

# The Looming Battle Over FLORIDA'S RURAL LANDS

BY: PATRICK VANASSE, AICP

## Is there a battle brewing between Florida's coastal and rural areas?

As Florida's population grows and development intensifies within coastal counties, public policy increasingly seems to suggest that rural areas should be responsible for providing the collective open space and natural areas for the entire state.

This issue truly came to light at this year's APA Florida conference in Miami. During RWA's panel discussion about rural planning in Florida's Heartland, an attendee stood up to admonish the panelists for even suggesting that there was a conflict brewing between coastal (or urban) and rural communities. He argued that it is counterproductive to approach growth management issues from such a divisive perspective, and that a cooperative approach should instead be fostered. Granted, his comments have merit, but we should recognize this urban-rural conflict and encourage free and open debate to help shed light on this growing dichotomy.

So, is there really a battle brewing? Some people, including agricultural-business entities and local government

from rural counties, definitely think so! However, the average Floridian, as well as many planning professionals focused on urban areas, are likely not aware of these sentiments. Although we may not yet have drawn the proverbial line in the sand, battle lines are being formed. The time is ripe for formulating forward-thinking growth management strategies that will truly protect Florida's vast agrarian areas and natural resources, while also promoting economic development and diversity in rural communities.

By their very nature, rural areas are targeted as providers of farmland, wildlife habitat, water resources, and open space for all of Florida. But should rural landowners be forced, through regulation, to carry this burden? If these areas truly provide benefits for all, shouldn't the burden be borne by everyone, and shouldn't the landowner be compensated for providing these social benefits? Ultimately, how we address these policy matters will have wide-ranging repercussions on urbanization, transportation, environmental protection, energy use, resource management, social justice, and private property rights.

It is simply too costly, and in some cases, impossible, to address these challenges effectively within our urban areas, where most of us live and work. Instead, the "sleepy" rural counties, characterized by vast areas of open

space and agriculture, provide the opportunity to implement innovative and far-reaching planning techniques to balance public benefits with private property rights. Incentive-based techniques, such as green payment mechanisms, land banks and other mitigation opportunities, Rural Land Stewardship programs, Transfer of Development Rights strategies, compact mixed-use development, rural economic development zones, and other novel approaches, must be employed to shape this new future.



RWA's Planning Group is fully involved in this very important public policy dialogue. We are committed to developing strategies aimed at protecting Florida's most significant environmental lands; promoting economic diversification and a viable agricultural industry; and directing appropriate forms of development to suitable areas, while at the same time respecting and upholding private property rights.

RWA intends to address specific rural issues, and is soliciting input from clients and colleagues in order to begin a dialogue on long-range planning for our rural lands. We welcome your comments, questions, and recommendations, and ask for your assistance in formulating growth management solutions to these local and statewide challenges.

Please email your comments or feedback to Patrick Vanasse at [pvanasse@consult-rwa.com](mailto:pvanasse@consult-rwa.com).

*RWA Planners helped develop Collier County's award-winning RLSA and Rural Fringe programs, drafted Rural Area Plans for Highlands and Hendry Counties, and created an innovative Tiered TDR Program. RWA is currently involved in developing strategies for Charlotte's East County Area.*