

# Let's devise a different plan for our future

By Pam Johnson, Special to the Star-Banner

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The staff of the Marion County Planning Department, a division of the Growth Management Department, has been working on an Evaluation and Appraisal Report (EAR) to update the current Marion County Comprehensive Plan. The Marion County Commission must approve this EAR before it is submitted to the Florida Department of Community Affairs for their approval.

Public meetings for experts, residents, landowners, developers and their representatives to express their opinions about the shape of the EAR are drawing to a close, and the Planning Department will now prepare a document that, in part, will recommend where new housing and businesses should be built in the future in Marion County.

The draft proposal the Planning Department has been working from, which appears on its website at [www.marioncountyfl.org/Planning/EARabout.aspx](http://www.marioncountyfl.org/Planning/EARabout.aspx), greatly expands the "urban service area" around the city limits of Ocala and adds nine new "employment-activity centers" scattered around the county to the existing 11 centers already identified in the old plan. Both the "urban service area" and the "employment-activity centers" would allow new businesses and high-density housing to be built.

The Farmland Preservation Area in the northwest part of the county is further reduced in the draft plan, and the Shady area south of Ocala stretching down to the Florida Horse Park is urbanized.

I propose that the Marion County Planning Department, the Marion County Commission, the Ocala City Council, businesspeople, landowners, nongovernment organizations and everyone who lives in or cares about the future of Ocala/Marion County take a few minutes to consider the benefits of a different plan. Let's have a long-range master plan that encourages building and rebuilding in the current city limits of Ocala, with perhaps some slight expansion for businesses along the Interstate 75 corridor close to the city.

Let's return the Farmland Preservation Area to where it used to be, along route County Road 225A, or better yet, move the line back to along Northwest 60th Avenue, then north and south to the existing line. And let's leave the Shady area, well, shady.

Think about the benefits of building high- and medium-density housing and new businesses where roads, sidewalks, power, water and sewer service, fire hydrants, stores, schools, parks, entertainment and government offices already exist. Ocala has a lot of empty space around town and has neighborhoods and commercial buildings in decline. We should find ways to encourage our ailing building industry to work at building a vibrant, appealing city, a place that will house people ready to work in businesses that will want to move to the even more attractive place that Ocala could be.

In addition to thinking about the benefits of putting housing and businesses in the city, think about the benefits of not putting housing and businesses in the country.

The beautiful, board-fenced, oak-shaded rolling horse country of Marion County is unique in Florida, indeed in the world. This is where people who are considering moving their businesses or corporate headquarters to Ocala might want to live. It's the place where the golden sunsets are best. This is the land that supports a job-producing, multimillion-dollar-a-year boost to the Ocala/Marion County economy in the form of the horse industry. This is the land that holds the clean water natural recharge system without which nothing will live - people, plants or animals.

It's true there are some high- and medium-density housing developments already built in the country, including in the Farmland Preservation Area. Fine, leave them there, but don't make it worse. Instead, fiercely protect the open land we have, and encourage growth where growth should be - in Ocala. We can rebuild the city, but once the countryside is paved over, it's gone for good.

Large landowners or developers may request that their land be placed in a high-density zone that will help them realize a greater profit when they sell or divide. But, the mandate of government bodies is to make decisions based on what is best for the majority of the people they serve. Moving the Farmland Preservation Area boundary back even to 60th Avenue will not leave the large landowners or developers destitute. There is plenty of money to be made in dividing large farms into smaller farms.

I call upon our government to protect the countryside, an asset for our economic future as well as our environmental future, and to persuade our builders to build the housing and commercial space we need in the city - the place it will be most useful and appropriate.

Let's build a well-planned, compact, efficient city that is, in its own way, as beautiful and appealing as our countryside. Then, Ocala/Marion County could become not only the Horse Capital of the World, but also the envy of the world.

The Marion County Planning Department and the Marion Board of County Commissioners, in cooperation with the Ocala City Council, could start us in this new direction by changing course with the Evaluation and Appraisal Report the county is now working on, and I call on them to do it. Do everything possible to plan for a small, dense, vibrant city surrounded by beautiful, open countryside. All it takes is a little shift in how those with power think about planning for the future, and all it takes is a little courage.

*Pam Johnson is a resident of Marion County who has served on a municipal planning board and has become a student of urban and rural planning issues over the years.*