

## Goals 2006 - Go for No. 1

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The Orlando region could be on the cusp of greatness. It could do things this year that allow it to become Florida's premier city. Better than Miami. Better than Tampa. Better than Jacksonville.

After all, already it has the state's largest convention center. Indeed, its convention center is the second largest in the nation after Chicago's. And it has the state's busiest airport. Last year, for the first time, more people used Orlando's airport than Miami's.

Yet in other key areas, Orlando lags behind. Jacksonville, Miami and Tampa all have first-class amenities and assets that Orlando lacks. Even Jacksonville, which is half the size of the Orlando region, has a better performing-arts center and stadium. Orlando also lacks a medical school, which Tampa and Miami both have. And Miami has an extensive commuter-rail system that allows residents to escape the ever-increasing traffic jams.

But all that can change this year.

With the right leadership, the Orlando region can launch, all at once, a commuter-rail system, a new arena, a world-class performing-arts center, an upgraded stadium and a medical school. The school not only would build on the budding greatness of the University of Central Florida, it also would help diversify the economy.

Orlando this year also has the opportunity to preserve the open space that it still has. Anyone who thinks the region's growth has ended or even slowed is wrong. The area is expected to more than double its population in the next 15 years -- to 4.5 million people. If the region doesn't manage that growth well by directing the development to the urban areas and setting aside open space, little else will matter. It also needs to ensure that housing costs don't price residents out of the market.

In today's annual Goals section, the Sentinel Editorial Board lays out what needs to happen to make this a reality. Orlando could and should beat out the other Florida cities to be the model for the future. Go for it. Be No. 1. All it takes is the will to do so.

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### 1. Model for growth: OK commuter rail, regional land authority

A quiet but palpable revolution is taking place. And elected officials had best take heed. An overwhelming majority of Central Floridians are sick of traffic headaches, fed up with urban sprawl, and treasure the region's dwindling natural resources. They're unhappy with the status quo of government-induced sprawl and they harbor little long-term hope for an improved quality of life. In fact, a new, visionary growth paradigm for the region is vitally important to a growing majority of local residents, according to a recent survey by *myregion.org*, a regional policy group.

Responding to that challenge in the year ahead should be a top priority—no, a mandate—for every elected official in the region, too. Unless real leaders coalesce around a sustainable vision for the future, pessimism and the discontent those growth trends now breed will doom this region to mediocrity. It's not about reinventing the wheel, or about coming up with some grandiose, off-the-wall scheme. The hard work already has been done by groups such as *myregion.org*, the University of Central Florida and

the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce. And the vision is elegantly simple: Employment centers, flanked by homes surrounded by wildlife and recreation areas, linked to the rest of the region with a wide array of transportation options, from rail and ferries to traditional byways.

Simple, no? All it takes now is the political will and perseverance to implement that vision.

In the coming year, for example, elected officials in Volusia, Seminole, Osceola and Orange counties are expected to decide whether to help finance a commuter-rail system along existing CSX freight tracks through all four counties. Not only would that create the spine of a rapid-transit system and give residents an alternative to cars, it would help focus more intense growth in existing urban areas, convenient to mass transit and other city services.

Most of the project costs will be borne by the state and federal governments. But a host of transportation needs, including commuter rail and better bus service, would receive a huge boost if state lawmakers also gave local voters a chance to impose a \$2 surcharge on rental cars. The \$40 million wouldn't solve all transportation woes. But it sure could help.

A regional authority—with appropriate taxing powers—to protect environmentally sensitive lands from development also deserves legislative blessings. Aggressive protection of natural resources would create new growth boundaries to preclude urban sprawl, while encouraging denser, more sustainable development in the urban core.

That revolutionary approach could truly distinguish this region. Most Central Floridians are on board. But leaders still need to answer their call.

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## **Goal 2. First-class entertainment: Raise resort tax for community**

Being the best means setting a high goal and wisely putting your resources to use to ensure success.

