



Journal

Save Sarasota County



September, 2001 The Growth-restraint and Environmental Organization Vol. 12, No.1

GROWTH ALERT

Join GEO

If you are not yet a GEO member or are up for renewal, now is a great time to join.

In the months to come, our County Commissioners will be voting on measures which will have tremendous consequences for the future of our homes and our families.

Help GEO be there for you.
Help GEO save Sarasota County.
Join today!

See Back Page For Details

Incredibly, at a time of worsening **water shortages** and **traffic congestion**, the Sarasota County Commission is about to consider a plan to massively **intensify development** of our rural and urban lands.



Initiated by County Administrator Jim Ley, the proposal would add 100,000 more people east of I-75 and relax growth controls in the existing urban areas. The plan calls for six "RMAs", or

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Who Is This Man And How Can We Stop Him?

See Page 4

The GEO Agenda

A Positive Plan For Sarasota County

The GEO Board of Directors has adopted an eight-point plan for the future of Sarasota County.

The "GEO Agenda" suggests specific steps to curb urban sprawl,

make growth pay its own way, prevent classroom shortages, reduce traffic congestion and protect our neighborhoods and environment from further harm.

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Annual Membership Dues
To GEO Are \$15 Per Year

Additional Contributions
Are Very Welcome
As Are Contributions
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GEO's Political Action
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President's Message

Now more than ever, Sarasota County needs GEO and GEO needs you.

During the past 12 years, we've had a **major impact** on the growth and environmental policies of our community. We led the way in defeating several bad referenda, from a \$100 million tax to build roads for developers to a blank check sales tax extension to Charter amendments to repeal limits on County



Sarasota County 2025?

borrowing and taxes. In response to our advocacy, Sarasota County has largely kept the I-75 barrier on urban sprawl and maintained most of the strong environmental and growth restraint policies of the 1980's, despite attempts to repeal them. We have strengthened the County's neighborhood compatibility policies. We have worked, with mixed success, to make growth pay its own way.

Now, however, **the challenge is greater than ever before**. Sarasota County Administrator Jim Ley is pushing several initiatives to weaken and destroy restraints on growth and development, including the radical Resource Management Area scheme discussed in this issue, a rewrite of the Zoning Code, changes in concurrency, further tax hikes and lowballing of impact fees. Several County Commissioners could go either way in response to these plans, depending on the level of public awareness and engagement.

That's where you come in.

As a **member of GEO**, you help us to be a stronger organization. You are also kept informed of pending decisions, so that you may better influence them, by attending public hearings and contacting your Commissioners. Please join or renew your membership in GEO today. Please stay involved. **Together we can make this a better community**, for us all and for generations yet to come.

GEO Is FOR

- ★ Proper Concurrency Standards, To Avoid Traffic Congestion and Other Problems
- ★ Strong Rules on Urban Sprawl and to Protect the Environment and Neighborhoods
- ★ Fees And Taxing Districts to Make Growth Pay Its Own Way

RMA Scheme Promotes Radical Overgrowth

(Continued From Page 1)

Resource Management Areas. The scheme could not be worse.

Urban/Suburban RMA

Lost in the focus on the RMAs east of I-75 is the plan's proposal to weaken development controls in the existing urban area. It would designate all of Bee Ridge and Clark east to I-75 and US41 from Bee Ridge to SR776 as "development corridors". Higher densities and more intense commercial development would be allowed all along these "corridors" and promoted by weakened concurrency, tax subsidies, cursory reviews and "administrative rezonings" without public hearings or votes.

Even outside these corridors, rezoning for commercial along any major thoroughfare will be "presumed" approved, as will rezoning to the lowest of any adjoining zoning (regardless of the actual uses or other nearby properties). Also, some current Major Employment Centers, now limited mostly to office parks, will be opened up to intense commercial use and high density housing.

Village/Open Space RMA

The I-75 barrier to eastern urban sprawl would be dismantled and the eastern County opened up to intense urban development, adding more than 100,000 people to the densities allowed there today. Although the County has focused on the "form" of the new "towns,

villages and hamlets", they would be little more than intense subdivisions with commercial added. Although 50% of the land would be "open space", this includes golf courses, common lawns, retention areas, ball fields and cemeteries, among other uses.

