

STRATEGIC REGIONAL POLICY PLAN

**for the
Withlacoochee Region**

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STRATEGIC REGIONAL POLICY PLAN
WITHLACOOCHEE REGION, FLORIDA

Adopted
August 5, 1997

WITHLACOOCHEE REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL
1241 S.W. 10th Street
Ocala, FL 34474-2798
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INTRODUCTION

A. MANDATED BY THE STATE OF FLORIDA

The eleven regional planning councils in Florida were mandated by the Legislature (186.507, Florida Statutes) in 1993 to prepare Strategic Regional Policy Plans to replace the existing Comprehensive Regional Policy Plans. This Strategic Regional Policy Plan was prepared by the Withlacoochee Regional Planning Council in response to that mandate. The current draft is the Strategic Regional Policy Plan that the Withlacoochee Regional Planning Council proposes for the region; it will be used for formal review by state and local governments and for receiving public input at public hearings to be held in the region. It will not become the final Strategic Regional Policy Plan for the region until it is formally adopted by the Board of Directors of the Withlacoochee Regional Planning Council by a two-thirds majority. After adoption, the Strategic Regional Policy Plan will be enacted into the Florida Administrative Code and have the authority of administrative law.

B. WHAT IS A STRATEGIC REGIONAL POLICY PLAN?

A Strategic Regional Policy Plan is a long range guide for the physical, economic, and social development of a planning region which identifies regional goals and policies" (Rule 27E-5.001, F.A.C.). The rule requires that...

...plans shall be developed through a collaborative process that emphasizes consensus and coordination between local governments, regional entities, state and federal agencies, other appropriate organizations, and the public.

The Strategic Regional Policy Plan is not just a plan for the regional planning council, it is a plan for the region. The plan contains regional goals and policies to promote a coordinated program of regional actions directed at resolving problems and needs identified in the trends and conditions analyses of each strategic regional subject area. The required strategic regional subject areas are affordable housing, economic development, emergency preparedness, natural resources of regional significance, and regional transportation. The plan also must identify and address significant regional resources and facilities that could be adversely impacted by development activities.

The primary difference between the Strategic Regional Policy Plan and the previous Comprehensive Regional Policy Plan is that the Strategic Regional Policy Plan is intended to be strategic rather than comprehensive in nature and scope. Rule 27E-5.002(9) defines "strategic" as proactive, future and results-oriented with a focus on important long term priorities, needs and problems of the region. Unlike the Comprehensive Regional Policy Plan, the Strategic Regional Policy Plan is not required to address all the goals in the State Comprehensive Plan (Chapter 187, Florida Statutes)--but it must nevertheless be consistent with and further the State Comprehensive Plan.

C. PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGIC REGIONAL POLICY PLAN

The purpose of the Strategic Regional Policy Plan is to serve as a basis for the review of the resources and facilities found in local government comprehensive plans originating in the Region (27E-5.001(4), F.A.C.). Other purposes include:

1. To implement and further the goals and policies of the State Comprehensive Plan with regard to the strategic regional subject areas and other components addresses in the plan.
2. To provide long range policy guidance for the physical, economic, and social development of a region.

3. To establish public policy for the resolution of disputes over regional problems, needs, or opportunities through the establishment of regional goals and policies and to provide a regional basis and perspective for the coordination of governmental activities and the resolution of problems, needs, and opportunities that are of regional concern or scope.
4. To establish goals and policies, in addition to other criteria established by law, that provide a basis for the review of developments of regional impact, regional review of federally assisted projects, and other activities of the regional planning council. In addition, the plan may recommend specific locations or activities in which a project, that due to its character or location, should be a development of regional impact within the region. Standards included in strategic regional policy plans shall be used for planning purposes only and not for permitting or regulatory purposes. A regional planning council shall not adopt a planning standard that differs materially from a planning standard adopted by rule by a state or regional agency, when such rule expressly states the planning standard is intended to preempt action by the regional planning council.
5. To establish goals and policies to assist the state and the council in the determination of consistency of local comprehensive plans with strategic regional policy plans and the state comprehensive plan. Strategic Regional Policy Plans shall serve as a basis to review the resources and facilities found in local government comprehensive plans.
6. To establish land development and transportation goals and policies in a manner that fosters region-wide transportation systems.
7. To serve as a basis for decisions by the regional planning council.
8. To guide the administration of federal, state, regional, and local agency programs and activities in a region to the extent provided by law.
9. To identify significant regional resources and facilities, infrastructure needs, or other problems, needs, or opportunities of importance to the region.
10. To identify natural resources of regional significance and promote the protection of those resources.
11. To set forth economic development goals and policies that promote regional economic growth and improvement.
12. To set forth goals and policies that address the affordable housing and emergency preparedness problems and needs for the Region.

