

## County wants to change how we live, get around

**Developments would be more compact, and an express bus service would be a key component.**

By [Christopher Curry](#)  
Staff writer

Published: Sunday, September 5, 2010 at 6:01 a.m.

In Florida, living in a residential subdivision and getting around by automobile are a part of the state's identity - like college football and the palm tree.

Locally, Alachua County officials intend to make a sea change in this area's transportation and growth patterns. The end goal is a shift away from suburban-style subdivisions to more compactly built, walkable mixed-use developments that intermingle retail, residential and office, and go by planning terms such as "transit-oriented" or "traditional-neighborhood" developments.

Instead of getting behind the wheel to head to the job, the store or a restaurant, residents of these developments could either have these destinations in their neighborhood and within walking distance or get to them by a new mode of transportation - the planned express bus service that Gainesville's Regional Transit System will operate.

The rationale is that this shift will reduce reliance on the automobile and, as a result, cut down on greenhouse gas emissions, protect pocketbooks from increases in gas prices and, with dedicated lanes for the express bus system, provide an alternative to driving along congested routes such as Archer and Newberry roads.

What remains to be seen is if there will be enough buy-in from developers and residents to see the county's plans through.

For many, giving up the car keys to ride the bus would be a significant lifestyle change.

As Luis Diaz, developer of the mixed-use Town of Tioga community on Newberry Road, pointed out, the ability to get anywhere one wants by automobile is essentially an unwritten freedom in the "American Bill of Rights."

"People love their cars," he said.

That said, there is, at this point, interest among developers in this move toward transit-oriented, mixed-use developments. At a time when county growth management director Steve Lachnicht describes Alachua County's residential growth as "anemic," with 15 to 20 residential permits issued monthly, four sizable projects - SpringHills, SantaFe Village, Newberry Village and, most recently, Celebration Pointe - have been submitted under this new planning blueprint.

Combined, they could contain more than 6,000 residential units when built out, a process likely to take decades. They would also be the linchpins for the development of bus rapid transit system in the urbanized area just outside Gainesville's city limits.



That planned segment between the area of the Northwest 39th Avenue and Interstate 75 interchange and The Oaks Mall would include Santa Fe College and SpringHills, SantaFe Village and Newberry Village.

The developers of those communities would be required to build transit stops and lanes within their developments, put funding toward the construction of the larger system and contribute to the bus rapid transit operation for approximately 15 to 20 years.

David Coffey, the land-use attorney representing all the proposed projects except Celebration Pointe, expects the public to buy into bus rapid transit out of necessity if not preference.

"They do (love their cars), but they hate being stuck in traffic," Coffey said. "There is no realistic scenario where there will be road capacity for the trips that will be out there. ... It is not realistic to widen roads. Plus, our community will not tolerate it and thankfully so. More importantly, we have learned it doesn't do any good even if you do it."

Alachua County's and Gainesville's shared plan is a bus rapid transit system with the University of Florida at its heart - a system with routes branching off toward areas that include Jonesville, downtown, east Gainesville, the airport, The Oaks Mall and Santa Fe College. The plan also includes streetcars for the downtown and midtown areas.

The current projected cost for the full bus rapid transit system through Gainesville and unincorporated Alachua County just outside the city limits is \$200 million, a figure that is in the process of being revised, said Marlie Sanderson, with the Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization.

Development of the system is projected to be approximately a decade away.

"It will take years and several phases of these projects to be built," Lachnicht said.

Currently, Gainesville's Regional Transit System is seeking \$500,000 in federal funding to complete a feasibility study that is required in order to seek federal grant funding to go toward the system, RTS spokesman Chip Skinner said.

The current estimate of the construction costs for the first leg, which will be primarily within the city limits, is \$37 million, Skinner said. If federal grant money is secured, local funds will still have to cover half of that, he said.

Adam Bolton, president of residential development company Robinshore Inc. and the former president of the Builders Association of North Central Florida, said the county's new policy focusing on mixed-use developments and transit could assist some projects in moving forward. That's because the policy includes a plan to do away with state traffic concurrency requirements in a designated "urban service area" - a 16,195-acre swath of unincorporated Alachua County west of Gainesville.

Under concurrency, developers were required to contribute a "proportionate fair share" for new road construction and road widening projects deemed necessary to accommodate the increased traffic from their project.

If a roadway segment, such as Archer Road east of I-75, could not realistically be widened, developers would still pay the projected cost to do so and that money would go toward other road projects intended to provide alternate routes and ease congestion, said Jeff Hays, the county's senior transportation planner.

Complex, complicated and steeped in planning jargon, traffic concurrency and its the financial obligations made many projects "cost-prohibitive," Bolton said.