In 2006, this community can begin to build a first-class performing arts center and state-of-the-art arena and a modern football stadium to rival those in the state's other major cities. All this can be done while boosting advertising to invest in our tourism industry and building a safe reserve fund to protect tax dollars should the economy falter.

That is the goal. The resource: a one-penny increase in Orange County's 5 percent tourist tax on hotel rooms.

There is no reason Orlando's cultural offerings should pale next to Miami's, Tampa's or Jacksonville's. But those metropolitan areas have invested millions of dollars in their sports, entertainment and cultural facilities --and they've done so without much benefit from a lucrative tourist tax that residents don't have to pay.

These communities have performing-arts centers that can house as many as 300 events a year, ranging from the most elaborate Broadway show to the readings of works by children in elementary school. They are centers of culture not just for the wealthy, but also for all citizens who thirst for the arts and entertainment ranging from Beethoven symphonies to a Jerry Seinfeld performance.

And these are not just buildings. These activity centers draw people downtown and bring them together to share wonderful experiences. These signature facilities help define these communities. So why not Orlando? Why not now?



We will look to Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty and Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer to continue efforts toward building the amenities the hardworking people of this community deserve.

At the same time, we will urge leaders of the tourism industry to join as full partners by embracing the effort. This is not a shakedown; it's a handshake -- an offer to the industry to pay back this community. And the increase would boost the Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau's meager advertising budget in the process.

The risks are minor considering what is at stake.

Orlando will lose its only major sports team, the NBA's Magic, without a new arena that puts the team on the same financial level as other cities' franchises. The dilapidated Citrus Bowl runs the risk of being supplanted by Tampa's Raymond James Stadium or Jacksonville's Alltel Stadium in the increasingly competitive college bowl-game market.

Let's put these concerns to rest by increasing the tourist tax for the good of this community.

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### **Goal 3. No retreat: Bring up F schools, stick with FCAT**

In the push to become the best, education remains the most important investment Central Floridians can make in the future.

To that end, districts must continue to focus attention and resources to help poor-performing schools, particularly failing high schools. Jones and Oak Ridge high schools in Orange top the list of schools that earned F's on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. But there are more high schools, such as Gateway in Osceola, Evans in Orange and Leesburg High in Lake, that are struggling.

This year it is imperative that districts create magnet and International Baccalaureate programs to attract the best students to these schools and create more positive learning environments. Partnerships with the business community -- such as those that have helped Oak Ridge and Jones -- should be increased.

High school is the end of the river, where the flow of graduates is washed out into the sea of life. Educators need to work upstream and identify troubled students long before they show up in high school. That's why middle-school reform must be an important component in the next wave of Florida's education-reform movement.

All of this, of course, hinges on accountability. As Gov. Jeb Bush's term winds down, we will look to those who hope to succeed him in the governor's office to commit to preserving key elements of the A Plus Plan for Education.

The FCAT is the foundation of Mr. Bush's policy. It provides a sound way to measure how well our students are doing in reading, math, writing and science. Using this test as a way to grade schools, and then publicizing those grades so that all parents and taxpayers know how well their schools are doing, has worked well for Florida's children.

Democrats Jim Davis and Rod Smith have criticized the FCAT and the way the state uses the results to hold schools accountable. Republicans Charlie Crist and Tom Gallagher -- both former education commissioners -- have voiced support for the plan.

There will be pressure from opponents of school accountability no matter who becomes the next governor. It is important that these candidates say clearly how they will preserve the tough accountability

standards that make Florida a national model.

The stakes could not be higher. The attention brought to school grades have forced districts to spend more time and money improving struggling schools. Success stories such as those at Mollie Ray Elementary in Orange County have outnumbered the failures.

The candidates for governor need to be clear that there will be no retreat from these high standards and accountability on their watch.