Perhaps even worse, the County would abandon its present policy of only opening up about enough land for urban development as needed to meet ten years of projected population growth at a time. At present, the County has enough urban land until 2017 and enough "future urban" west and south of I-75 to last for 50 years. No more is needed. By removing this brake on timing and by overdesignating urban land, growth will inevitably accelerate.

Although the plan admits that it will greatly increase traffic on existing roads, consume more water and intensify other impacts on infrastructure and services, the County has no proposal or funding to deal with those problems.

Greenway Spine RMA

This RMA depicts only a stingy "greenway spine" consisting of little more than existing public lands and those now slated for acquisition with existing funds. Almost everything else is planned for development. There is no set plan to create the few new areas designated for greenways. Increased densities for the Villages would be granted as a matter of

right (at over 500% of current densities) rather than required to be transferred from greenways.

Infrastructure Corridor RMA

The rural lands would be crisscrossed with a network of major roads, many 4-laned or more, opening up areas to new intense development. These roads would often be placed right along the middle of designated greenways, posing clear wildlife hazards.

Rural Heritage/Estate RMA

RMA consultant Tim Jackson summed up this one by stating that people living in current large lot subdivisions and rural areas "will be allowed to continue to live there." That's about it.

Agricultural Reserve RMA

Although the County's RMA goals falsely state that they include the "preservation of agriculture", this RMA is limited to only the far southeastern corner of the County, where the County already has plans to buy out the development rights. Bye-bye ag.

Let Your Voice Be Heard

The County has public hearings tentatively set for the RMA plan on September 4, 5 and 6, October 3 and 10, November 13 and December 12 and 18. Call the Planning Department at 951-5140 for notice and mailings of the details. We all must work together to defeat this terrible scheme and to promote alternatives which make our future better, not worse.

Our Pro-Growth County Administrator

Let's Be Like Las Vegas

He came from the west, as the Assistant County Administrator of Clark County, Nevada, the home of Las Vegas and the fastest growing county in the United States. His duties included growth management.

In a heated campaign, a new majority had just been elected to the Clark County Commission on a platform of controlling growth and making growth pay its own way. The County Administrator resigned.

Meanwhile in Sarasota County, the County Commission had just fired its County Administrator and formed a search committee for a new one. With one exception, that committee consisted of representatives of the local chambers of commerce, led by Joel Freedman of the Sarasota Chamber.

The Chambers had recently taken the lead in pushing pro-growth policies and had backed several winners for Sarasota County Commission. The search committee picked Jim Ley as their choice for County Administrator and the County Commission went along.

In the years since, Jim Ley has relentlessly advocated and implemented pro-growth policies and procedures for Sarasota

County. Ley initiated and argued for RU-77, to gut the County's traffic concurrency rules. His plan would allow development to overcrowd a road so long as the design of the needed improvements are budgeted three years away. (The Commission passed a weakened version, over Jon Thaxton's dissent, to apply the exception only to selected industries and to require the actual road construction, rather than just the design, within three years).



"The words 'congestion' and 'subsidy' are selfish words that should not be the focus of planning for the future of our community." — Jim Ley

Jim Ley also pushed through large increases in gas, phone and property taxes to build roads, mainly for future growth, while keeping road impact fees at only 2/3 of what they were ten years ago. He did this in part by forming an advisory committee on road funding comprised almost entirely of representatives of development and roadbuilding interests.

Although the County Commission initially resisted Ley's plan, he kept calling them back into workshops (without public hearings) until they agreed.

Jim Ley has also restructured and chastised County staff to make them more developer-friendly. Natural Resources Director Gary Comp was given a bad review for not following the new Administrator's "business philosophy" by disagreeing with a developer at a workshop. A wetlands regulator, on the other hand, was given an award for "balancing environmental protection with private property rights."

At meetings of the Tiger Bay Club, Jim Ley has stated that he believes that all development is a net benefit to the taxpayers. In response to a question about how he responds to citizens concerned about developers causing traffic congestion and about taxpayer subsidies of growth, he responded, "The words 'congestion' and 'subsidy' are selfish words that should not be the focus of planning for the future of our community."

Jim Ley has relentlessly pushed his plan to open up the eastern County to intense urban growth and to weaken development controls in the existing urban area. He is the biggest threat to sensible growth management in Sara-

The GEO Agenda: *A Positive Plan For Sarasota County*

Sarasota County is experiencing record water shortages, increased school crowding and traffic congestion like never before.

