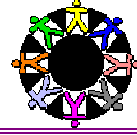


CONA COMMENTS



SARASOTA'S ONLY COUNTY-WIDE ASSOCIATION OF NEIGHBORHOODS
SINCE 1961

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Dr. Robert Kluson speaks on organic foods, healthier eating and sustainable agriculture at September 14 CONA meeting

Sarasota County Extension Agent Robert Kluson, PhD., will speak about organic foods, healthier eating and sustainable agriculture at CONA's September 14 meeting at 7 pm, at the Sarasota Garden Club, 1131 Boulevard of the Arts, Sarasota (Corner of US 41 and Blvd of the Arts). Members of the public and the media, as well as CONA members are invited to attend and ask questions.



County commissioners being asked to approve plan aimed at gutting traffic and development limits

"Multiple Projects Strategy"

By Dan Lobeck

Overdevelopment has harmed our economy, as the market is flooded with vacant houses, condos, offices and stores. The weakened economy has forced the Sarasota County Commission to cut library hours, law enforcement, mosquito control and other services in order to balance its budget.

Incredibly, however, the County Administration will ask county commissioners to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on staff, consultants and publicity in an effort to hugely increase the amount of development allowed on already overcrowded roads throughout the County.

Called the *Multiple Projects Strategy*, the plan to greatly intensify allowable density and intensity will only be possible by gutting the county's traffic "concurrency" rules to allow developers to add far more traffic to congested roads than is allowed today.

The *eleven locations proposed for intense development and traffic congestion*, which they are calling "hot spots that call for action", include Stickney Point and US 41, the Venice Bypass, Sarasota Square Mall, Fruitville East of I-75, Pine Street and River Road and corridors along Bee Ridge, Swift, Lockwood Ridge, Clark and SR 776.

Lobeck, continued on page 4.

Neighborhoods should be concerned: This issue of CONA Comments focuses on a possible return to the old boom and bust development strategy by county staff (see Dan Lobeck's article on the Multiple Projects Strategy), county commissioners (see article on elimination of 2050 Plan Requirements on page 4), Ann Kaplan's plea for reality based planning (page 2), and Bill Zoller's comments on the Hometown Democracy Amendment (page 3).

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Congratulations to new County Planning Commissioner Cheri Luehr!

At their July 22 meeting the Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners appointed long-time CONA supporter Cheri Luehr as Planning Commissioner. Cheri is a long-time supporter of sensible growth for Sarasota County.

Let's plan for reality, not wishful thinking

By CONA President Ann Kaplan

In the near future you will hear a lot of discussion from the county staff about changing the rules to allow for what amounts to **increased traffic congestion**, among other unnecessary evils. It will be cloaked in other words, such as "Multiple Projects Strategy" and will be presented as visionary planning for the future. Don't be fooled by the fancy planning titles. It's just another way of continuing the same old boom and bust cycle that gave us the current economic/real estate disaster!

Instead, what we desperately need is **practical planning** based on **REALITY!** That's **real** visionary planning. There are certain facts and human behaviors that we can count on that will **not** change. We need to take such realities into consideration when planning, instead of visioning in the hope that things will change because we want them to or because we think they should change.

For example, most people who live in and visit Sarasota County will **NOT start riding buses** or other public transportation unless they don't have a car or other means of a ride. They will **NOT start riding buses** just because it may be good for the environment or because the bus stops near their home or runs frequently.

County residents and visitors will **NOT start riding their bikes or walk** to the places where they normally take their cars. One of many reasons for this is that Sarasota County's population is one of the oldest in the country and many of them can't walk or ride bikes that far. In this community more people use their cars for shopping and entertainment than they do for work because most are retired. Also, locations, including employment, are spread out all over the county and it would be totally impractical to try to use public transport to go from home to multiple locations and back, which is usually the case for most car trips. **These are simply facts that fly in the face of major bus system expansion here and doom it to failure.**

The reason people ride buses/public transportation (other than that they don't have a car) is because they live in large, dense **employment** centers like New York City and it's the only practical way to get to work or around the city. Parking a car is too expensive and the buses run on almost every street. Those who can afford it take taxis (that also sit in traffic) because they consider it preferable to public transportation.