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#### **Goal 4. An economic balance: Land UCF medical school, up incentives for diversification**

Strong numbers for unemployment and job growth might give the impression that Central Florida faces no serious economic challenges. If only that were the case.

While the unemployment rate in the four-county Orlando metropolitan area is below the state and national average, and the pace of job growth here over the past year led the state, Central Florida still lags behind the nation in average wages. That's because the region still relies too heavily on low-wage jobs, especially in its dominant industry, tourism.

Central Florida needs more high-wage jobs to boost the region's tax base and generate the discretionary dollars essential to supporting cultural and recreational amenities. Such amenities are vital for improving the quality of life here.

Central Florida also needs a more diverse economy to make the region less vulnerable to downturns in tourism, whether caused by hurricanes, disease outbreaks, fuel-price spikes or terrorist attacks.

Leaders in the region took some commendable steps last year to strengthen the economy. For example, they rallied to support the U.S. military's modeling, simulation and training center in Orlando, the anchor for a burgeoning high-tech industry.

But there is more to be done.

State officials could give a huge boost to the goal of diversifying Central Florida's economy by approving a new medical school for the University of Central Florida. A UCF medical school would not only help alleviate a deepening doctor shortage in Florida. It would be a magnet for millions of dollars in grants for medical research. Such research would spur development of the region's life-sciences industry, one of the modern economy's fastest-growing and most lucrative sources of high-wage jobs.

While the fate of UCF's medical school largely rests with state officials, local officials can take other steps to diversify the economy. They can start by dedicating a dollar source to promote economic development, just as county taxes on hotel guests have been used to build the region's tourism industry.

Orange County officials need to keep trying to persuade state lawmakers to give back to local governments half the sales taxes from their convention centers. But meanwhile, officials across Central Florida could finance economic-development initiatives by setting aside just a small portion of their annual growth in property-tax revenues. Those dollars could help the region compete for high-wage jobs by paying for better marketing, tax incentives, job training and other business-friendly measures.

Central Florida leaders need to make building and broadening the region's economy a top priority.

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## **Goal 5. An affordable home: Free up state housing trust, boost low-cost development**

For a community to be its best, there has to be an opportunity for everyone to live in safe, clean and decent housing.

Access to affordable housing no longer can be taken for granted in Central Florida. Housing prices in this region have soared into the stratosphere by more than 40 percent during the past four years. Yet wages increased only 3 percent.

That puts the dream of owning a house beyond the reach of many residents. To make matters worse, the supply of rental apartments is getting short and more expensive.

During the past year metropolitan Orlando led the nation in the number of apartments -- 20,000 -- that have been converted to condominiums.

This is creating a crisis because many people who work in service-sector jobs, especially hotels, theme parks, malls and even local government, are having a difficult time finding housing that they can afford.

Solving this problem requires the attention of top state and local political and business leaders. More affordable housing is badly needed to maintain the vitality of Central Florida's workforce and to keep the regional economy humming.

Two tools to do the job exist already, but Florida is not making good use of either one.

Years ago Florida leaders correctly predicted that there would be an affordable-housing crisis. That's why they required growth-management plans submitted by local governments to address this issue.

The results, though, are pitiful. The affordable-housing section of the growth plans has turned into a bad joke. They're full of government doubletalk that doesn't solve anything.

This law needs teeth that set detailed goals for affordable housing. Officials have a duty to follow through by making developers live up to the goals by including affordable housing in their projects, or paying to build such housing elsewhere.

It's equally disappointing that the money in the William E. Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund has not been used properly. That money comes from a small tax on real-estate documentary stamps. This year that tax is expected to bring in \$692 million.

Lawmakers, though, capped that trust fund at \$193 million. For years, lawmakers have been taking money coming in over that cap and spending it on other needs.

Removing that spending cap is critical to ensure that all the money in that fund goes for affordable housing.

For this community and its economy to thrive, adequate affordable housing for working people can't be an afterthought.