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THE IMPORTANCE OF SCALE IN AREA-WIDE PLANNING STRATEGIES: BAY COUNTY OPTIONAL SECTOR PLAN

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I. INTRODUCTION

Strategies for area-wide planning are as variable as they are numerous. Both spatial and temporal strategies are needed to address the physical location issues as well as the impacts and opportunities that will occur over time. Also, there is a scale of strategies, ranging from the major decisions on the project approach and process to the minor day-to-day strategies of responding to issues. All strategies are dependent on a catalyst or trigger, usually some development pressure, event, or activity that forces the recognition that land use and infrastructure in a large area need to be examined. In addition, there must be an advocate to bring the issues to the attention of the public and land use regulatory agencies. This advocate may be a local government, regional or state agency, private landowner, or a citizens group. The objective of the advocate is to argue for a course of action and hopefully a solution to the area-wide land use problems.

This article addresses one area-wide planning effort that is taking place in Bay County, Florida. The catalyst for this effort was the Panama City-Bay County Airport and Industrial District who sought an alternative site for the Airport, since the District was unable to expand the existing location due to environmental constraints. FAA safety requirements and the 20-year forecasted growth of air traffic at the Airport mandated an evaluation of a series of alternatives. The recommended strategy was to relocate

1. AICP, SR. ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNER, PBS&J TAMPA
2. AICP, SR. PLANNER, PBS&J/PANAMA CITY BEACH
3. ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNER, PBS&J TAMPA
4. AICP, SR. TRANSPORTATION PLANNER, PBS&J/TAMPA
5. PHD, SENIOR SCIENTIST, PBS&J/TAMPA

rather than expand at the existing Airport. The potential relocation of the Panama City-Bay County International Airport from its current 700 acre location within the urbanized area of Panama City to a 4,000 acre tract in the undeveloped north central portion of the County set in motion a series of spatial strategic decisions that culminated in the area-wide planning effort named the West Bay Area Vision, *a planning framework*. Once a potential site for the new Airport had been identified, the landowner, The St. Joe Company, supported the effort and became an advocate of this area-wide planning effort.

The prospect of relocation of the International Airport to this new site created a unique opportunity for Bay County to examine long-term land use changes. To answer questions regarding long-term spatial land use changes and balance the opportunities of economic development with potential growth impacts, an optional sector plan was initiated. The optional sector planning process, authorized by Section 163.3245, Florida Statutes, is intended to support innovative and flexible planning strategy for areas within local governments that are experiencing development and growth pressures. This statute authorizes the state land-planning agency, Florida Department of Community Affairs (FDCA), to enter into an agreement authorizing preparation of an Optional Sector Plan upon the request of a local government.

In the first major strategy decision, Bay County began the Optional Sector Plan process by requesting reservation of one of the five authorized Sector Plan demonstration projects for an undetermined portion of the County. In February 1999 the FDCA acknowledged the request and indicated that the proposal was an acceptable candidate for an Optional Sector Plan.

The Optional Sector Plan was considered an appropriate strategy to address the land use changes that may result from the relocation of the airport to the north central portion of the County. A major strategic planning partnership was formed between Bay County, the Panama City-Bay County Airport and Industrial District, and The St. Joe Company to facilitate the planning effort. Together the planning partners conducted an Optional Sector Plan process, entitled the **West Bay Area Vision, a planning framework**.

Once the decision was made to conduct the Optional Sector Plan, it was important to define the spatial boundaries of the Sector. Here the strategy becomes ill defined with multiple options and an equal amount of input from the partners and public participants. After evaluating numerous alternatives, the selected sector planning area encompasses approximately 75,000 acres of north central Bay County. The dominant existing land use in the

sector planning area is silviculture, but small enclaves of rural residential communities include West Bay, Woodville, and areas east of Crooked and Burnt Mill creeks. The St. Joe Company is the largest landowner in the sector planning area.

The sector planning process is being implemented through two steps: (1) a long-term conceptual buildout overlay or Vision Plan; and (2) Detailed Specific Area Plans (DSAPs). The long-term overlay creates the vision or template for future development. However, an important element of the process is that the land uses defined in the overlay plan have no immediate effect on the issuance of a development order until followed by a detailed specific area plan. Land use and development in these areas continues to be subject to the Bay County Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Map in effect on January 1, 2002. Only after the adoption of a DSAP will the land use changes be made to the Bay County Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Map. DSAPs, by law, must encompass a minimum of 1,000 acres (unless exempted by the Department of Community Affairs), must be consistent with the overlay, and must provide adequate details necessary for consideration and approval.

II. VISION

Public participation was an important strategy in the development of the long-range vision plan. While not specifically required by the Optional Sector Planning process, a number of public forums were conducted to obtain input regarding the opportunities and potential impacts afforded by the West Bay Area Sector. These public forums addressed issues related to:

- the Bay County Comprehensive Plan;
- environmental features;
- economic development; and,
- public facilities and transportation.

The vision planning process was conducted in a series of informational meetings and public forums during which community issues were identified, guidelines and principles were defined, and a land use plan was developed. The informational meetings and public forums are outlined below.