D. CONSISTENCY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMPREHENSIVE PLANS WITH STRATEGIC REGIONAL POLICY PLAN

Rule 9J-5.021(1) FAC requires that each local government comprehensive plan in the region be consistent with the strategic regional policy plan and with the state comprehensive plan. Consistency is defined as being compatible with and furthering the regional and state plans. The term "compatible" means that the local plan is not in conflict with the regional and state plans. The term "furthers" means to take action in the direction of realizing goals or policies of the state or regional plan. For the purposes of determining consistency of the local plan with the state and regional plans the state or regional plans shall be construed as a whole and no specific goal and policy shall be construed or applied in isolation from the other goals and policies in the plans (9J-5.021(2) FAC).

E. STATEMENT OF INTENT

The goals and policies in the Strategic Regional Policy Plan are intended for planning purposes only. The Strategic Regional Policy Plan is not a regulatory document, nor does it create regulatory authority. According to state law, the Strategic Regional Policy Plan may not establish binding level of service standards for public facilities and services provided or regulated by local governments; however, this limitation shall not be construed to limit the authority of regional planning councils to propose objections, recommendations, or comments on local plans or plan amendments (Chapter 186.507(14) F.S.).

F. THE STRATEGIC REGIONAL PLANNING PROCESS

The procedures used to formulate the Withlacoochee Strategic Regional Policy Plan were set forth by the state in Rule 27E-5.001 FAC. The Council's procedures in developing the Strategic Regional Policy Plan are summarized below.

1. Public Participation

Public input and participation were invited during the initial formulation of the Strategic Regional Policy Plan through the required initial public hearing and at ensuing Council meetings where audience input was solicited. Public input will be received at public hearings to be held in the region during the review phase of the draft plan.

2. Local Government Participation

Local government participation has occurred primarily through the county commissioners and municipal officials serving on the Council's Board of Directors. Local government planning staff were invited to serve on an ad hoc Technical Advisory Committee and participated in the review of draft copies of the strategic regional subject area chapters.

3. Participation by Other Agencies

Copies of the draft strategic regional subject area chapters were circulated to various agencies for review and comment during the formulation of the plan. These included the Executive Office of the Governor, Department of Community Affairs, Southwest Florida Water Management District, St. Johns River Water Management District, Suwannee River Water Management District, Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Florida Department of Transportation, U.S. Economic Development Administration, etc. Computerized mapping data from the three water management districts was utilized in the formulation of the accompanying maps.

4. Existing Plans

Existing plans and regulations affecting the strategic regional subject areas were reviewed to provide a an overall planning and regulatory framework for the trends and conditions analysis for each strategic regional subject area.

5. Data and Analysis

The data utilized in the plan was assembled from various sources. These sources are listed in the References section of this document. Data sources utilized in this plan are available for public inspection at the offices of the Withlacoochee Regional Planning Council in Ocala.

G. PLAN ORGANIZATION

The content and format of the Strategic Regional Policy Plan is set forth in Rule 27E-5.004, F.A.C., and this document was organized thereby. The organization and content of the plan are summarized below.

1. Executive Summary

The Executive Summary briefly describes strategic regional subject areas and selected goals and policies of specific concern to the region. It also summarizes important conditions and trends that exist in the region.

2. Strategic Regional Subject Areas

The Withlacoochee Regional Planning Council chose five strategic regional subject areas to include in the plan: affordable housing, economic development, transportation, natural resources and emergency preparedness. These are discussed in separate chapters which form the substance of this document. Strategic regional subject areas are subject areas that--viewed from a regional perspective--have the potential to affect the region's significant physical characteristics and/or its quality of life. Included within each strategic regional subject area chapter is a list of identified resources or facilities of regional significance. For the convenience of the reader these lists have been summarized in Appendices A and B.

3. Trends and Conditions Statement

Included within each strategic regional subject area chapter is a statement of trends and conditions pertinent to that topic. These include discussions of existing requirements of other planning or regulatory programs; the significance of the strategic regional subject area to the region; list of regionally significant resources, facilities and systems; relationship to the state comprehensive plan; forecast of future conditions related to the strategic regional subject area; problems, needs and opportunities associated with the strategic regional subject area; and, goal statements and regional indicators.