In just twelve years, Sarasota County may lose its biggest water source (Manatee County) and environmental and cost constraints limit the feasible expansion of water supplies. The School Board projects a \$122 million construction shortfall over the next ten years, almost half its total need. State and County road planners also project hundreds of millions of dollars in unfunded road needs and forecast increased congestion even if funds are found to build those roads.

In this context, it is incredible that serious consideration is now being given to weakening restraints on growth in both present urban and rural areas of Sarasota County and tax hikes are being considered instead of enhanced impact fees on new development.

GEO, the Growth-restraint and Environmental Organization, believes the time has come for a principled direction for Sarasota County. Our leaders should serve first the interests of the people here today rather than the few who would profit from growth out of control. Here's our plan to get a grip on growth:

1) Stop Urban Sprawl -- Sarasota County and its cities already have enough urban and "future urban" land to accommodate population projections for the next 50 years. While we favor a plan which provides for clustering and greenways in appropriate locations east of I-75, we will vigorously oppose any scheme to increase overall density and intensity of land use in that area or to loosen current limits on the timing of urban growth. Venice and North Port also should stop sprawling by urban annexation of rural lands. We support the broad-based recommendations of the public interest half of the Multi-Stakeholders Group to "let rural be rural" beyond I-75.

2) Make Growth Pay Its Own Way -- The costs of growth should not be placed on the backs of the taxpaying public. Instead, growth must be made to pay its own way. Road impact fees, which are far less than they were ten years ago, are increasingly inadequate, as are park and library impact fees. For over a decade, the County has "studied" but not enacted impact fees for judicial, administrative, and law enforcement facilities. The excuses must end -- our politicians should act to make growth pay its own way without further delay.

3) Save Our Schools -- What can be more critical than adequate classrooms for our community's children? Are roads, for which Sarasota County has an impact fee, more important than schools, for which it does not? On April 24, 2001, the Sarasota County School Board heard a report from consultants about school impact fees to address a ten-year \$122 million capital deficit. They stated that fourteen other Florida counties levy a school impact fee, from \$1200 to \$2500 from the builder of each new dwelling, to build and expand schools to keep up with growth. The School Board should finally act, after years of delay and talk of tax hikes, to instead make growth pay its own way for schools. Also, the County Commission and School Board should act now to add schools to concurrency, to require that growth not

be allowed to outpace the school facilities needed to serve that growth.

4) Maintain Concurrency -- It's a simple premise: development should not be allowed beyond the capacity of available roads and other infrastructure to safely handle it. We resist all efforts to weaken such concurrency rules, whether by lowering adopted levels of service, averaging concurrency over an area, exempting areas, considering facilities in place although merely planned, or otherwise changing methodologies to allow premature and excessive growth.

5) Serve Public Needs Before Developer Desires -- Our local governments should devote their resources to meeting the needs of the people here today rather than upon opening up new areas to development. Accordingly, while public services should be extended where they are needed and desired (such as public water to Osprey), pipes and pavement should not be laid merely to extend urban growth into rural lands. For those reasons, Pine Street should not be extended into the Taylor Ranch and no new freeway should be planned to open up eastern land to urban development.

6) Protect Our Neighborhoods and Environment -- The County's Zoning Code, Land Development Regulations and Comprehensive Plan should be preserved and strengthened, rather than weakened as some now seek, to protect neighborhoods and the natural environment from incompatible land uses.

7) Maintain Safe and Sensible Water Resources -- We oppose any efforts to develop water resources to serve unbridled growth at the expense of the environment or other public interests. While doing better to control growth, the pristine Myakka River should not be tapped for drinking water, polluted water should not be pumped and stored underground and we should not be forced to drink treated sewage. We also oppose the premature construction of a desalination plant without first resolving the significant issues of public cost and environmental impacts, such as the disposal of polluting brine and the consequences of an accompanying coastal power plant. New development should be required to limit water use, by "gray water" irrigation lines, cisterns and other means, while we all seek to live within our means.

8) Reform for the Public Interest -- We favor changes in local government processes which advance reform but not those which retreat from it. We therefore oppose proposed changes in the Sarasota County Charter to repeal the public's right to vote on large increases in County taxes and borrowing. We support the County Charter's limits on local campaign finances. We support the current Sarasota City system of decisions by an elected Council rather than "boss government" by a single mayor, as some development interests have proposed. We support an amendment to the County Charter require public votes for all large annexations.

