

■ *Future Plans and Opportunities* ■

Supporting Economic and Employment Potential with County Projects and Plans

Integral to achieving the maximum potential of the Gateway Area is a comprehensive planning approach that recognizes the diversity of uses and activities in the Gateway Area and seeks logical connections among and between those uses and activities. With sound planning, the County has the ability to use County-owned properties to help fill the gaps in needed or desirable services and uses, and to create the synergistic relationships with area businesses, industries and governments that will position the Gateway Area for successful local, regional, national and international interaction. With the same confluence of conditions that first set the Area apart for its economic and employment potential thirty years ago still in place today, and with significant development activity still underway, the Gateway Area is already a diverse and dynamic employment center of the County. How then to make it better? The evaluation of the County-owned properties in the area, particularly those that might be underutilized from a contributory economic and employment perspective, is critical to this question.

Maximizing the employment potential of the Area requires attracting and retaining businesses and industries. How does this impact the transportation network, and the ability to effectively manage traffic carrying capacity of the major roadway system? How will development and redevelopment affect the natural environment? How do we ensure that planning for new opportunities is compatible with the need to plan and fund needed support facilities and services? And finally, how do we make sure that the quality of life for Gateway Area residents remains protected, and even enhanced, by implementing a long range plan for the Gateway Area? To answer these questions requires that we have well-thought-out plans and policies to guide critical future decisions. The following discussion explores the potential for County projects, properties and planning in the Gateway Area to impact and influence the goals and outcomes for the Gateway Area.

■ ■ **Recreational Plans and Opportunities**

The most significant recreational opportunity located in the Gateway Area, and perhaps for the County as a whole, is associated with property under Pinellas County Utilities/Solid Waste Operations ownership. The **241 acre closed Toytown landfill** is one of the few large properties not yet committed for a specific development (**see Figure 2**). Particularly if associated with adjacent privately-owned property, creative multi-use recreational opportunities exist at this location. However, since it is a closed landfill, any future development for a public use, including a recreational use, must be planned to address the physical, environmental and permitting limitations imposed by the site characteristics. With the County's build-out condition, opportunities to purchase or develop vacant tracts of this size are rare. But a tract of this size is required if the County is going to plan for any sort of regional recreational venue. Recreational

planning has taken on increased importance in the past few years with the completion of the Active Recreation for Pinellas County Residents report in 2002, resulting in the current recreational master planning process underway. Use of the Toytown property for recreational purposes was discussed in that report, recognizing that the size and contiguity of the property presented significant opportunity. The proximity of the property to the planned Progress Energy Trail alignment of the Pinellas Trail provides further value to the location as an accessible recreational hub. In addition, the fact that the property is centrally located with major roadway access in all directions makes it desirable for the types of regional recreational uses that benefit local residents, as well as the local economy by attracting recreational enthusiasts at both regional and national levels to Pinellas County. For these reasons, a study of the recreational potential of Pinellas County Utilities' Gateway Area properties is being undertaken. This scale of recreation does not necessarily address community-level recreation needs, requiring that the County continue to plan at a community-level, even while devising a regional plan for recreational and economic success. In fact, a recreational survey has been devised for the Highpoint area to gauge recreational interests.

As mentioned above, the **Progress Energy Right-of-Way/Easement** is currently under consideration as an eastern alignment of the Fred E. Marquis Pinellas Trail. Recently, a lease agreement was completed between the County and Progress Energy allowing for co-location of the Trail along the powerline alignment. Currently, construction of the portion of the Trail north of Ulmerton Road is planned to begin in 2006 using Penny for Pinellas dollars. The County has received approval and allocation of Federal Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) funding to complete overpasses. Portions of the project have been scheduled by the MPO and put into the FDOT work program. The southern alignment in the vicinity of the County's Bridgeway Acres landfill will still need to be worked out with Solid Waste/Utilities and environmental permitting officials. An alignment to connect the Progress Energy Trail with the closed Toytown landfill property, a potential future recreational venue, is under consideration in association with the mixed use development project planned in proximity to the County's Solid Waste Operations; however, there are no final plans. The Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan requires bicycle lanes and sidewalks to be included along with any County roadway construction projects in the Area. Ongoing attention to bicycle facilities planning and safety in the Gateway Area is important, not only from a recreational, but also a transportation perspective, as the Area matures and integrates as a residential and employment center.

