

Comp plan ponders major changes

The county may have 100,000 more homes within the next 25 years.

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Marion County planners looked two decades into the past to develop a vision of what the community will look like 25 years into the future.

The final outcome: a county that maintains, if not adds to, its inventory of rural lands and enhances protection of and appreciation for farming, especially of the equine variety.

Yet Marion, a generation hence, could also include 100,000 more homes - almost 75 percent of the current housing stock.

And some of that growth could appear sooner rather than later, since the county will ask state planners later this year to approve several projects that could add thousands of new homes in the near future.

Those were some of the highlights of the long-awaited update to the county's comprehensive land-use plan, or comp plan, which was provided to the County Commission last week.

The board took no immediate action on the report, which was begun with ideas gathered at a series of community meetings launched in March 2008.

Local governments must update their respective comp plans every few years. Marion County's plan expires this year.

The county, which was criticized not long ago by the state Department of Community Affairs, or DCA, for not looking far enough out in the previous update, has attempted to stretch the new time frame of the report, expanding it from 10 years to 25.

Several more meetings are scheduled to consider the plan - the next of which is set for July 8 - en route to the board forwarding the final product to the DCA at the end of the month for the agency's approval.

At this point, the revised comp plan indicates the staff planners' attempt to strike a balance between maintaining the character of a community largely built on agriculture by attempting to keep thousands of acres of rural lands as such, and the need for more economic development and their consultants' findings that Marion will need roughly 102,000 new houses by 2035 to meet the projected population increase.

To ensure much of rural Marion County remains rural, Growth Management Department director Jimmy Massey has recommended a slight expansion of the Farmland Preservation Area, or FPA, a zone that places restrictions on more intense development.

The FPA primarily spans northwestern Marion, stretching westward from Northeastern Jacksonville Road, just east of U.S. 441, to the Alachua and Levy county lines and southward toward the State Road 200 corridor.

Another avenue the county is taking is reclassifying hundreds of acres of vacant land that are now designated as Urban Reserve to Rural.

Urban Reserve was basically a holding designation that was granted in outlying areas where development was expected to eventually spread, but not specific to any particular type of land use. Massey is eliminating that category in favor of more specific designations for those properties.

Those lands lie primarily around Lake Weir, north of SR 200, in the Shady community immediately south of Ocala and near Dunnellon.

In an interview Tuesday, Massey said the change will remove the uncertainty about what might develop in such areas, while also making it harder for developers to argue that it was supposed to be urbanized.

Additionally, Massey said the county is discussing with the city of Ocala ways to expand its Transfer of Development Rights program, which allows developers to swap their land-use rights in rural areas for the ability to create projects of greater density closer to urbanized areas.

Another approach for the county, though in the future, would be to permit developers to exchange rights to build residential units for commercial and industrial projects.

The changes reflect what the planners and their consultants distilled from recommendations from the community - 36 pages of which are found in the newly proposed comp plan.

Frances Marino, one of the county's consultants, told commissioners last week that those suggestions led to the development of four main principles that guided the thinking on the new comp plan's provisions.

The first two of those were preserve and protect the county's natural resources and save the function and character of the community's rural sections by declaring an Equestrian Reserve Area.

According to a map in the new comp plan, that area might cover all of unincorporated Marion County exclusive of the Ocala National Forest, the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway and the cities within the county.

Marino explained to the commission that a key concern was safeguarding the unique soil that enabled the growth of the horse industry locally.

Massey, in an interview, added that the staff also wanted to keep "equestrian neighborhoods" of smaller horse farms as cohesive communities and to protect those horse farms that are scattered in urban areas from becoming prey to sprawl.

That move to strengthen the equine industry, however, also includes a proposed comp plan amendment that would create Equine Commercial Support Districts.

Such zones, according to the new comp plan, would range between 20 and 160 acres and allow a variety of uses - such as hotels, veterinary offices, restaurants and recreational vehicle parks - in an undefined proximity to facilities such as the Florida Horse Park that routinely host equine-related [events](#).

But the remaining two principles might stir people concerned about sprawl.

Marino suggested to the board last week that the county needed to continue the "logical extension" of the growth in the county's three main cities - Ocala, Belleview and Dunnellon - and to concentrate economic development in "key locations."

Part of the latter involves the county establishing special business districts known as employment activity centers and regional activity centers, which are larger versions of the former that cater to people across jurisdictional lines.

Ideally, the county wants to locate businesses, their services and job opportunities to outlying areas to relieve stress and congestion on existing urban areas.

Some of those projects, like a 318-acre business park on the McGinley family property near Marion Oaks, have been tentatively approved by the board.

The County Commission seeks permission from the DCA to add others in the future.

Some of those, according to the new comp plan, are slated for the Dunnellon-Marion County Airport, an area along the Belleview Beltway, On Top of the World and along I-75 in the north end of the county.

Despite the board's recent emphasis on sustainable and diversified economic development, a prominent feature on the 25-year plan is to add 101,964 new homes to the community - a possible boost to an industry hard hit by the recession.

Marino told commissioners last week that four ways to calculate how the county must deal with future population growth were considered: using projections from the state's population experts at the Bureau of Economic and Business Research, or BEBR, at the University of Florida; analyzing the number of building permits issued by the county since 1990; studying the actual population growth since the 1990 census; and averaging the other three methods.

The county, according to public documents, preferred to go by the number of building permits and opted for what was considered the most conservative alternative - although the BEBR projection was 68,546.

Tom Lewis, another of the county's consultants, wrote in a recent letter to the DCA that UF's analysts were very accurate in projecting out 15 years, but tended to come up short on growth estimates that went beyond that.

For example, Lewis wrote, Marion's population in 2000 was 26 percent above what BEBR had anticipated in 1975 that it would be come the turn of the century.

The county apparently has the capacity to handle that growth, according to the consultants.

Their report indicates that Marion County has 134,562 platted lots within major and smaller subdivisions as well as the Marion Oaks and Silver Springs Shores communities.

Marion also has another 34,065 vacant lots outside those areas that are designated for residential use, bringing the total to 168,627.

And the county appears set to getting a head start on reducing that number of future new homes.

The updated comp plan includes requests for DCA to approve a maximum of 8,525 new residential lots.

Some of those the board had already supported - sometimes years ago - but got held up when state planners objected to the approval of new residential lots without demonstrating an apparent need for them.

These requests are offered to the DCA now, Massey said, because state planners wanted to see how they fit in the context of the remodeled growth plan.