

This article from the August 28, 2005 edition of the Orlando Sentinel references the myregion.org sponsored Naturally Central Florida initiative that identified seven "Environmental Jewels" of Central Florida. Among those quoted in the article are Clay Henderson and Charles Lee, both members of the myregion.org committee.

Naturally Central Florida calls for our citizens and leaders to ensure that protection of the environment is part of the equation as the region continues to grow.

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70,000 homes? Not So Fast, Say Activist Groups

By Kevin Spear - Sentinel Staff Writer

Central Florida's real-estate boom is delivering plans for mega-developments at a pace not seen in nearly two decades.

As many as 70,000 new homes have been proposed this year alone within 15 projects stretching from north Volusia to south Lake County. They could take a few years or a few decades to rise from what is now mostly vacant land.

It's a wave of development that will define Central Florida's landscape.

Planners are banking on increasingly stringent rules, smarter designs and more developer contributions for such things as roads, schools and wildlife protection to better order the region's growth.

But there is growing fear that the developments are sowing the seeds of sprawl, surging toward some of the region's most prized wetlands and landscapes.

"There are market forces that are going to wipe out these areas," said Clay Henderson, an environmental lawyer and former president of the Florida Audubon Society.

If the region cannot order its growth and preserve its lands now, the future will be paved with the failures of today.

"It's a simple strategy of doing it now before it's too late," Henderson said.

Henderson is part of a renewed initiative to protect seven outposts of natural environment. Included on the list: the basin of creeks and rivers flowing through Osceola County and on to the Everglades; desert scrublands of Polk County; and the watery wilderness of the St. Johns River in Orange and Seminole counties.

Backers of the effort -- particularly the Metropolitan Center for Regional Studies at the University of Central Florida and a regional leadership group called *myregion.org* -- are encouraging residents, visitors, businesses and elected officials to demand stepped-up acquisition and protection of the environmentally significant lands.

All of the natural areas have been the focus of conservation efforts for a decade or more. Some of those efforts have sputtered, while others have been accorded a high profile, such as Wekiva River lands.

But the stakes are growing higher. About 1,000 people are moving to the region daily. This decade, Central Florida's population of 3 million could grow to 4 million residents, and to 7 million by 2050. A quarter-million vacant acres -- an area nearly four times larger than Orlando's city limits -- are expected to be developed.

The call to save Central Florida's natural places comes at a time when communities and counties are facing the 15 planned jumbo developments. Known as Developments of Regional Impact, these projects can include thousands of homes, office complexes or even more commercial footage than a shopping mall.

"It's busier than I ever remember," said Jeff Jones, acting director of the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, the agency assigned to putting the massive developments under a microscope. They stretch around the region:

Along the east side, the Viera community near Melbourne already has approval for 18,945 homes. Its developer filed a preliminary request in July for an additional 13,279 homes in an area extending to near St. Johns River wetlands.

On the west side, a developer of the Karlton project in south Lake County wants to build as many as 5,000 homes. The community would border the Four Corners area, where development has four counties hard-pressed to provide services.

A much-watched test case for how well growth can be managed are five proposed communities that would fill much of the gap between Lake Tohopekaliga and East Lake Tohopekaliga in northern Osceola County. Early plans call for nearly 32,000 homes and an extensive road network, a new expressway and a new interchange with Florida's Turnpike.

Some of that area, particularly near the Kissimmee and St. Cloud city limits, already has seen urban invasion. But much of the land remains untouched.

To the west of where Kissimmee Park Road crosses Florida's Turnpike, 7,000 homes are proposed for the Edgewater development.

Today, that landscape takes in pasture, palmetto patches and citrus groves where wild turkeys and sandhill cranes forage. Dirt roads buzz with grasshoppers, and cans nailed to fence posts are riddled with bullet holes.

"I was brought up around groves and country," said Debbie Priddy, 44, who was born in Osceola and lives with her mother, children and boyfriend on 5 acres off of Kissimmee Park Road.

She knows growth is coming.

"The roads are too small. The schools are too small. We're 20 years behind the times," Priddy said. "I'll be here until something happens to my mom, and then I'll be out of here."

The regional-planning council has taken the unusual step of grouping the five projects for an extra layer of review.

"It's a visioning study for what the area might become," said Jones of the council. "It's in response to the sheer volume and number -- more than 100,000 people -- which is larger than any city in the region but Orlando."

Bob Whidden, a land-planning consultant in Kissimmee working on four of the five projects, thinks the communities envisioned near the Toho lakes will have generous road and school capacity and fully address environmental issues.

In part, he said, that's because the developers are starting with a blank slate and must show they can provide enough classrooms, traffic lanes and park space before they can get county approvals to start building.

Whidden also thinks the mega-developments are better planned because officials take a more holistic planning approach than is possible when a host of smaller developments are approved incrementally.

He said the larger-scale development is being done by developers backed by Wall Street or big banks. Those companies can better afford to comply with government requirements than smaller developers can, he said.

The proposed developments are also in a part of northern Osceola where county officials are looking to concentrate urban growth.

But as the building marches on, two major environmental groups remain anxious about the potential outcome.

The Nature Conservancy sees the development proposals as inviting growth to the doorstep of the organization's 12,000-acre Disney Wilderness Preserve, a property that has been under painstaking restoration from pasture to wetlands for more than a decade.

Charles Lee, advocacy director for Audubon of Florida, said his group is devoted to the massive restoration of the Kissimmee River basin, which takes in the Tohopekaliga lakes and ultimately feeds Lake Okeechobee and serves as the headwaters of the Everglades.

He said that without extraordinarily careful planning, the five projects could disturb the nation's richest and most valuable bald-eagle nesting area outside of Alaska as well as disrupt drainage on thousands of acres near the lakes.

"We could have a cascade of dirty water all the way to Lake Okeechobee," Lee said.

The Osceola County projects may seem expansive, but there is more to come. Central Florida planners predict that in this decade alone, growth will turn enough green space into blacktop and rooftops to build several cities the size of Orlando.

Kevin Spear can be reached at kspear@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5062.

