

FLORIDA GROWTH

Film explores Florida's suburban sprawl

A new documentary produced by Miami's public TV station concludes that Florida must find alternatives to suburban sprawl in order to enhance livability and restore a sense of community.



A shot of a gated community in the documentary 'Imagining a New Florida,' which will air at 8 p.m. Thursday.
WPBT-PBS 2

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As the economic crash slows sprawl to a crawl, Miami's public TV station has produced a documentary on urban development in Florida that asks what seems a pertinent question: Do we keep the march of the subdivisions going, or is it time to try something else?

The hourlong program, *Imagining a New Florida*, which airs Thursday on WPBT-2, comes down heavily for the latter option.

It concludes that we can't, don't really want to, and should not continue to churn out formulaic, disconnected subdivisions that the film's producers -- and virtually everyone interviewed in it -- contend are unsustainable and lack a cogent sense of community and place.

That message may not go down easy with many Florida audiences, especially those who have eagerly flocked to such subdivisions by the millions. But writer-producer Jack Kelly says he wants Floridians to think about what kind of future we're making for ourselves.

“The assumption is that just because you create a suburban tract that has 600 homes in it, that doesn't necessarily create a community in which people talk to each other, walk around and interact in,” said Kelly, WPBT-2's vice president of production. “If that's all we want, well that's fine. But we found that invariably people are looking for this idealized concept of a community that's small-town America, where kids can play outside and walk to the park and talk with your neighbors. And yet we don't have that. So the question we ask is, how do you create community in a state that's a poster child for sprawl? And what's community even mean?”

ONE POINT OF VIEW

Kelly concedes there is scant counterweight to that view in the documentary. The one developer interviewed is clearly no fan of sprawl. Producers tried but could not procure interviews with officials at the St. Joe Co., which is planning a mammoth urban development in the Panhandle, Kelly said.

The documentary is narrated by former Miami WPLG-Ch. 10 news anchor Dwight Lauderdale. It intersperses interviews with sprawl-skeptic historians, urbanists, planners like Miami's Andrés Duany, and former governor and U.S. Sen. Bob Graham with stunning high-definition aerial shots of Florida subdivisions and intensely urban places like Miami to make its case that:

- Absent an overarching vision or strategy, the state has been radically and thoughtlessly transformed by untrammled development since World War II -- “a joyride of growth,” as the documentary puts it.
- The “big bang” of suburban growth was, the documentary says, the result of deliberate policy decisions to encourage suburbanization of the nation, including affordable, federally guaranteed mortgages and federal highway construction, as well as the availability of abundant and cheap land and gas.

But Kelly said the goal of the piece was not so much to go over old ground as to suggest alternatives.

The \$200,000 film was underwritten by a grant from the Florida Humanities Council, which asked producers across the state to explore what the state might look like in 2030, when demographers expect its population to reach 24 million.

WPBT looked at the state as a whole, while stations in Tampa, Jacksonville and a couple of other cities investigated their communities (WPBT will show all five documentaries starting at 3 p.m. Sunday).

Kelly and his PBT crew spent a year criss-crossing the state in search of “what works and what doesn't,” he said.

What doesn't, he contends, are isolated or gated residential subdivisions, including artificial "retirement communities" that separate people geographically as well as by age and income while needlessly consuming land. Residents become utterly dependent on automobiles to get around big distances between home, work and shopping, contributing to the erosion of civic life, the film says.

What does work is a more complicated question, one the documentary doesn't try to answer definitively, though it concludes the template involves old ideas that we gave up because of the car: Walkable, compact, mixed-use communities, whether in small towns, retooled suburbs or big cities.

SOUTH BEACH

The documentary skips around the state to explore alternatives.

It winds up back at home with a familiar story, the South Beach redevelopment miracle, which author Brian Antoni describes as a close-knit if quirky urban community within the glitzy tourist district. "Mayberry on Ecstasy," Antoni calls it, probably something you won't find out in the 'burbs.



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