4. Regionally Significant Resources and Facilities

As stated above, each strategic regional subject area chapter includes a list of regionally significant resources, facilities and systems. The significance of this list is that it identifies those specific facilities or resources which must be protected either through preservation or mitigation from the adverse impacts of development activities. The locations of these resources and facilities are depicted on the accompanying maps.

5. Goals

Goals are presented for each strategic regional subject area, along with regional indicators to measure progress toward implementation. Goals are long term ends toward which programs and activities should be ultimately directed. The goals devolve from the analysis in each strategic regional subject area and arise from the discussion of problems, needs and opportunities for each subject area. Furthermore, goals must be consistent with and in furtherance of the state comprehensive plan.

A note about the numbering system for the goals in the Plan: the first digit in each goal is the same as the strategic subject area chapter number and tells the reader precisely which chapter the goal comes from. For example Goal 1.1 would be the first goal in the Affordable Housing chapter (chapter one); Goal 2.1 would be the first goal in the Economic Development chapter (chapter two). By adopting this numbering system, each goal bears a unique numerical designation throughout the Plan and is readily recognizable as to its strategic regional subject area.

6. Policies

Presented with the goals are policies that promote activities and programs in furtherance of implementation of the identified goals. Policies--which must have a region-wide application--are designed to promote and develop a coordinated government and private sector agency programs to work toward the resolution of the identified problems and needs. Policies must also be consistent with and in furtherance of the state comprehensive plan.

A note about the numbering system for the policies in the Plan: the first digit in each goal is the same as the strategic subject area chapter number and tells the reader precisely which chapter the goal comes from. The second digit refers to the specific goal number for that chapter. For example Policy 1.1.1 is the first policy of the first goal in the Affordable Housing chapter (chapter one); Goal 2.1.1 would be the first policy of the first goal in the Economic Development chapter (chapter two). By adopting this numbering system, the number of each policy bears a unique numerical designation throughout the Plan and is readily recognizable as to its strategic regional subject area and specific goal.

7. Coordination Outline

The Coordination Outline appears as Appendix C in this document. Its intent is to provide an overview of the Council's cross acceptance (Appendix H), dispute resolution (Appendix G), public participation and related regional planning and coordination activities. The Rule states that the outline is presented for information purposes only to describe how local governments and citizens are involved in developing, implementing and updating the plan, and how the Council will help resolve inconsistencies between local, state and regional plans.

8. Glossary/Acronyms/References

This document includes a glossary that defines the key terms and acronyms appearing in the text. A listing of references utilized in the compilation of this Plan is also included.

H. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Overall Trends and Conditions of the Withlacoochee Region

The Withlacoochee Region, consisting of Citrus, Hernando, Levy, Marion and Sumter Counties, changed significantly over the past generation, experiencing tremendous population and housing growth and the rapid development of large scale residential communities in previously undeveloped rural areas. This growth in turn strained segments of the Region's transportation system; converted large tracts of agricultural and forestry lands to urban uses, and stressed environmentally sensitive lands and habitats. Moreover, a significant portion of the region's population is vulnerable to natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding, etc., particularly those residing in coastal areas and mobile homes. The influx of new residents caused dramatic demographic shifts whereby the Region became retirement-oriented, transforming its economic base from agriculture, fishing and forestry to retail trade and services. While the region outperformed the state over the past 20 years in overall population, housing and labor force growth, it lagged behind state levels in wages, educational attainment and personal income; it also had a higher percentage of persons in poverty and an historically higher percentage of unemployment than the state as a whole.

However, in spite of rapid growth, the region is still predominately rural in character with an abundance of natural resources. Vast areas of the region are still in agricultural or forestry uses, and much acreage is simply vacant. Natural resources--particularly surfacewaters and their related habitats--give the region great potential to become a principal eco-tourism destination in the state of Florida. Unfortunately, the region's natural resources face major challenges. For example, residential development with inadequate wastewater treatment infrastructure in coastal and environmentally sensitive areas has diminished the quality of many of the region's surface waters. An important resource is the Floridan Aquifer, the source of the region's water supply, which underlies the entire region; it is at times the subject of controversial proposals for the withdrawal and transfer of groundwater for potable uses to jurisdictions outside the region--a course of action which has great potential for harming the region's ecology and economy. One of the region's great economic natural resource-based industry--commercial fishing--faces disruptions following the adoption by voters in 1994 of a ban on certain nets in Florida waters.

