

An Overcrowded Paradise is No Paradise at All

Okaloosa County has a census of more than 40,764 people living in agricultural areas north of Crestview as stated on page 39 of The North Okaloosa Planning Study Final Report dated October 1, 2024. The large majority of those people live on small farms of 5 or more acres. This article is written in defense of those residents. You live in a rural area, not because you couldn't afford to live in town, but because you chose to. For the most part, your home is valued similarly to the average one-third acre lot in the city. In my mind, I envy every one of you. But Carolyn tells me I couldn't possibly live on a farm because I need people around. I spend the weekend playing golf or tennis, or something far removed from raising cows and horses.

I still envy you, and in my imagination, I can see myself living the life that you have chosen.

But the point is, and the most important point of this article, that you chose it, and others did not.

On a fit of absolute clairvoyance, 20 years ago the State of Florida passed a Statute called the Florida Comprehensive Planning Act. The "Act" was revolutionary for any State in America. It required all local governments to create a binding general plan for the way their land would be developed. Each county and city were told not to simply allow development to ooze into the places where developers could make the quickest profit, but to concentrate housing in residential areas, industry generally where it made most sense to put it, and to all agriculture to exist where the land could most support it. Each city and county were instructed, in maybe the last nonpartisan and unselfish act of the Florida Legislature, to guide their own future by passing their own Comprehensive Plan.

Some ideas were crucial to the future development of each locality. Development was to occur only where there were adequate roads to serve the uses of property. Water, sewer, and education services also were to be thought out and planned, and future development rights were to be timed not to spring up before roads, hospitals, and police departments were there to support them.

One of the chief concepts used by the act to prevent development from "oozing" into agriculture areas is a prohibition of "urban sprawl", meaning development in pods or groupings that leave large distances between intense development. Building a subdivision in the middle of an agricultural areas is an example of urban sprawl.

Okaloosa County has just permitted exactly that. Two single family subdivisions totaling 277 homes have just been permitted on Buck Ward Road, smack in the middle of agricultural areas. Developers are busy every day now trying to convert the woods several miles inside agricultural areas into subdivisions.

Some very knowledgeable and concerned farm and rural owners have formed a group called “Okaloosa United Residents for Saving Our Irreplaceable Land, Inc.” (“OUR SOIL”) to contest one Developer’s right to convert previously isolated farmland into islands of subdivisions. Brian Hormberg, the president of OUR SOIL, whose email address is oursoilokaloosa@gmail.com is leading the agricultural area’s defense. They need help, and they need your contributions. They are locked into litigation to stop the desecration of Okaloosa farmland. They will need knowledgeable planners and engineers to counter the testimony of very committed and well-funded developers.

This article is only a quick introduction into the detail involved in their struggle to preserve the intent of the Okaloosa Comprehensive Plan. The irony is that everyone agrees more affordable housing is necessary. But in the theory of planning the whole community is for the better, and far more efficiently, served if those houses are built in the right place.

Please help these neighbors of yours in whatever way you can. Message them. They will describe what they are doing, why it’s important, and how you can help. You may also email me, Mike Chesser, at mike@chesserbarr.com.