The **Gateway Preserve** is over 1600 acres of County-managed preserveland. While the Preserve is largely wetland, there may be the potential for some trail development, including a "blueway," or canoe/kayak trail destination. However, the site constraints are significant for public access as very little of the land is upland. Still, the Preserve is an integral and defining environmental feature of the Gateway Area and must be considered in the County's long range planning.

■ ■ **An Intermodal Transportation Hub For The Future**

An intermodal “hub” is envisioned in the Gateway Area, with its confluence at the 112 acre former “Speedway” and adjacent horse stables site. The area is seen as an ideal site for the co-location of several transportation-related uses, including the Roosevelt Boulevard/CR 296 connector and an intermodal/high speed rail terminal. According to the 2002 Airport Master Plan Update, “it is envisioned as a consolidated regional transfer center for passengers using the Airport, monorail, local/regional bus service, and rental cars” and would be designed to accommodate high speed rail. The monorail is currently proposed to connect the Airport to downtown St. Petersburg and downtown Clearwater. Funding has been earmarked for the Roosevelt Boulevard/CR 296 connector, and the Speedway site was recently acquired for this purpose. Construction dollars are not yet committed. Several segments of the CR 296 connector are already in design, but construction is not anticipated until the outer years of FDOT’s work program. There are also plans for integrating the rest of the intermodal plan, including elevated guideway and bus rapid transit, into the Area. Because of the suitability of the Speedway site, should a specific commitment be made to the intermodal projects, up to two thirds of the property is currently considered “reserved” for these uses.

As mentioned earlier, PSTA is interested in using a portion of the property for a Cross-Bay terminal, for commuter buses to and from Hillsborough County. The County, the FDOT and PSTA will be working closely during 2005 to evaluate the options, and develop a conceptual plan, for optimal co-location of uses at this site.

PSTA, FDOT and the MPO are currently evaluating Ulmerton Road to determine its suitability for Bus Rapid Transit strategies such as signal priority and “queue jumpers” (i.e., allowing the bus to advance first at intersections by using the right lane to “jump” around cars). Trolleys, or “loopers” are being considered in other locations around the County to move people around a limited area; an evaluation of the Gateway Area for such a service might be warranted to complete the mix of integrated mobility options.

Overall, this intermodal “hub” would be designed to support the economic, employment and transportation goals of the Gateway Area and the County as a whole, by optimizing mobility in and around the Area. Obviously, to achieve this will require coordination and a common interest among County departments, as well as federal, state and local agencies and governments. Therefore, in regard to planning and decision-making, the County should be a leader, as countywide interests are at stake with the commitments made to this project area, or mobility “hub.”

■ ■ **Implementing Airport Plans and the St. Petersburg-Clearwater Airport Master Plan Update**

Airport Operations

The Board approved the Airport Master Plan Update on December 21 of 2004. Because airport markets and climate are volatile, the County must plan for a future that recognizes the cyclical nature of the industry. The Master Plan contains specific funding

strategies for the needed capital improvements, initially focusing on a pay-as-you-go approach. Adoption of the Master Plan is the first step towards eligibility for State and Federal grants. Developing a plan for, and construction of, the terminal structure should be underway soon, contingent upon approval of a specific project by the Board of County Commissioners. Any short-term terminal improvements will be financed on a “pay-as-you-go” basis.

Airco Golf Course

The Airport’s Airco golf course property, at over 124 acres, is a focal point of the County’s redevelopment plans in the Gateway Area. The golf course use is planned to be phased out for development to a use with more countywide economic benefit. While specific plans are not formalized, the site is intended to be developed as a business and employment center. This property is required to be used to provide revenue for the Airport, according to the provisions of by the Federal transfer of property in 1947. Because of the size of the site, the County will need to determine if redevelopment plans are of a threshold requiring treatment as a Development of Regional Impact (DRI). Regardless, the site planning process will require that such things as compatibility with adjacent uses, the adequacy of roads and infrastructure, compatibility with the onsite and surrounding environment as well as the neighboring community be adequately addressed.