2. Summary of Growth Trends, 1970-1990

The following is a summary of regional growth trends and conditions between 1970 and 1990:

- The Region's population grew by 237%, or 447,000 people, from 1970-1990. The 1994 estimate of the Region's population was 499,874, a growth rate of 11.84% over 1990.
- Citrus and Hernando Counties were two of the fastest growing in the state, but almost half of the Region's population lived in Marion County.
- In 1990, the Region's Mortality Rate (12.7 deaths per thousand) exceeded the Birth Rate (12.1 births per thousand). In 1992, the gap between the two figures widened with a death rate of 12.5 vs. a birth rate of 10.9.
- In-migration was the primary source of population growth. New residents tended to come from out-of-state and from other locations within Florida.
- The 65+ age group was the largest and fastest growing in the Region, except in Citrus County where the 25-44 age group was the fastest growing.
- Growth is forecast to continue faster than the state's, but at a less rapid pace.
- The civilian labor force grew faster than the overall population and the total number of jobs.
- The Region is plagued by chronic, high unemployment.
- Regional employment is dominated by the Retail Trade and Services sectors.
- Natural resource based employment sectors (agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining) have declined relative to total employment.

- Marion County is the trade and employment center with almost half the jobs in the Region and the most diversified economy.
- Wages were up, but remained generally lower than wages in the state as a whole.
- Incomes increased tremendously from previously low levels, but remained below state levels.
- The Region had a high incidence of income from transfer payments.
- Private sector earnings were no longer the primary source of income in the Region.
- The percent of persons in poverty declined, but the actual number of persons living in poverty almost doubled.

3. Summary of Goals in the Strategic Regional Policy Plan

The strategic regional subject area addressed in this Plan contains sets of goals and objectives based on the analysis and input from the WRPC Board of Directors, local government, economic development officials and citizens of the region. The following is a summary of the overall goals the Withlacoochee Regional Planning Council envisions for the region:

AFFORDABLE HOUSING CHAPTER

- Meet existing and future needs in the Withlacoochee region for safe, sanitary and affordable housing in a suitable environment.
- Identify and meet supportive/special housing needs.
- Expand choice in housing location and consider accessibility to jobs, schools and services in the provision of affordable housing and supportive/special needs housing.
- Increase awareness and understanding of affordable housing issues and programs, address public concerns relating to the affordable housing and supportive/special needs housing, and provide alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes.
- Enhance coordination between economic development and affordable housing efforts.
- Increase capacity and efficiency in the operation of the housing delivery system and maximize the use of federal, state and local resources available for housing and community development.
- Enhance coordination among local governments regarding the identification of affordable housing needs and the location and provision of affordable housing.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CHAPTER

- Foster a regional approach to marketing, promotion and planning activities for economic development and tourism.

- b. Preserve and revitalize downtown areas as centers of economic activity in the region's municipalities.
- c. Promote employment and economic opportunities for the unemployed and economically disadvantaged in the region.
- d. Realize maximum effectiveness from job training programs.
- e. Achieve a per capita personal income for each county in the region that equals or exceeds the per capita personal income figure for the state while reducing the region's poverty rate so that it is less than the average state poverty rate.
- f. Reduce the amount of agriculturally valuable land converted to other land uses without imposing permanent restrictions on its conversion.
- g. Increase farm income to promote the survival and growth of the family farm.
- h. Tourism directed primarily toward eco-tourism.
- i. Enrich the cultural life of the region.
- j. Promote efficiency and economic productivity from economic development by ensuring that future economic development and transportation projects are properly sited to avoid and/or mitigate adverse impacts to adjacent land uses.
- k. To provide for the development and maintenance of adequate infrastructure and resources to support continued economic development in areas identified for growth in the local government comprehensive plans.
- l. To appropriately utilize the region's natural resources (air, water, ecological communities, forests, etc.) for economic development.
- m. Establishment of a legal framework whereby local governments shall retain the right of use of natural resources within their jurisdictions in order to meet present and future growth.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS CHAPTER

- a. All counties in the region will be prepared to respond to and recover from the impacts of all hazards.
- b. Local governments are encouraged to provide awareness and educational opportunities to the public regarding natural and man-made disasters.
- c. Local governments shall train emergency responders to appropriate levels for responding to hazardous materials incidents in accordance with the State Emergency Response Commission (SERC) Training Task Force Training Guidelines.
- d. Local governments shall provide timely alert and notification to the public in the event of any type of disaster.
- e. Update the Withlacoochee Hurricane Evacuation Study in order to reflect current data, Sea, Lake and Overland Surges (SLOSH) modeling, and population figures.