Kaplan Continued middle next column



Rendering of what Sarasota might look like after new "smart urban" growth planning.

Kaplan, continued

In fact, buses are the least desirable form of mass public transport because they sit in the same traffic as cars and taxis. The subway or a monorail are, by far, the fastest and most practical forms of transit. Maybe we should work on a subway or monorail system for Sarasota!

Sarasota County is **neither a big, condensed city, nor** a major employment center and parking a car is not a cost prohibitive situation. While I'm sure we'd all like it to be a bigger employment center, it simply doesn't have the other criteria that contribute to a successful public transportation system. So why do some continue to try to shove this very expensive "unnecessary evil" down our throats? Some fast-growth boosters do it because they want to justify allowing more traffic on the roads than is currently allowed now (traffic concurrency). If this change is allowed then it opens the door for more dense development and puts them in favor with developers who they hope will offer them a better job.

I lived in Orange County, California which is rather similar to Sarasota County. There are many more jobs in Orange County but otherwise it's laid out similarly. Because they ignored concurrency, Orange County now has a **HUGE** traffic congestion problem of the likes you've never encountered unless you've lived there or someplace like it. People sit in traffic for hours every single day on the surface roads and the freeways even though there is a bus and rail system because it is simply **NOT** practical for them to use public transit. Why: Because it is **NOT** a condensed city with prohibitively expensive parking, which is the requirement for successful public transit.

I urge county commissioners to look at up-coming staff proposals such as the "Multiple Projects Strategy" with a critical eye to separate "wishful thinking" from **real world facts** and plan accordingly!



Community Thoughts.... By Bill Zoller

Hometown democracy anyone?

We have all seen videos of a building's demolition by planned "implosion"; the dynamite is set off, and in seconds, the entire structure falls down and a huge cloud of dust billows out from the collapse. The same thing has happened here with the collapse of the "house of cards" real estate Ponzi scheme. The dust is still billowing out over every facet of our community, and the cleanup will be long and messy.

As autumn begins, though, there are stirrings in county government. Comprehensive Plan amendments are being proposed by staff, and they will make their way through the process. As they do, we will need to be increasingly vigilant as to what the purpose and what the consequences of these amendments might be. CONA is already following and commenting on them. There may be a push to re-activate the growth machine under the guise of restarting the economy, and cloaked in the buzzwords of "good" or smart growth. There may be attempts to weaken concurrency standards in order to make it easier for development to take off again. In other words, the old mindset of grow, grow, grow may be alive and well here. The old dependence on "growth" instead of on other, more beneficent and sustainable economic activity, may die hard.

The recent proposed comp plan amendments to loosen 2050 Plan requirements for buffers (mainly) at the SMR Lakewood Ranch "Village" are a good example. SMR plead hardship and managed to get a 3-2 vote by the BCC to transmit the amendments to DCA (Barbetta, Mason, and Staub voting for, with Patterson and Thaxton voting against) (see related article page 4). CONA and several other groups have written to DCA opposing these amendments, and we hope that DCA will reject the amendments. Commissioner Thaxton was particularly eloquent in criticizing these amendments.

The Sarasota Citizens for Sensible Growth (CSG) county charter amendments overwhelmingly approved by the voters, have made it a little harder for really bad growth decisions to be made, but there are always creative ways to try to slip through or around limits; or, as in the case of the SMR Village, there are ways to get 3 votes. These are the things we need to pay close attention to as comp plan amendments and other county administration proposals and plans crop up once more.

Zoller, continued next column



Zoller, continued

Statewide, it also appears there are many out there champing at the bit to fire up the growth at any cost machine. If the citizens of Florida decide that they do not want to endure more years of incessant sprawl, higher taxes, and overdevelopment, proposed Amendment Four to the Florida Constitution may be the only answer.

A public interest group called Florida Hometown Democracy has managed, after a titanic struggle, to get this amendment on the November 2010 statewide ballot. Simply put, this constitutional amendment will put approval of comprehensive plan amendments for every city or county in the hands of the voters. Yep... every comprehensive plan amendment that reaches approval by the local government and DCA would have to clear the final hurdle of approval by the voters of that jurisdiction (you can read about this amendment by visiting www.floridahometowndemocracy.com).

