

## Economic Development and Directed Growth

### My View

I grew up in south Leon County. My third generation family business is located in north Wakulla County. Naturally, I was disappointed when the Leon County Commission refused to engage in a thoughtful conversation about the future use of the Fairgrounds and the need for economic development in the area. Even the casual observer can see the vacant buildings and underutilized real estate along South Monroe Street and the Woodville Highway. Property values and household incomes there continue to be far below county averages.

It is true, we are constrained by the economic realities of the recession, but it is shortsighted and an admission of defeat to hide from our future and surrender our ability to shape it. Despite the current conditions, I see hopeful signs. There is a realistic opportunity for the development of a home-grown, nature/recreational based tourism industry promoting hiking, biking, camping, horseback riding, canoeing, historic sites and nature observation for this underserved part of our community.

There are many treasures hidden in a field of green. They can be found in the existing system of multi-use trails, improved bicycle lanes, waterways and camp sites throughout Leon and Wakulla Counties. Dozens of neighborhoods, parks and historic sites are connected by this greenway trail network. It would take weeks of full-time exploration to visit and experience all of them.

The Capitol Cascades Park, FAMU Way and Gaines Street revitalization projects, now underway, will connect FSU, FAMU, Downtown and nearby neighborhoods with improved sidewalks and bike lanes. This will create more access to the Saint Marks Trail for thousands of office workers, students and residents. This popular trail is now enjoyed by 280,000 annual users. The improvements to Orange Avenue, Blair Stone Road and Capital Circle SE give thousands of residents in NE, SE and central Leon County neighborhoods a safe, alternative way to travel to the trail head located near the intersection of Capital Circle and the Woodville Highway.

As more people become familiar with our greenway trails and begin using them, their confidence and abilities will improve leading to an increased use of the network not only for recreational purposes but also as an alternative means of transportation. With more people, the potential for the development of specialty retail shops, tour-guide businesses, lodging, restaurants and providers of other general consumer needs near the trails becomes more viable. There is evidence that properties located near multi-use trails support higher market values.

If the State of Florida should relocate other downtown state agencies to Southwood, then the remaining property may be transferred to joint city/county ownership and incorporated into an expanded Capitol Cascades Park. Some of the land could be set aside for taxable, private sector

development as cultural, retail, restaurant and entertainment. Perhaps, we could see the return of Centennial Field and the Old Farmers Market. Maybe the long-held dream of converting the Old City Water Works to a restaurant could soon become a reality. What can be done to encourage this kind of diversified, healthy economic development activity?

- Appoint a City/County Coordinator to oversee all elements of our greenway trail network and marketing campaign; pursue grant funding; create cooperative relations with all public and private groups in Leon and adjacent counties for any future enhancements.
- Initiate a survey to establish a baseline of public awareness and use of the greenway trail network.
- Invite the public to participate in a contest for a local and regional marking campaign with a cash award and public recognition for the winning concept.
- Survey every six months for user feedback to determine the effectiveness of the campaign and modify the campaign as needed to improve public awareness and utilization.
- Eliminate all city and county permitting fees, electric, water, sewer hook-up charges and business license taxes for locally owned start-up, relocations or expansion of existing local businesses in areas such as the Downtown and Southside/Frenchtown Community Redevelopment Agency Districts (CRA).
- Rebate the increase in property taxes attributable to desirable business development in the CRA.
- Reduce costs and the time required for permits in the CRA by authorizing the reviewing staff to make common sense decisions relating to publically funded greenway trail projects and desirable private sector projects, particularly in the cases of the adaptive re-use of existing sites.

Creating incentives and promoting desirable development activity in underserved areas of our community is consistent with the goals, objectives and policies as set out in our Comprehensive Plan and Southern Strategy.

If you agree that the development of a home-grown, nature/recreational based tourism industry is suitable for the people of Leon County, then by all means, contact your city and county commissioners and the members of our state legislative delegation and encourage them to get onboard.

Don't be a snail. Go to the trail for recreation, adventure and fun.

Rick Malphurs

Candidate for Leon County Commission, at-large, group 2