

## **Osceola is next frontier, experts say**

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Housing boom is coming, so get ready, panel urges

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KISSIMMEE -- The future growth of Metro Orlando's economy will depend largely on Osceola County's ability to build 200,000 or more new homes over the next 25 years and wisely manage that staggering growth, a panel of land-use experts said Friday.

Osceola -- with its vast expanse of pasture and prairie -- will have to absorb an increasing share of housing construction in Central Florida as the supply of available land dwindles in neighboring Orange, Seminole and Lake counties, planners brought in by the Urban Land Institute of Washington told local officials and developers.

How Osceola handles this wave of growth will help define the four-county region's quality of life for decades to come as the county continues on a fast track from rural small towns to booming suburbs, the experts said.

"It's a frustrating period. We've got crowded roads, crowded schools, a lack of services, quite often not enough phone lines to the county offices to receive all the complaints from people," said panelist Gerard Tully, a Salt Lake City planning consultant. "Good planning can minimize that."

With land running out along the Interstate 4 corridor, most future development will occur through Lake and Osceola counties, said Andrew Borsanyi, a principal with The Concord Group, a California real-estate advisory firm. Much of the available open land is alongside Florida's Turnpike.

Based on large-scale projects already in the pipeline, nearly 40 percent of the region's housing growth is projected to take place in Osceola, which has the most developable land within commuting distance of Orlando, Borsanyi added.

"If people don't want to live in Osceola, the land's not available in Orange. They can go to Polk, they can go to an hour-plus away, they can go farther and farther out. But everyone agrees that risks becoming urban sprawl," Borsanyi said.

Based on current job creation and housing demands, at least 35,000 new homes annually will be needed over the next 25 years in Lake, Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties, Borsanyi said.

"For the job growth to continue, there has to be housing for these people, and your county is the linchpin," he told Osceola officials.

The county hired the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit research organization, to study an area of 28,000 acres on the east and southern shores of Lake Tohopekaliga, where five proposed mega-developments are expected to add 35,000 homes and 100,000 people over the next 10 to 15 years.

The institute, which offers guidance on land-use matters, brought a panel of seven experts in real-estate finance, transportation, engineering and design to analyze Osceola's growth plans. The county split the

\$100,000 cost of the study with the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, the agency that is scrutinizing the new projects.

In its research and more than 50 interviews this week, the panel concluded that traffic poses the single greatest threat to the quality of life in Osceola, where 235,000 people now live. Those five proposed developments alone will generate 250,000 to 400,000 daily car trips, and the county should look for ways to make regional road improvements before the new residents arrive, Tully said.

"They're not going to come and wait for a road to get built," he said.

The panel supported proposals to build an expressway linking the Central Florida GreeneWay to Florida's Turnpike and recommended it be extended west to I-4.

County officials took the presentation as validation of the steps they have already taken to prepare for future development. In its latest comprehensive plan for growth, the county set an urban-growth boundary to steer development near central water and sewer service. The plan also provides incentives for developers in the urban area to buy development rights from rural landowners.

"We've already begun to work toward what they are recommending we do," County Commission Chairman Paul Owen said. "Osceola County is going to be the leader in Central Florida as building quality, sustainable communities."

The panel suggested the county create a master plan with expectations that go way beyond the comprehensive plan, which local governments must file with the state and revise every seven years.

Such a plan would identify specific locations and standards for services such as schools, sewage pumping stations, stormwater-retention ponds and wildlife-management areas, said David Godschalk, a professor of city planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"You don't just have to respond to development proposals," Godschalk said. "You can set the framework -- where the major roads are going to be, what the timing of the schools and the utility extensions are going to be -- and then developers can respond to your framework."

Such standards also let developers know what's required of them so they can figure out how to pay for it, whether through impact fees, land dedications or special taxing districts, said Ann Saegert, a Dallas attorney who specializes in real-estate financing.

"We want your developers to understand what's going to be required to develop in this community and where is it going to happen," Saegert said. "Don't come back and ask a developer to contribute a park after they've spent several hundred thousand dollars on a plan. They should know."

Builders and planners have been pushing the county to tell them what it needs from them, said John Adams of RJ Whidden and Associates, a Kissimmee planning firm that's designing four of the five major developments near Lake Toho.

"The private sector wants to be a partner," Adams said, "but don't surprise them after they've spent thousands of dollars."

County officials said they plan to work with the public to come up with a vision for the community of which everyone can be proud.

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