Some say that Amendment Four would be impossibly cumbersome and expensive in requiring referenda on every amendment, *but Hometown Democracy makes the argument that the amendment would mean that the system would NOT be flooded with bad or ill-conceived proposals in the first place, inasmuch as the developer would know that the likelihood of voter approval would be very low.*

This would also mean, in all probability, that comprehensive plan amendments would be dealt with once a year or twice a year, at most. This would be a boon to citizens who grow weary of never-ending, it seems, hearings on these sorts of amendments.

In the long run, if Amendment Four passes in November of 2010, it could mean that our plans remain more stable and meaningful... more carefully crafted in the first place. They might even become a real, solid document... less and less subject to the whims of every developer seeking to enhance the value of a piece of ground simply by a few votes of a county or city commission. Sounds good to me!



County staff's proposed multiple projects strategy may give you a lot more of this.

Lobeck, continued from page one.

Anticipating opposition from neighborhoods and residents near these locations, the proposal calls for building support to "balance local pushback with regional constituency for benefits." Of course, those who benefit will mainly be big developers and those allied with them.

The staff proposal packaged as supposed "smart growth," calls for "Promotion ... that extra push that overcomes barriers" to the scheme. The promotion includes media contacts, publications, brochures, newsletters, a website, a speaker program and meetings all designed to "educate" the public and officials that overdevelopment and congestion are good for us. This all will be guided by a new Task Force of supporters of the scheme.

Making it clear that they want to accommodate developers rather than regulate them in the public interest, the Multiple Projects Strategy call for a focus on working with the developers and property owners at the chosen locations to "transition from a regulatory strongbox to a collaborative working relationship."

The presentation to the Commission by county staff will focus on gaining additional tax revenues if the intense developments are allowed. Not discussed will be the full costs to the County as well as the costs to our quality of life by increased traffic congestion and other adverse impacts from overdevelopment.

Let's hope our elected officials understand that past overdevelopment created our current economic problems and that the solution is not more overdevelopment. That's like saying gluttony will cure obesity. Let's not go back to that same old boom or bust cycle in Sarasota County once again.

Dan Lobeck is a Sarasota attorney with extensive land use law experience. The views expressed herein are those of Mr. Lobeck and do not necessarily represent those of CONA.

Is County's 2050 plan being destroyed by developer demands?

The Sarasota County Commission's Sarasota 2050 Plan was supposed to be a grand vision of what Sarasota County should look like in the future. Citizens were told it would mandate environmental conservation and new, smart growth development in eastern Sarasota County.

Two of the most important smart growth benefits for increased density in the 2050 Plan were preserved greenbelt buffers around each of the new eastern developments, called Villages, and the developers' preservation of certain environmental features such as broad and extensive greenways and internal roadways inside of buffers.

Sadly, on July 8, the County Commission voted 3 to 2 to amend the 2050 Plan to repeal those requirements for the first proposed Village, a huge 5,500-unit development east of I-75 and south of University Parkway. It also voted to replace a two-lane road through the development with a four-lane one.

After the vote, County Commissioner Jon Thaxton, said the County has "left the heart of the program" intended by Sarasota 2050 and destroyed the "balance" by which it allowed greatly increased densities east of the Interstate in return for measures to protect the public interest. Commissioners Staub, Barbetta and Mason voted to approve the developer demands to change the plan. Mason, who originally voted no, changed her vote after hearing from the developer's representative in a private conversation. Barbetta who before his election was against 2050 because it gave too much to developers, in voting for the changes said 2050 was too stringent. Only Thaxton and Patterson voted to protect the original 2050 requirements the public had been promised.

The approval of the amendment went against negative recommendations of both the County staff and County Planning Commission. The amendments are now at the state's growth management agency, the Department of Community Affairs, for review. It will then return for another public hearing and final vote of the county commissioners in a few months.

The developer demanded changes were opposed by CONA, the Sierra Club, Control Growth Now, the Audubon Society, ManaSota-88 and The Fruitville 2010Alliance. After review by the state, the proposed changes will come back before the county commission for a final vote.

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