while reducing vehicle miles traveled?

When a new development is proposed, Panhandle citizens should ask whether it will move the community toward common goals — goals that will bring jobs but also respect the region’s heritage.

Developing Goals

Here are some goals which might be particularly suited for the Panhandle:

- Protect the quantity and quality of Panhandle waters, both surface and underground.
- Sustain traditional natural-resource based industries such as commercial fishing, shellfishing, farming, and forestry.
- Provide outstanding opportunities for outdoor recreation, including sport fishing, hunting, hiking, kayaking, wildlife watching, and canoeing.
- Protect sufficient habitat for the entire diversity of species native to the region.

“The re-animation and rebuilding of regions as deliberate works of collective art is the grand task of politics for the coming generation.”

Lewis Mumford,
The Culture of Cities,
1938

Toward Regionalism

“There was no single crisis here; rather we were seeing the consequences of thousands of small decisions made by balkanized local governments. Each might be acting in ways that made sense to themselves, but the result was rapid transformation. I’ve seen many natural resource areas in California absorbed and transformed by huge megalopolises. Doing something about this has become my passion....We try to send the message that there are win-win opportunities that you can achieve at the regional scale, that you can’t achieve community-by-community. In the Central Valley, the tradeoff is between short-term wealth creation vs. maintaining the agricultural economy. But there’s a human side to why you do this – which revolves first around community, and then around preserving agricultural land.”

Carol Whiteside,
executive director,
Great Valley Center,
Modesto, California

- Insulate military bases and their traditional air and water corridors from encroachment and to buffer military operations from other land uses.
- Support eco-tourism.
- Create an attractive environment for investment in new and restored communities, including second and retirement homes.
- Create an attractive environment for investment in new business recruitment and development.
- Avoid or mitigate damage from flooding and storms.
- Retain the historic quality and character of the region.

Every development proposal should be considered within the context of those goals. If it doesn’t fit, it is time to ask hard questions about whether it will benefit — or harm — the Panhandle region.

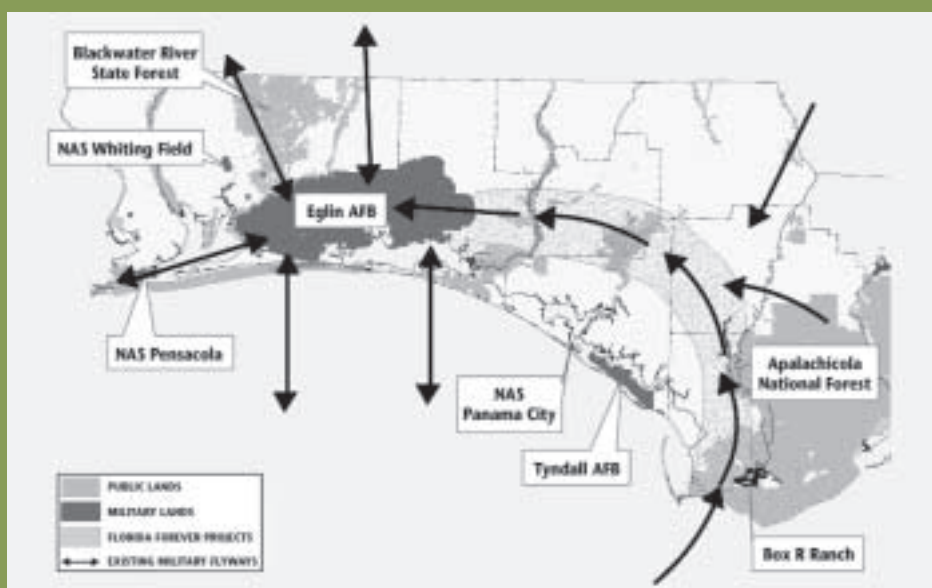
The Northwest Florida Greenway

In 2003, Florida joined with The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Department of Defense to establish the area's first regional greenway: The Northwest Florida Greenway. The project creates 100 miles of open space stretching from the Apalachicola National Forest and waters of the Gulf of Mexico to Eglin Air Force Base. The undeveloped land will provide a refuge for Panhandle plants and animals, as well as serve as a buffer for military installations.

The 750,000-acre corridor spans six counties and follows the flight path of military aircraft on training and testing exercises. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, military services, The Nature Conservancy, University of West Florida, and Okaloosa County are partnering to establish the greenway.

Conceptual Plan

Courtesy of Florida Department of Environmental Protection



Note: This is a conceptual map used only for preliminary planning purposes. Property owners are not required to participate and may request to have their property removed from consideration.

Toward Regionalism

“Rural America demands leadership, and there are those who will lead, not out of a thirst for power, but out of necessity...These are people who take responsibility for themselves, for their community, and for their society...At times, it seems that these people lead against long odds. But it is precisely at such times that they best demonstrate what they stand for and what they are—people of principle.”

Marty Strange, The Center for Rural Affairs

A Call to Action

In times past, it wasn't that critical for the 16 counties in the Panhandle to spend time working together. But now, developers are marketing the region as never before, under the new name of “Florida's Great Northwest.” (See www.floridasgreatnorthwest.com). As developers attract more people and businesses here, it is important for Panhandle residents to be clear about what they do want for the future, as well as what they don't want.

Citizens across the Panhandle should begin to make regional connections as well. Citizens evaluating a new development proposal in Franklin or Leon Counties, for example, would be wise to consult with citizens evaluating ones in Gulf or Bay counties. By working together, by paying attention to where roads and schools go, and reviewing what sort of neighborhoods are being proposed, the citizens of the Panhandle have a chance to design their own future. Growth is coming. It is time for citizens to help guide it.

To Learn More:

1000 Friends of Florida at 850.222.6277 or www.1000friendsofflorida.org

The Apalachee Regional Planning Council, Blountstown, at 850.674.4571 or www.thearpc.com (covers Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Jackson, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, and Wakulla Counties)

The West Florida Regional Planning Council, Pensacola, at 850.595.8910 or www.wfrpc.dst.fl.us (covers Bay, Escambia, Holmes, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton, and Washington Counties)

Apalachee Ecological Conservancy at 850.926.7439 or www.apeco.org

Apalachicola Bay & Riverkeeper at 850.670.5470 or www.abark.org

South Walton Community Council at 850.314.3749 or www.southwaltoncc.org

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