



Sarasota 2050 Gutted

"If you are failing to plan, you are planning to fail."

-- Benjamin Franklin

For decades, the Sarasota County Commission held the line on urban sprawl, at I-75 and in Englewood.

But the developers kept pushing, even though others pushed back. That led to the Sarasota 2050 Plan, in which the rural lands were opened up to urban development in exchange for protections for the taxpayers, the environment and other citizens' interests.

But then, during the building bust, developers started recruiting and bankrolling County Commission candidates they can control, with an eye towards gutting Sarasota 2050 and replacing it with standard, massive urban sprawl.

On October 22, 2014, the developers won. The rest of us lost.

Sarasota 2050 was gutted. Among the changes:

All timing is repealed

A potential explosion of urban sprawl is now allowed. Policies are repealed that limited development to 150% of demand as projected over 20 years, spread villages in certain areas 15 years apart and allowed the County to defer new development if the growth rate increased by more than 20% over the past ten years' average. Now all the development – a tremendous amount – is allowed all at once. It's the first time in over 30 years that Sarasota County has been without a timing limit on expanded urban development.

Goodbye Greenways.

With rare exception, all new off-site Greenways, depicted on maps as wide swaths of preserved habitat, will instead be developed as subdivisions. That's because developers are now given density rights they previously were required to purchase and transfer off the Greenways. The South Village was given its rights outright. The Central Village has enough rights on site. The North Village (Lakewood Ranch South) was amazingly allowed to count density rights on land it had already sold to the County for \$7 million. And one change gives developers density rights for building affordable housing they were already required to build, instead of transferring them from Greenways.

Fiscal neutrality is destroyed

All monitoring and follow-up reports are repealed, so the phony assumptions in initial reports can never be disproven and corrected. Some Commissioners said that it's alright that the first reports may be false because those "back-audits" will catch the truth and the developers will be required to pay. But now the back-audits are no more.

For example, an initial report was approved saying that the developer doesn't have to pay for mass transit because at present no buses run to the vacant land -- even though now the bus route has been added.

Several approved reports assume full impact fees will be paid even though they have been slashed indefinitely. No follow-up reports, no correction. The developer doesn't pay and the taxpayers pay instead.

Also, the developers will now be allowed to count their required affordable housing as if it is market-priced housing, thereby assuming more revenue to the County than will actually be achieved and destroying fiscal neutrality. Further, the specific requirement for a detailed traffic study to determine the developer's road contributions has been deleted.

No more "mixed use, walkable villages"

"Centrally located" mixed use Village Centers to serve the residents have been replaced with commercial strip centers on major highways to serve the regional public. The only thing walkable for residents will be "focal points" which may be merely tiny parks. Numerous "new urbanist" standards are repealed and a full exemption allowed. The "mix" of uses has been changed to effectively allow little more than subdivisions and the Village Center, and the phasing of that mix has been destroyed. Stormwater

ponds now count as open space, allowing less natural habitat. Requirements for internal greenbelts, buffers and road setbacks have been cut to almost nothing.

Huge subdivisions are allowed far out east

“Hamlets” – less dense urban development allowed by Sarasota 2050 in large areas east (in some cases far east) of the Interstate – will become vast, sprawling urban subdivisions rather than pockets of a limited number of homes surrounded by green space. This will be done by reducing the greenbelts between Hamlets from 500 feet to 50 feet.

Affordable housing is weakened

Instead of requiring housing at affordable prices, a house will now be deemed affordable merely if sold to someone below a certain income, even if they cannot afford it. Also, a huge loophole is created by providing that a developer can avoid the affordable housing requirement by “any other methodology” approved by the County Commission.

The result of this gutting of Sarasota 2050, if it continues to stand, will be traffic gridlock, higher taxes and deeper debt, environmental destruction, harm to city vitality and a devastation of property values from a glut of overdevelopment.

If we don't start electing County Commissioners who are independent of the developers, it is a failure of planning that we as a community will deserve.