An example of that came with the former development plans for SpringHills. Planned on all four corners of the I-75 interchange at Northwest 39th Avenue, developer Pennsylvania Real Estate Investment Trust's required contribution for road projects under plans the County Commission denied in 2007 would have been \$58 million.

In addition to doing away with traffic concurrency in that designated "urban service area," county government's plan would, if the state approves, also do away with the Florida Department of Community Affairs' review of large-scale developments that meet the threshold to be a Development of Regional Impact.

"It gives us more flexibility because we're less beholden to other agencies," Lachnicht said of the planned changes. "We're acting more independently."

Lachnicht said the new policy would make the development application process less cumbersome and would allow the county to have developers put more transportation project money toward bus rapid transit and the broader road network instead of just road stretches adjacent to their developments.

For the most part, the county will require that any development of 150 residences or more proposed along a future bus rapid transit corridor be developed as a transit-oriented development - with a mix of residential and retail infrastructure constructed to support the bus rapid transit system.

Off transit corridors, any development of at least 300 homes would be considered a "traditional-neighborhood" development, which has similar mixed-use development patterns, with pedestrian and bicycle paths, higher densities toward the center of the project and regulations on such things as the number and location of parking spaces and the number of drive-through lanes at banks.

Bolton questioned if the end result would be a viable product for developers to market. "The traditional neighborhood development concept is being applied universally to the Alachua County development regulations ... but there are many people that don't want to live that way," Bolton said.

Diaz, who began to develop Town of Tioga in 1994, commended the county for a "very, very ambitious plan" that attempts to get ahead of rising gas prices by promoting transit use and mixed-use developments.

Still, he said the plan will be a challenge to implement given the attachment many residents have to the automobile and to living in exclusively residential subdivisions instead of clustered townhouse or apartment units. "Some people do not want New York City-type density," Diaz said. "Just because you want to do 40 units an acre, doesn't mean people will accept it in those areas."

When it comes to proposed funding sources, Alachua County's plan heads into relatively uncharted territory for Florida.

This fall, county commissioners are expected to vote on a proposed multi-modal fee. That move would do away with the existing road transportation impact fee now charged on new development to fund road construction and replace it with a fee that is put toward road projects as well as transit and pedestrian and bike paths. Florida law provides for this fee but, at this point, it is not yet in place in any county. Lachnicht said several counties are in the process of implementing such a fee.

Another new wrinkle is the potential use of property taxes generated by new development. Under a Comprehensive Plan change commissioners sent off to state review on Aug. 10, the county could establish geographic districts in the urban area where these mixed-use communities are slated to be built.

When development occurs, a percentage of the property tax revenue generated would go toward road and transit projects instead of flowing into the general fund, the operating fund that pays for most county operations.

Department of growth management staff has proposed a test case district centered around Archer Road west of Interstate 75 - an area that includes the site of the proposed Celebration Pointe transit-oriented development.

Under staff's current proposal, a percentage of property tax revenues generated by new development - starting at 85 percent and gradually decreasing to 55 percent - would go toward transportation projects during the 10- year period from 2012 to 2022.

While the general fund has been most impacted by the county's financial tumult, with \$3.9 million in reductions expected for next fiscal year, growth management staff feel this proposed use of those property tax revenues for transportation would not place a financial burden on other county operations.

They cite a Sarasota County study that concluded the type of mixed-use development Alachua County is now encouraging generated far more property tax revenue per acre than strictly residential or retail growth.

The study showed that low-rise (three-stories or less) mixed-use developments in Sarasota County generated more than \$70,000 per acre. By comparison, a large mall generated nearly \$22,000 per acre and single-family growth topped out at \$8,200 per acre, the study showed.

"This is a higher-quality development both initially and long term," Lachnicht said. "Long term, you see a much higher tax-generating property."

The model for the local bus rapid transit system is not any multimillion population metropolis. Instead, it is the metro area of Springfield/Eugene, Ore. - a college town with a population of approximately 250,000 that has, for years, pushed for alternative forms of transportation such as bus rapid transit and bicycle and pedestrian pathways.

In Springfield/Eugene, the first four-mile leg of the bus rapid transit system opened in January 2007, with construction costs of approximately \$6 million per mile.

Ridership has now reached 6,000 boardings a day and an extension of the system is under construction, said Stefano Viggiano, assistant general manager for the Lane Transit District, which operates the bus service.

Like the plan here in Alachua County, Viggiano said land-use planning plays a part in the transit system.

"It is tied into development plans," he said. "Both cities are developing mixed-use plans with intense developments built around these (transit) stations."

*Contact Christopher Curry at 374-5088 or [chris.curry@gvillesun.com](mailto:chris.curry@gvillesun.com).*