We offer this positive agenda for Sarasota County, both for the present population and for the generations yet to come. We must do our part to protect and advance the public interest. We cannot afford not to try.

Last October, GEO held a membership picnic at Turtle Beach on Siesta Key. Burgers, brats and hotdogs were served, as well as pot luck dishes brought by members and guests. Musician B.C. Hathaway provided entertainment. County Commission candidates Jon Thaxton, Fredd Atkins and Paul Mercier attended. Future membership activities, including GEO's biannual luncheon in April, 2002, are being planned.



controlgrowth.com

Check out GEO's new web site, controlgrowth.com. By entering the age of electronic information, GEO hopes to further increase our membership and influence over public policy, to the benefit of our environment and quality of life.

BITS AND PIECES

GEO Opposes Sarasota “Boss Mayor” Scheme

— The GEO Board of Directors has voted unanimously to oppose the push by the Argus Foundation and other development interests to amend the Sarasota City Charter to create a “boss mayor” (or elected strong mayor) form of government. The scheme would empower one person to determine the City Commission agenda and to hire, fire and direct all City employees except the Clerk and Attorney. The plan would also give the mayor a veto over all City Commission action (except for rezoning and development approvals, which of course the Argusites don’t want to impede), subject to override only by four of five Commissioners. It is clear that the development interests hope to elect a “boss mayor” with their huge campaign contributions, so as to give them almost total control over the City without the messiness of public meetings and open Commission votes.

The “boss mayor” scheme will be on the March 12, 2002 ballot. It results from a petition drive by paid solicitors who deceived voters by telling them that this just gives them the right to decide if they want an elected mayor. GEO hopes that a majority of the Sarasota City Commission will have the courage and wisdom to word the ballot title and summary in a way to make it clear that the vote is on a “strong mayor” (by use of that phrase), not just an elected one.

The Scoop on SCOPE — About two years ago, several local developers and other pro-growth interests came up with the idea to form a new organization to affect Sarasota County’s future. They raised thousands of dollars from charities and local governments with which they have influence, invited a few citizens who they trusted and formed SCOPE, for Sarasota Openly Plans for Excellence. The result has been a biased effort to push the pro-growthers’ political agenda.

The first activity for SCOPE was to form eight committees open to volunteers, to come up with 16

positions from which the public would choose two for further study and action. To the dismay of SCOPE’s leaders, the top position which emerged from its public input (a newspaper poll and survey forms) was a strongly worded call for “growth restraint”, including firm urban boundaries, stronger concurrency, higher impact fees, better environmental protection and limits on development timing and density. It was written by GEO President Dan Lobeck, through one of the SCOPE committees. The second issue was a strong call to stop “environmental degradation”, from that same committee.

The SCOPE leaders responded by forming a select committee dominated by development interests and their allies, which met privately to select two different topics, affordable housing and traffic flow. Now those issues are being “studied”, with plans to push for solutions. The affordable housing committee is stacked with development interests and housing advocates and can be expected to call for lower impact fees and other reduced controls on development. The traffic committee was told by SCOPE that it could not link traffic to growth management and faces pressure to call for more roads and higher taxes. The SCOPE Board has retained final say on all policy positions.

While GEO will continue to monitor and participate in the SCOPE process, we urge that charities and governments deny any further funding to this obvious attempt to further the pro-growthers’ agenda.

Planning Commission Politics — GEO is very disappointed in County Commissioners Nora Patterson and Shannon Staub for voting with David Mills to replace Becky Ayeck on the Planning Commission, in response to Becky’s advocacy for rational controls on development. This comes after those two Commissioners voted to appoint two pro-growthers, Meg Wittmer and Jody Hutchins. From what we know of Becky’s replacement, Sally Braem, we have hopes that she will follow Becky’s lead in calling for sensible restraints on overgrowth.

Send Them A Message

Your Voice *Can* Make A Difference

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Join GEO

Yes,

I agree that growth should be controlled to avoid tax hikes, traffic jams, pollution, water shortages and other problems of overgrowth.

Please sign me up and keep me informed.

Name or Names _____

Address _____

E-Mail (if any) _____

Please fill out this form and mail it, with a check to GEO for \$15 each (or more), to: GEO P.O. Box 277 Osprey, FL 34229-0277

(Additional contributions are welcome and appreciated)