

## Impact fees help pay for growth

*By Eric Kopp, Okeechobee News*

Part 2 of 2

“Florida has reached its tipping point. We can’t continue what we’re doing in the next five to 10 years without serious ramifications.”

That statement came from Vivian Young, communications director for 100 Friends of Florida, about the anticipated explosion of growth and development around the state.

Ms. Young’s non-profit group released a study entitled “Florida 2060: A Population Distribution Scenario for the State of Florida” which states that if current trends continue the amount of urbanized land in the state will double by the year 2060.

The study predicts that roughly 7 million additional acres of Florida land -- or almost another 20 percent of the state’s land -- will be converted from rural to urban uses. This includes about 2.7 million acres of agricultural lands and another 2.7 million acres of natural habitat.

This study was prepared by the University of Florida’s GeoPlan Center.

The study also states that more than 2 million acres within 1 mile of existing conservation lands will be converted to an urban use and that the counties predicted to undergo the most dramatic transformation, in order, are: Glades, Hardee, DeSoto, Hendry, Osceola, Baker, Flagler and Santa Rosa.

Also, many areas in the state will be “built out” by the year 2060, or before.

In essence, the term build out means there is no land left to build on or develop.

If growth is allowed to continue uncontrolled, it is anticipated that the state’s population will go from 17,872,295 in 2005 to 35,814,574 in 2060.

“The big debate, statewide, is: how do you cover the cost of growth,” said Charles Pattison, 1000 Friends of Florida president. “We know a lot more today than we did 50 years ago, as to what growth costs us. As long as you set up the correct foundation, an impact fee is the way to go.”

Legally, he said, a developer can be required to pay every penny of the impact their development creates. All that’s needed is an ordinance to show how it is calculated.

“You can’t charge a developer more than their impact,” explained Mr. Pattison. “You can have impact fees for the sheriff, drainage -- almost any kind of service. Nothing is inappropriate.”

And this is exactly what counties such as Glades, Hendry and Okeechobee are doing. All have impact fees put in place that have the developer pay 100 percent of the costs.

George Long, county administrator in Okeechobee County, said the developer will not only be required to pay 100 percent of the costs, they will also have to pay a portion of the costs for off-site improvements -- such as road construction -- through impact fees.

“Park space, for example, if its needed to create a park space we would expect them to pay 100 percent of the park space,” said Mr. Long. “If turn lanes have to be constructed to facilitate residents getting in and out of the development, they should 100 percent of the cost.”

Mr. Long said fees will be based on the type of project. In the case of a road project, the developer would pay approximately 25 percent of the cost. Other funds would be used to pay for the remainder of the cost, such as the 5-cent gas tax that was recently approved by the Okeechobee County Board of County Commissioners.

He went on to say that law enforcement, expanded facilities and a portion of the planned communications improvement for the county will be paid for in part by impact fees. There is also an impact fee for fire protection in the county. This fee will also be used for an additional fire station and half of the communication system.

“In this case, impact fees will pay for 25 to 30 percent of those improvements,” said Mr. Long.

He added that some of the costs will be paid for by fire assessments.

In Glades County, developers will also have to pay 100 percent of the cost of the development through impact fees.

“Depending on what they build, it is \$8,000 for a single-family home,” said Larry Hilton, deputy county manager for community development.

He said costs are calculated on a square-foot basis and were put in place to keep the financial burden off of taxpayers.

Vince Cautero, planning and development director for Hendry County, said even though the developer pays 100 percent of the cost there is still some costs passed on to taxpayers.

“You always have residuals from developments -- such as health care, for an example,” he said. “The impact fee will defray the cost of the development but there is always residual effects to the taxpayers.”

Mr. Cautero said Hendry County currently has seven impact fees n roads, schools, law enforcement, public buildings, fire/EMS, libraries and parks/recreation.

In expectation of the population boom in Hendry County, Mr. Cautero said the county projects that most of the growth will be in Clewiston.

“Some may be annexed in,” he added. “LaBelle has been very aggressive in its anenxation issues.”

Even though his county is expected to swell from 39,000 to almost 80,000 by 2060, he feels there will still be some rural areas in Hendry County.

“I think there will be pockets of rural, where housing development is mixed with commercial,” he said. “We’re trying to promote compact development, have mixed uses and more creative types of development.”

In Glades County, Mr. Hilton said he wasn’t concerned about growth getting out of hand. It is projected that the population in Glades County will increase from 11,000 in 2005 to almost 18,000 in 2060.

“I think most of it will be in western Glades County,” he said. “Small towns can’t be more than 3,000 acres and we may end up with three or four of those, but they won’t be able to expand.”

However, when looking at developments like The Grove in Okeechobee County, Mr. Long is concerned about the future of his county.

The Grove is a project slated for the northeastern portion of the county that is anticipated to have up to 15,000 housing units on approximately 5,760 acres. The development is slated to be, for the most part, self-sufficient.

And with the size of the development and other projected growth, Mr. Long fears that Okeechobee County will be among the many counties in Florida that will build out.

“I think it’s certainly possible,” he said. “That’s why it’s particularly important that the community paint the picture of what they want the build out to look like as soon as possible. If their vision of the future isn’t accurately painted, and regulations aren’t developed, the very things that are valued most will be lost.”

He went on to say growth must be controlled and regulated so that it preserves what is best for the community.

“Nobody wants to see 700 miles of single-family homes, but it’s conceivable,” he said. “Open spaces must be preserved as much as possible. The build-out picture still has to be painted, but the community has to decide what it wants to look like at build out.”

The population of Okeechobee County is expected to increase from 38,491 in 2005 to 61,292 in 2060. However, that figure does not include The Grove, which may well add over 30,000 people to that total.

This is one reason why Mr. Pattison said people and local governments may have to just say no to new developments.

“People must make sure new towns pay for themselves or that rural areas are set aside,” he said. “Local government has all the authority in the world to say no, which seems to be harder and harder to do these days. It’s up to the local government to decide.”

If all the maps dealing with projected growth across the state become a reality it will have a major negative effect on the state, said Mr. Pattison.

“For the first time, after seeing these maps, people really do believe you can ruin this state with growth,” he said.