Airport Industrial Park and Business Center

As described earlier, the existing 42 acre Airport Industrial Park and Business Center is a successful business location, although several of the occupants are public sector uses. It is expected that the Center will continue to be an employment focal point, but will receive new attention regarding marketing, accessibility and visibility, particularly as the public sector uses onsite re-locate to the EpiCenter in the Rubin Icot Center.

Commercial Property to the South

There are several commercial properties to the south of existing Airport operations, under Airport ownership, totaling approximately 33 acres. Most of the properties have direct access to Ulmerton Road. While small commercial interests have expressed interest in developing the properties, and a Cracker Barrel restaurant is under construction now, there is benefit to looking at the remaining contiguous properties as a whole before parceling out opportunities individually. Ulmerton Road is already experiencing level of service deficiencies and additional commercial attractors along the roadway may not be the best development alternative.

Properties to the East

The Airport also owns the properties to the immediate east of Airco golf course and existing Airport operations. These properties are important for several reasons. They provide an excellent buffer between the planned activities at the Airport, along with the planned development of a business and economic center at the Airco Golf Course, and the residential areas to the east. Additionally, the proximity of the property to the nearby

Yat Kitischee archaeological site makes it likely that significant cultural resources might be found on this property as well. The site also offers potential for a stormwater management purpose associated with redevelopment of the Airco property. Overall, maintaining this County property in a largely natural condition, coupled with analysis of a compatible stormwater management function, and the potential for passive public access, is recommended. However, additional cultural exploration should be the initial priority in order to determine the level of activity and accessibility appropriate for this property.

■ ■ **Plans for Other County Properties**

Solid Waste Operations

Solid Waste Operations will continue to develop its landfill operation. In fact, development will occur on a continuous basis for at least the next 50 years. New residential and industrial development planned in the vicinity may be impacted by this ongoing operation. It is imperative, however, that the landfill operation continue in this location, otherwise solid waste will need to be transported out of the County, resulting in an extraordinary increase in the cost of solid waste disposal for all County residents and businesses in the future. This is the reason for the reluctance to allow residential uses too close to the operating landfill, and the reason, therefore, for the creation of a buffer zone regulating development around solid waste operations. Anticipating that future residents would object to build-out of the landfill operation, the Board of County Commissioners adopted regulations that would control the location of residential and mixed-use development in proximity to Solid Waste Operations. In this manner, the Board can balance the economic objectives of the Gateway Area with the long-term needs of countywide solid waste disposal and management responsibilities.

Criminal Justice Complex and Jail

The Criminal Courts Complex is complete, and the Jail facility is in phase 2 of its 3 phase development, as described in the Florida Quality Development application for the Complex. Phase 2 includes a 432 bed health care facility for the Jail, and remodeling/reconstruction of the food service, dining and laundry facilities. Build out of the FQD is expected by 2012. However, additional land will still be required for some limited expansion associated with juvenile justice operations. The vacated PSTA site on 49th Street appears to provide the location for this expansion. Coordination with the City of Largo on use of the PSTA site will be required. As the entire Complex is in close proximity to the Cross Bayou Canal, any development and all future operations associated with this sizable operation should contribute to improving overall environmental quality and water quality in the Canal, consistent with the purpose of the Cross Bayou Watershed planning underway.

Jumbo Sports Site

This property, while having certain site constraints, still has redevelopment potential to a use with more economic and employment value. Pinellas County Economic Development is currently marketing the property under its existing commercial general land use designation. To support this purpose, the County should evaluate the benefit of amending the site to an Industrial Limited land use designation in order to support uses with a higher level of employment and economic return. With the exception of commercial land uses around the intersection, the surrounding area is largely industrial. The traffic impacts associated with light industry would likely be less than that associated with commercial development.

Vacated PSTA site on 49th Street

While a portion of this property will be reserved for use by the City of Largo for expansion of their wastewater operations, the remainder of the site is available for other uses. However, the site might provide the appropriate location for expansion of Criminal Justice operations rather than additional economic development.

