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the nature of things

Wild Places Falling to Development

By [Tom Palmer](#)

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It hit me as I was driving through one of the formerly remote sections of Central Florida's rural interior.

To borrow from the political world, I had discovered the Axis of Sprawl (Evil Sprawl, if you prefer).

It occurred to me as I passed Harmony, a week or so after passing Destiny. Harmony is an 11,000-acre development along U.S. 192 east of Holopaw in Osceola County.

Harmony has already been approved and contains houses, roads and everything else that goes with remote developments.

A line of similar future developments runs along the Kissimmee/St. Johns River valleys in what had been for years one of those relatively blank spots on the map between the urban coastal areas and the urban areas farther inland north and south of Orlando.

It has been one of the last wild places in this part of Florida.

Destiny, which has yet to break ground, is south of Harmony at the other end of Osceola County. It is even larger - 41,300 acres.

Destiny will turn Yeehaw Junction, an outpost to get gas along open stretches of State Road 60, U.S. 441 and the Florida Turnpike, into a major Florida city.

North of Harmony, in addition to the gerrymander-like sprawl spreading eastward from Orlando, is the Deseret Ranch holdings.

Plans to carve out a 4,578-acre chunk of the 289,000-acre ranch to provide more homes for Orlando's sprawl have been discussed but are on hold for the moment.

Go a bit farther north and you run into the proposed Farmton development, a 60,000-acre tract along the Volusia-Brevard boundary. It recently won tentative approval from local officials.

All have similar marketing schemes and justifications for their intrusion into vanishing rural areas.

They're all going to set aside most of the land as open space. They're all going to build homes with the latest green technology. They're all going to have walking and bicycle paths to attempt to cut down on vehicle trips.

But from a 10,000-foot environmental view, many people are unpersuaded that any of that matters.

We heard the same arguments during the public hearings for Hatchineha Ranch, the 5,134-acre development proposed along the county's eastern boundary.

But the reality of all of these developments is that they will never supply the shopping, entertainment, jobs and other amenities that people in established cities enjoy, so the people who live in these developments will commute a lot and greater distances than many people who live in town.

The developers may donate land for schools and fire stations and other public facilities, but the general taxpayers will pay to keep these facilities open and staffed.

Yes, conservation land will be set aside, but it will likely be fragmented.

There's also the question of who will manage the conservation land to maintain its wildlife values. That includes prescribed fire, which is harder to accomplish once homes and roads are closer and more likely to be affected by the smoke.

These developments also fly in the face of everything we hear from planners these days about the need to concentrate growth in urban areas and change the mix of residential and commercial development to encourage transit and relieve traffic congestion or at least slow its growth.

But despite what the planners say should be the local vision, it's clear many people don't share that vision and are moving toward the suburbs.

And as long as local officials continue to make rural land available for major developments, there is no reason to think that trend won't continue. Things will only change when the urban development boundary actually means something.

BLAME GROWTH LAW FOR BUBBLE?

The Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, recently issued a report that lays much of the blame on the housing bubble and subsequent crash on urban planners.

The theory is that growth laws create relative scarcity, which drives up prices when demand outpaces supply, causing real estate bubbles. Florida is mentioned often in this piece.

The problem with Cato's argument is that I can't think of any place in Florida where local officials weren't handing out building permits as fast as builders submitted them.

I also wonder why, if growth laws are the main culprit in the housing bubble, it took 20

years after the law was passed for this phenomenon to manifest itself?

Finally, this theory is hard to reconcile when you look at some of the places where there are high foreclosure rates, one of the results of the bubble's collapse.

They're places such as Poinciana, whose growth entitlements predate Florida's growth law by a decade or more.

This appears to be nothing more than ideology masquerading as scholarship.

[Tom Palmer can be reached at tom.palmer@theledger.com or 863-802-7535. Read more views on the environment at <http://environment.blogs.theledger.com>.]

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