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MY WORD COLUMN

By Mark P. Wylie

*President & CEO
Central Florida Chapter Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc.*

Is Florida moving in the right direction on growth?

One point of view might answer we are going to hell in a hand basket.

After all, our children are in portable classrooms; it takes an hour or more to drive across town at rush hour; and there are deadly bacteria in our lakes. We have more foreign languages spoken in Orange County schools than the United Nations; and to top it off, Wal-Mart wants to build a Super Center next door!

From a developer's point of view, it's difficult if not impossible to do business here.

Government has a tourniquet on the arteries of the economic heart of the state – property rights – and doesn't hesitate to tighten it with every news headline. If you don't think this is true, try getting a permit for a major building... even on property zoned for such use... and then pay the impact fees!

I think the answer is somewhere in between those two poles. I am confident that there are enough checks and balances, enough economic reality and certainly enough love of the environment that our community leaders will make the right decisions. Not perfect choices but smart growth decisions.

Smart growth planning implies a vision of the future, a difficult task at best.

Just think of what has happened in the first seven years of this decade:

- Thousands of apartments were converted to condominiums changing the demographics and closing a valuable source of affordable housing;
- Single family home prices, which had barely kept up with inflation for ten years, nearly doubled in a few years – fueled by speculation and free credit – before sales abruptly stalled;
- New public student enrollments rocketed along for years, then two years ago went flat and are now negative;
- Property taxes and insurance have gone from affordable to confiscatory;
- Following 9/11, tourists – the golden geese of Florida's tax revenue – stayed home with their money for years.

I think the biggest challenge to the "growth belt" of Florida, in which Orlando is the buckle, is overcoming the historical parochial decision-making of our multitude of cities and counties. It is driven in no small part by political realities and a natural reluctance to expend (or even coordinate expenditures of) tax revenues for the benefit of anyone but the local electorate.

My point of reference for smart growth and hope for the future are the six points identified by the regional planning effort called *myregion.org*:

1. Preserve open space, recreational areas, farmland, water resources, and regionally significant natural areas.
2. Provide a variety of transportation choices.
3. Foster distinct, attractive, and safe places to live.
4. Encourage a diverse, globally competitive economy.
5. Create a range of obtainable housing opportunities and choices.
6. Build communities with educational, health care, and cultural amenities.

On the other hand, those who advocate stopping growth by requiring a constricting plebiscite in lieu of growth management are being disingenuous with the public. The results of their desired inaction would be catastrophic to Florida's economy and politically unsustainable. They will not stop growth; they will only not plan for growth.

I am convinced that the plan espoused by *myregion.org* has far more merit and more broad-based support than any effort to the contrary. I am confident that Florida is heading in the right direction.