Cross Bayou Out-Parcel (formerly Turtle Club)

This 9-acre property is currently vacant; and was the site of a former restaurant use. While a land use change was recently proposed in order to make the property more commercially viable, the proposal was eventually withdrawn. The site is for sale at this time with its current Industrial land use designation.

150th Avenue North Site

This 29 acre property, located behind the Crossroads (previously Bay Area Outlet) Mall, is currently being marketed for sale by Economic Development. It is in a largely natural condition, with jurisdictional wetlands, a retention pond, and a small area of uplands. While the site was originally envisioned for a major drainage purpose, Pinellas County Public Works has since determined that the location is not ideal for this purpose. Hence, the site might have greater overall value in association with a redevelopment purpose, particularly since it is adjacent to the Mall property.

Integrating Plans and Opportunities Successfully into the Surrounding Environment

The success of the Gateway Area depends on more than projects; it depends on successful integration of the plans and projects into the surrounding natural and community environment. The desire to maximize the economic and employment potential of the Gateway Area cannot be at the expense of the natural surroundings, nor should it jeopardize financial commitments made by the County to the protection of the Gateway Preserve, or the County's upcoming commitments to watershed restoration and management.

Additionally, planning for the Gateway Area must recognize existing neighborhoods - Gateway is home and community to many people. The residential land uses contribute to both the vitality and diversity of the Gateway Area. Consequently, County projects and plans must be sensitive to neighborhood concerns and needs. For example, residents both in and outside of the Gateway Area have expressed concern over plans to expand Airport operations, particularly in regard to noise levels. Concerns such as these require creative and ongoing planning to resolve.

The following details provide further description and context to these types of concerns and relate natural surroundings and quality of life to the planning process for the Gateway Area.

■ ■ *Natural Resource Protection and Public Use Opportunities*

The Gateway Area contains at least two significant environmental features, the approximately 1,600 acre Gateway Preserve and the Cross Bayou Canal. The Gateway Preserve is a part of the County's network of managed environmental lands, managed by the Environmental Lands Division of the Pinellas County Department of Environmental Management. It is unique in that it was the first large environmental investment by the County for natural resource protection. Today, the Preserve is managed by the County for its significant regional habitat value and for its contribution to the overall goals of the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. The Preserve was recently annexed by the City of St. Petersburg.

The Cross Bayou Canal bisects the County, and is navigable in portions. Off and on, the Canal has been the subject of discussion by the County as a possible canoe trail, or blueway. However, for several reasons, including security issues associated with the proximity to the Coast Guard Facility and the Black Hawk Training Facility, it has been difficult to advance a plan for such a use. Regardless, the Cross Bayou Canal remains a significant environmental feature in the Cross Bayou Watershed and water quality issues have contributed to its priority in the County's watershed planning program. Watershed diagnostics and planning are currently underway by staff from the County, the City of Largo, the City of Pinellas Park and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. The Cross Bayou watershed management initiative recently received a designation by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Land

Revitalization/One Clean-up Pilot Program which will provide financial support for the County's watershed management and land revitalization goals. Additionally, the EPA recently awarded the County an environmental assessment grant complementing the Cross Bayou designation. This designation goes hand-in-hand with the County's brownfield initiative, and the program components of both can be applied throughout the watershed to achieve watershed improvement and County redevelopment goals.

The Gateway Area is also home to significant cultural resources and was the site of a major archaeological excavation, the Yat Kitischee site, in the 1990s in the proximity of the Airport. Protection of the Yat Kitischee site and its resources as a reflection of Pinellas County's past remains important to the County. The Yat Kitischee site is currently protected, but it is likely that archaeological resources are located on other properties in the vicinity. The Airport completed an archaeological assessment of the area in 2005 and additional protection measures might be worthwhile and appropriate.

