

Toward A Sustainable Future: Alternatives for Southwest Florida Reconnecting Lee

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Reconnecting Lee County is an informal, ad hoc association of private and public sector individuals focused on connecting communities through a range of transportation and transit-oriented development options to accommodate future growth through a strong and sustainable economy and a well-protected natural environment. Reconnecting Lee County's principal concern is laws, regulations and codes at the county or municipal level that would enable a shift from a 20th century to a 21st century land-use paradigm that would result in more liveable communities. Nonetheless, many regional and state regulations also deserve reexamination. As we move into the next decade, one fact has emerged with crystal clarity: the development model currently being implemented throughout Southwest Florida is unsustainable.

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On a global basis, buildings produce 43% of all CO₂ and consume 48% of all energy. Transportation accounts for 33% of all CO₂ in the U.S. currently and is growing. Since 1980, the number of vehicle miles traveled has grown three (3) times faster than the Country's population. Our land is being developed three (3) times faster than what could be anticipated by population growth alone.

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Lee County has been one of the fastest growing places in the nation and, the current economy notwithstanding, our growth will resume at some point. Current projections suggest that we will need to accommodate another half million people, or more, in the coming 20 years. This is one of the most compelling reasons to make this the place we want it to be rather than the place we are sorry it became. Urban sprawl is manifest in Florida: the Fort Myers – Cape Coral

metropolitan area is ranked 165th out of 271 metropolitan areas in sprawl characteristics; Naples is ranked 134th; and Punta Gorda is 194th. Sprawl characteristics are increasing in Southwest Florida, as a region, faster than any other part of Florida.

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Transportation is the second largest expense for American households, costing more than food, clothing, and health care. Even before the recent run-up in gasoline prices, Americans spent an average of 18 cents of every dollar on transportation, with the poorest fifth of families spending more than double that figure. The vast majority of this money, nearly 98 percent, is for the purchase, operation, and maintenance of automobiles. Drivers spent \$186 billion on fuel last year, and without improvements to fuel economy, Americans will spend an estimated \$260 billion in 2020 on gasoline.

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This high cost is unavoidable for those who live in sprawling areas that lack sidewalks, bike lanes, and convenient public transit. Incomplete streets leave many commuters with no alternatives. Families living in auto-reliant environments, such as Houston, spend an even larger percentage of their household income on transportation, about 20 percent. In communities with more transportation options, costs are as low as 14 percent. A 2-person adult household using public transportation, for example, saves an average of \$6251 annually as compared to the same household using only automobiles for transportation.

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In the South, between 1982 and 1997, land was consumed 3 times faster than population increased. Over the last 25 years vehicle miles traveled has increased 4 times faster than population and twice as fast as the number of private vehicles. These disparities are not sustainable under any projections.

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Roads, however, are but one manifestation of the challenge facing Southwest Florida. Imagine Lee County with 600,000 more people and our roads with that many more cars. Imagine the increase in taxes, impact fees, tolls and the cost of doing business just to pay to build and maintain all those roads. Imagine the destruction that a vast array of new roads will cause to the natural environment, one of the main reasons that people choose to relocate their businesses and families here. Imagine a quality of life harmed each day by excess pollution and traffic congestion.

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The 2001 National Household Transportation Survey found that 48% of all trips in metropolitan areas are three miles or less and 28% of all metropolitan trips are one mile or less – distances easily traversed by foot or bicycle. Yet 65% of trips under one mile are made by automobile, in part because of incomplete streets that make it dangerous or unpleasant to walk, bicycle, or take transit.

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It is Reconnecting Lee's position that a change in the development paradigm for Southwest Florida must be implemented. By facilitating a compact urban form we can realize a 20% savings in average energy use for each and every household in SW Florida.

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If we cannot begin the retrofit of our communities, it will be impossible to construct enough lane-miles to provide road capacity for our existing and anticipated population. Road building has provided mobility for our rapidly growing community, and we are fortunate to have competent agencies overseeing these programs. However, a shift in our thinking is now needed to allow an accommodation for the next wave of growth. Multimodal transportation planning will increase both cost effectiveness and the numbers of persons who

need to move about with ease and comfort. Better integration of land use and transportation planning will enable land uses that accommodate future growth while preserving our natural resources, keeping our property values growing, and maintaining our quality of life.

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As part of a new way of thinking, we must recognize that simple solutions are unlikely to address the challenges that are facing SW Florida. The option of adding lane-miles to a given roadway, while initially attractive, cannot solve the problems that face us. Increased capacity leads to higher speeds, more frequent travel, and longer trips.

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Studies in California, for example, show that the addition of a single lane-mile of capacity can add more than 12,000 additional vehicle miles traveled to a road network.

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The Texas Transportation Institute has found that increased roadway capacity resulted in **no** reduction in congestion, anywhere it studied. Their study concludes that it appears impossible to even maintain a constant road congestion level through the addition of capacity. Increased network capacity alone cannot address the challenges facing SW Florida over the coming decades.

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Each of us can play an active role in helping to facilitate transformation in our perceptions of our built and un-built environment, changing our decisions regarding growth and development into outcomes that promote an attractive, enduring Lee County where people of all walks of life enjoy a comfortable sense of place. Creative thinking can bring a more prosperous tomorrow. All of our decisions about where and how we grow, develop, and re-develop are

interconnected. We need to start looking for solutions that go beyond simple capacity, and address the underlying urban form that we have created.