III. PUBLIC SECTOR PLANNING FORUMS

| | |
|--|------------------------|
| Introduction to the Optional Sector Planning Process | Several, various dates |
| Comprehensive Plan and Demographics | October 23, 2001 |
| Environmental | October 30, 2001 |
| Economics | November 13, 2001 |
| Public Facilities and Transportation | November 27, 2001 |
| Open Forum at West Bay Elementary | December 3, 2001 |
| Design Charrette | December 11, 2001 |
| Review of Detailed Specific Area Plans (DSAPs) | Several, various dates |

The vision planning process culminated in the preparation of the Sector Overlay Plan in a Design Charrette. The Sector Overlay Plan provides an interpretation of the land use changes expected from the relocation of the airport and initiation of the conservation and economic development initiatives recommended at the public forums. This plan forecasts land uses to buildout of the Sector planning area, surpassing the ten-year planning horizon of the Bay County Comprehensive Plan.

One major strategy was developed from the public forums. This strategy advocated the protection of St. Andrew Bay from the primary and secondary impacts of development within the Sector. The Planning Partners recognized this objective and responded by establishing a large contiguous conservation area. The strategy of this conservation area was to eliminate development pressures, buffer land uses, and provide wildlife corridors throughout the Sector.

IV. PROPOSED LAND USES

Acres of land uses anticipated in the sector planning area, based on buildout conditions, are listed in the following table.

| Proposed Sector Land Use Summary * | | |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| Description | Acres | Percent |
| Agriculture/Timberland | 7,690 | 10.3 |
| Airport and Industrial District | 4,000 | 5.4 |
| Business Center | 2,070 | 2.8 |
| Conservation | 37,232 | 49.8 |
| Low-Intensity Village | 1,547 | 2.1 |
| Regional Employment Center | 3,565 | 4.8 |
| Village | 16,648 | 22.3 |
| Village Center | 348 | 0.5 |
| West Bay Center | 307 | 0.4 |
| Major Roads (SR 79, SR 77, and CR 388) | 577 | 0.7 |
| Water | 745 | 1.0 |
| Total | 74,729 | 100.0 |

*All acres are estimates.

Conservation is the largest single land use identified in the Sector Overlay Plan at approximately 50 percent of the sector area. The proposed Panama City-Bay County International Airport will occupy approximately five percent of the sector area. The proposed Airport will include commercial and general aviation facilities to accommodate existing and future needs. New facilities will initially include an 8,400 foot primary runway for commercial aircraft, a 5,000 foot crosswind runway for general aviation needs, a new 67,600 square foot commercial terminal, access road, and commercial and aviation support facilities. Eventual expansion of the primary runway to 12,000 feet, as well as the future addition of a third runway, is also planned.

The regional employment center, approximately five percent of the sector area, is planned for the area west of the airport. The center will attract aviation related and general industry, and service and distribution facilities that would benefit from a location near an airport. The Airport will be further complemented by the business center land use adjacent to the airport entrance road and eastern boundary, accounting for approximately three percent of the sector area. This commercial land use will include hotels, restaurants, office buildings, and distribution and maintenance facilities. The relocated Panama City-Bay County Airport is

identified as one of the land uses within the sector planning area. Other land uses include conservation lands, employment centers, commercial, and residential areas.

V. THE SECTOR PLANNING EXPERIENCE

The sector planning process authorized by Chapter 163.3245 of the Florida Statutes, envisioned five such plans across the state as a pilot program to prove the merit of long-range strategic visioning and planning. Other sector plans have been produced and adopted in Orange and Clay counties, with a fourth underway in Palm Beach County. Thus far, the experience has produced mixed results with only Orange County producing a detailed specific area plan out of the process. The sector planning history to date also suggests some changes to the authorizing statute that might be suggested by FDCA in the next legislative session, and include the following:

Although the sector plan process was a substitute for the Development of Regional Impact (DRI) process and actually provides exemption from some of the DRI requirements, the technical preparation of the plans must follow the requirements of the DRI Rule, Chapter 9J-2, FAC. This has led to confusion amongst reviewers about the Plan requirements and entitlements that are actually conveyed by both the Overlay Plan and Detailed Specific Area Plan.

Sector Plans and DSAPs as authorized by the statute can be prepared and approved concurrently. However, since the sector planning process is a visioning process developing standards, principles, and guidelines for future growth and development, and the Detailed Specific Area Plans are the equivalent of comprehensive plan amendments, requiring consecutive review and adoption rather than concurrent review, might be appropriate.

The DSAPs, since they are equivalent to a major Comprehensive Plan Amendment, are subject to the Comprehensive Plan Amendment limitation to a twice-annual cycle. Exemptions to this rule may be considered.

Debate also centers on what level of detail is necessary for both the Optional Sector Plan and individual DSAPs.

The sector planning process envisioned by the statute encourages spatial and temporal strategic planning. It is designed for very long range planning for large portions of a community with identified critical growth issues. The history of the optional sector plans in Florida is incomplete, but first indications are that the process is a necessary and productive option to the process of adopting changes to a community's comprehensive plan, incrementally, with the added benefit of the visioning process and a strategy for growth and development.

The West Bay Area Vision Sector Overlay Plan was approved for transmittal to the Florida Department of Community Affairs in September 2002. Two DSAPs, one detailing the development plan for the relocated airport, the other for mixed-use development around West Bay, are expected to be submitted for review in Spring 2003.