Incorporating Environmental Protection into the Planning Process

Protection of the natural resources in the Gateway Area should be a priority as the County has invested significant time and dollars towards the creation, development and management of the diverse and dynamic coastal preserve system represented by the Gateway Preserve, and Weedon Island to the south. The Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan recognizes, and commits to, the value of using environmental lands for education and public enjoyment in a manner that instills environmental stewardship. The wise integration and enhancement of the environment into the planning for Gateway, and representing the preserve lands as an integral feature of the Area, is key to ensuring stewardship for the surrounding natural environment. Planning for public access to the natural lands, therefore, is essential, even if access is largely by kayak or canoe.

Road planning, redevelopment planning and site planning present the opportunity for incremental environmental improvement. For example, exploring creative regulatory and funding strategies and priorities for beautification, habitat restoration and landscaping will contribute positively to the character and environmental value of the Area. Planning for road improvements can offer, for example, the opportunity to enhance the aesthetics and environment along the roadway corridor.

The Gateway Area is situated predominantly in the Cross Bayou and Roosevelt drainage basins. Consequently, long range planning for the Gateway Area needs to recognize specific watershed issues and must contribute to watershed improvement. For example, multi-jurisdictional watershed planning for improvements in the Cross Bayou Basin is underway (as previously described) between the County, the cities of Largo and Pinellas Park, and SWFWMD. In both watersheds, the issues to be addressed include compliance with the water quality improvement aspects of the County's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit and importantly, compliance with new surface water quality standards regarding maximum allowable pollutant loads (i.e., total maximum daily loads, or TMDLs). The Roosevelt Basin in particular drains to Tampa Bay, a National Estuary, which is a priority waterbody for

improvement both locally and nationally. As a member of the Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP), and playing a key role in the development of TBEP's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for Tampa Bay, the County has made a significant technical, scientific and financial commitment to improving conditions in Tampa Bay. Tampa Bay will soon be subject to new water quality and watershed restoration requirements associated with Clean Water Act compliance, which should have an impact on how development activities are evaluated and regulated in the Roosevelt Watershed.

All of the property controlled by Solid Waste Operations is currently subject to National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit requirements, which is one reason why the location of Tampa Bay Water's brackish wells and water treatment facility are a concern. The withdrawals have the potential to affect the ground water level gradient required to maintain the integrity and function of the slurry wall around the Solid Waste properties, which is required by State regulations.

Clearly, planning for the Gateway Area must be consistent with, and help to implement, regulatory directives, but planning and redevelopment in the Gateway Area also presents the opportunity for the County to be a model for sustainable environmental planning and low impact site design (i.e., environmentally-friendly site planning techniques that conserve natural resources and hydrologic functions). In particular, this is possible with the projects under direct County control and in the development/redevelopment of County-owned properties. In turn, the County's planning and actions should be a model for other local governments and the private sector in sustainable and quality redevelopment.

The Residential Community

An additional consideration in long range planning for the Gateway Area is the evaluation of opportunities to provide new and better integration of residential land uses into the Gateway mix. That is, by providing housing closer to employment, the potential to decrease the number of trips on the overall roadway system exists. For example, the ability to coordinate local transit with the location of housing and employment so that employees can get easily from home to work and back without a car is a desirable goal. To be effective, this is likely to require the introduction of new housing options directly into the mix of business and employment related land uses. Consequently, land use changes to support mixed use development may be appropriate in certain areas. In addition, there may be sites that offer redevelopment potential by conversion to a residential use.

Existing neighborhoods must also be considered in the long range planning for the Gateway Area. The unincorporated residents of Feather Sound, for example, have already expressed concern over the build-out of the Airport properties and the potential impact on their quality of life. Ongoing communication between the County and residents is critical.

The residents of Highpoint have more immediate concerns over neighborhood revitalization, including access to active recreational opportunities. In regard to the

Highpoint Area, the County has an ongoing neighborhood revitalization effort, and is continuing to look for sites with community recreation potential. County and City of Largo staff have discussed the future of providing recreation in the community through collaboration, and the City has discussed potential annexation, although the City has not expressed any definitive plans at this time.

It is important then, that individual community needs and issues be recognized and addressed when planning for the Gateway Area if the existing residential communities are to remain viable, and if additional residential uses are going to be successfully integrated into the Area.