

The League of Women Voters of Martin County has conducted a Committee Study about the Development Pattern Study and the options for changing Martin County's Comprehensive Plan to allow more development options outside the urban boundary.

SUPPORTING STATEMENT OF THE STUDY COMMITTEE

For many years the urban boundary and the requirement for minimum twenty acre lot sizes in the larger rural area outside that boundary, have been the mainstay of Martin County's rural protection policies.

We find that those policies have been uniquely effective for protecting natural resources and discouraging sprawl.

- Martin County does not have one acre lots on dirt roads that lack both drainage and wetland protection. This has been a serious problem in other counties that allow more rural development. Our lot size limit is twenty acres and rural subdivisions are required to protect wetlands and uplands.
- Martin County has maintained a truly rural area west of the coastal urban boundary and surrounding the Indiantown urban boundary. A look at aerial photos and approved development plans shows a striking difference from Palm Beach and St. Lucie County.
- Martin County does not have "rural settlements" scattered throughout the rural area that are in need of sewer and water and other urban services. Dr. Tom Daniels, a rural land expert from the University of Pennsylvania has stated that the county has achieved better rural land protection than most counties which have attempted to deal with the issue. He also warned that the worst kind of sprawl would be scattered rural settlements throughout the western area.
- Martin County has predictability in terms of development expectations. The comprehensive plan rules are clear. Exceptions are not allowed.

The alternative land patterns which have been proposed lack a history of success in achieving promised goals. The hope that clustered development in the rural areas would produce better results than the current system is not backed by evidence.

- Experts on the CERP/IRL project to restore the Indian River South Lagoon and the St. Lucie River have declared that clustering should not be allowed on or adjacent to lands needed for this critical project. The idea that lands targeted for public acquisition can be acquired free by allowing new land development patterns has not been backed by any creditable evidence.
- A study from Pennsylvania shows that rural clustering has done little to further the cause of environmental preservation and brings more people to live in the countryside. The concept exists that clustering allows large valuable open spaces to be saved for the public. The reality finds that the anticipated benefits of cluster design may not actually be realized.
- A report from Colorado shows that clustering does not benefit plant and wildlife communities of conservation interest. The assumed benefits of having smaller lots and larger common open space did not translate to any actual benefit for wildlife.

- A study from British Columbia on different strategies for farmland preservation found that requiring large lots and discouraging subdivision of land was most effective and that clustering appeared to encourage residential development in the rural area.
- Developers have made clear to the consultant that the clustering alternative will only be used if density incentives are provided.

Martin County residents have repeatedly stated their desire for slower rather than faster growth. A recent poll found that 72% of residents do not want to increase development outside the urban boundary. It appears inevitable that the clustering option will increase the density and the total number of units outside the urban boundary.

Finally, the suggested alternatives require great flexibility and discernment on the part of staff and policy makers. The requirements that are necessary to make clustering beneficial are difficult to describe legally and hard to enforce. The consultants have warned that great care would be necessary to make such a system work.

Because of (i) the success of the current system of rural policies, (ii) the uncertainty of the benefits of the changes, and (iii) the assurances of increased development that goes with clustering, **the Committee proposes the following for membership consensus:**

“We believe the county should hold the line on its strict urban boundary policies and its requirements for minimum rural lot sizes for twenty acres.

“We also believe that further study by the County is needed for better development patterns inside the urban boundary that address growth paying for itself, affordable housing, and true community concurrency for schools, roads and water.”