- f. Local governments are encouraged to protect the public from hazardous materials releases.
- g. Hurricane evacuation clearance times for the region should not exceed 12 hours.
- h. Local governments should be encouraged to identify mitigation opportunities, funding mechanisms, and develop strategies to implement mitigation.

NATURAL RESOURCES CHAPTER

- a. Groundwater levels should not be pumped to lower than the minimum seasonal levels necessary to maintain natural system functions and prevent saltwater intrusion into the aquifer.
- b. Reduce per capita use of groundwater.
- c. Prevent further degradation of ground- and surface-water quality.
- d. The integrity and natural value of floodplains shall be maintained, and floodplains will be managed through non-structural means.
- e. Coastal resources and natural functions of coastal eco-systems should be maintained and restored.
- f. New development and redevelopment should not adversely impact marine habitats.
- g. Public access to the coast should be encouraged only in areas where environmental degradation can be minimized.
- h. Development or redevelopment which would adversely impact the natural functions of the region's wetlands or surface water systems should be limited.
- i. Maintain and enhance the habitat and population of native species of plants and animals.
- j. There shall be an effort to reduce or mitigate the loss of habitat for endangered or threatened species in the region.
- k. There should be a reduction in the number of new developments and redevelopments which adversely affect the environmental quality, physical character, or natural function of the region's exceptional geographic features and environmentally sensitive areas.
- l. To ensure that the recreation needs of the population are met, there should be an increase in the number, variety and quality of recreational facilities.
- m. Maximum utilization of appropriate best management practices and conservation methods by agricultural and forestry management units, as determined by natural resource conservation districts, the Division of Forestry, the Department of Environmental Protection, and water management districts.
- n. The region's concentrations of all air pollutants for which standards have been established should continue to be less than state and federal standards allow.

- o. Per capita renewable energy consumption in the region should equal or exceed state averages.
- p. Per capita electrical energy consumption should not exceed state averages.
- q. Per capita gasoline consumption in the region should be reduced.
- r. All hazardous wastes generated in the region should be managed, treated and disposed in accordance with applicable local, state and federal regulations.
- s. The per capita amount of solid waste per capita generated and disposed of in landfills within the region should be reduced.
- t. All wastewater treatment plants in the region should maintain the appropriate level of wastewater treatment quality, consistent with standards established by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.
- u. New lands disturbed for mineral extraction should be reclaimed.
- v. Regulation of the region's natural resource extraction activities should be comprehensive in scope and coordinated among local, regional, and state agencies.
- w. Protect significant regional resources from the adverse effects of resource extraction.

TRANSPORTATION CHAPTER

- a. The region's travelers should have access to a general aviation system that is capable of meeting the increasing demand for air travel, and local governments should encourage surrounding land uses and public facilities that are compatible with future airport development and operations.
- b. The utilization of bicycle and pedestrian ways in the region should be expanded.
- c. Local governments in the region should address the provision of efficient, cost effective public transit for all populations.
- d. Future right-of-way for regional transportation facilities should be protected from building encroachment and incompatible land uses through the designation of regional corridors.
- e. Provide transportation facilities to ensure that the regional roadways operate at acceptable levels of service.

- f. The loss of environmentally sensitive lands due to transportation development should be first avoided then mitigated, where required.
- g. Alternatives to the single occupancy vehicle should be encouraged to minimize the increase in additional lane-miles of highway.
- h. Evacuation routes with adequate capacity should be maintained to serve the affected populations within the warning horizon of major storms.
- i. Local governments should plan for and encourage land use patterns that provide better opportunities for non-automotive trips.

I. STRATEGIC REGIONAL SUBJECT AREAS

Strategic Regional Subject Areas are defined in Rule 27E-5.002(10) as identified subject areas that from a regional perspective have the potential to affect the region's significant physical characteristics or the quality of life within the region. The following state-mandated strategic regional subject areas are addressed in the following chapters of this plan: Affordable Housing, Economic Development, Emergency Preparedness, Natural Resources and Transportation. The organization of each chapter is discussed above in D., Plan Organization.