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It is critical that responses to the challenges of development and re-development be based upon a multiplicity of data and analysis. Isolated responses, such as the simple concurrency-related capacity calculation of a facility's level of service, may address one aspect of the issue at hand – infrastructure demand – but ignore the consequences – urban sprawl. On balance, the failure to consider the entirety of the system, the complete urban landscape and the need to create an efficient public infrastructure, yields contrary outcomes. Functional responses, however, consider the overall system in all of its complexity, the linkages between the discrete parts of the system, thresholds of service and eventual transformation to alternative modes of service, and the cycles of growth, investment, and re-development that exist in every growing urban area.

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The functional response to development creates a new set of standards for looking at development and re-development. Future evaluation of development needs to consider how it creates **less** of a need for vehicular travel, not more. It should create a smaller ecological footprint and encourage options for renewable energy. Re-development of existing sites, 'grayfields', should be encouraged. It is necessary to increase the range of housing choices such that we are not creating suburban style subdivisions that press into wildlands. Interconnectivity between neighborhoods must be encouraged and, if necessary, created. We must decentralize our civic spaces, physical as well as virtual, to provide greater access to our residents. Overall, we must facilitate the creation of polycentric development nodes, reinforcing community centers and densification of our suburban landscape.

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There are specific strategies to be pursued immediately. We can undertake, as part of the EAR process and the evolution of our land development regulations, an initiative to encourage retrofitting our suburban landscape. We can remove restrictions on densification and clustered, mixed-use development. We also need to encourage the redevelopment of suburban features such as strip malls, inefficient linear commercial development, old industrial parks and tract housing. We can replace underperforming asphalt and assist in the evolution of bedroom suburbs to employment and service nodes. Removing the barriers to sustainable development will mean re-education so that as a community we do not fear change, but rather embrace it as an opportunity to re-invent our urban environment. Most importantly, we must begin now to prepare for the opportunities of mass transit and transit oriented development.

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Innovations such as ‘road diets’ have had a clear impact on travel patterns. In 1999, Valencia Street in San Francisco was converted from a four-lane road to a three-lane road with a center turn lane and bicycle lanes. One year after the conversion, a study by the city found that bicycle volume increased 144% on Valencia Street during the afternoon peak period; collisions decreased. A similar road diet on Edgewater Drive in Orlando resulted in a 23% increase in pedestrian traffic, a 30% increase in bicycle traffic, and automobile travel delays increased by only 10 seconds during the morning peak.

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Retrofitting suburbia may be uniquely applicable to Lee County. Rather than a single core city, we have a number of existing and emerging urban concentrations and employment centers. With the physical barriers created by our rivers and wetlands, a hybrid and polycentric model provides a reasonable alternative to the sprawl patterns of the past. By encouraging densification, retrofitting corridors into complete streets, promoting mixed use structures, encouraging and

preparing for transit options, reliance on local goods and services, and creating form based codes we can facilitate the formation of urban nodes that will, in turn, promote the evolution of alternate transportation options, transit corridors, and information access nodes.

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Looking at residence concentrations and employment concentrations, the evolution of these polycentric nodes can be seen. Residential concentrations in Cape Coral, North Fort Myers, Central and South Fort Myers, Lehigh Acres, San Carlos Park, and Bonita Springs are all identified. Lesser concentrations on Sanibel, Fort Myers Beach, and Iona are also apparent. Employment concentrations occur along U. S. 41 and again along Metro Parkway, with other areas along Del Prado, Pine Island Road, in Estero, and Bonita Springs.

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From just this data, a pattern of transit potential corridors can be seen. The pink line represents the Seaboard Coast Line railroad, probably the single greatest asset for future transit development available. Other potential corridors exist, however, connecting the residential concentrations to the employment corridors. Securing these corridors and promoting transit oriented development along them is a critical challenge for the County's future.

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And that future can extend to the region at-large. Extensions along the SCL corridor can connect Punta Gorda to the north and Naples to the south for a true regional mass transit system.

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But, we must act now to preserve our options for the future. Unless we lay the foundations for the alternate use of our resources, we will be stuck with the impossible to sustain suburban development model that has characterized SW Florida for the last five decades. Our local government must plan and prepare for

transit oriented development. We must begin to provide incentives for development that is not dependent upon private automobiles. This means increased densification, restricting the use of infrastructure to support suburban types of development, and the incentivization of low impact development and green design. On the private side alternatives to automobile dependency must be provided and re-development of strip centers and commercial corridors must be explored.

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All of these things must be pursued if we are to maintain the quality of life we have come to enjoy. Yes, our quality of life may be different in the future, but the only way to keep it at a comparable level is to utilize our resources more efficiently. Today most families spend far more on transportation than on food, and transportation costs continue to rise. One thing is clear from the study that has been done on capacity and vehicle miles traveled: capacity alone cannot provide the solution. To solve congestion, a systemic, functional solution must be pursued that involves all elements of the problem. Congestion is simply the manifestation of a larger and more fundamental problem. The challenge for Lee County will be to address this larger problem.

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Resilience is defined as the capacity of system to absorb change yet retain its essential form and structure. Reconnecting Lee believes that the current system demands can be met without eroding our capacity to meet future demands. However, current demands cannot be met indefinitely, and without a transformation to our suburban land form, we will all be ‘road kill’. We must seize the opportunity to re-direct our development paradigm and secure the assets and resources that will allow us to maintain our quality of life for future generations.