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Guest Column

There's room for sustainable, smart growth in Tampa Bay

Phillip Smith

Growth can occur in ways that are sustainable and respectful. When we grow smarter, everyone wins.

We can all point to many bad examples of growth, and we all are subject to the ills created by sprawl and inefficient land-use planning. But, these poor decisions from the past should not be a reason to close the door on developments that are trying to fix what's broken.

At Crosland, we believe a key part of smart growth is listening. We've heard concerns over traffic and endless sprawl. This is why we are concentrating our developments in key infill locations because they leverage existing services and infrastructure, reduce traffic and put people closest to the things they need the most.

Enlightened local governments rightly call on developers to propose infill projects to maximize existing services and to preserve open space.

The Hillsborough County Planning Commission and its staff encourage infill development throughout the county. It's a way for a suburban community to accommodate economic growth and prosperity without increasing sprawl. It's how we grow smarter.

Bob Hunter, executive director of the Planning Commission, said, "Sprawl is an ineffective use of county water and sewer lines, and it stretches other county services like police and fire, schools and libraries and parks." He further stated, "We have other obligations to serve inside the urban service area we need to look at before we start looking at various requests for an extension here or there ... "

It would appear public policy is changing for the better and we're realizing the long-term benefits of growing in intelligent and efficient ways. But, despite these written and spoken policies, smart growth frequently runs into fierce resistance.

At a Planning Commission public hearing on Jan. 14, Commissioner Hung Mai voted for a comprehensive plan amendment that would allow Crosland to place a vibrant and walkable luxury multifamily community at an existing activity center in Valrico. Mai stated five reasons why the proposal met the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives:

1. If the property was built as currently zoned, it would generate three times more traffic trips per day versus the proposed development and thus should be considered a "down-zone."
2. The project meets the urban infill criteria set forth by the Comprehensive Plan.
3. The project falls in the activity center, which promotes multifamily development to complement existing commercial and retail development.
4. A multifamily use would make a perfect transition from the existing grocery store and other commercial uses to the adjacent single-family subdivision.
5. The project creates a walk-to-shopping opportunity thus reducing traffic.

The Planning Commission voted 6-1 against the proposal.

The Comprehensive Plan is not perfect. It is a living document that should from time to time be adapted to our changing communities.

We have not tried to force the maximum allowable development onto the site. We've met with neighbors and made many changes based on their input.

Our vision is of a vibrant neighborhood modeled after small European villages -- a walkable, livable place.

"It's exactly these types of developments we should be promoting in Hillsborough County," Mai said at the public hearing. "The Comp Plan must incorporate the economic development component to promote responsible and good growth."

We are new to the multifamily market in Florida, but we're not new to issues of sustainable growth. We're known for our quality projects and for playing by the rules. We're committed to our philosophy of place-making and of being good neighbors and bringing value to our communities.

There has been an awakening in the national and international discourse about land-use planning and public policy. It calls us to be better stewards of our land and of the environment. It calls us to make better decisions about how we expand and prosper.

It's time for us to grow smarter.

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