

**Pinellas County Quality Communities Code
Stakeholder Focus Group: Environmental Community
October 22, 2010, at 1:30 p.m.**

Liz Freeman with the Pinellas County Planning Department welcomed the focus group participants and provided an introduction to the Quality Communities Code (QCC) project. Liz then turned the meeting over to Gary Cornell (Jacobs) and left the room. Gary introduced himself and Jennifer Straw (Jacobs) and explained the purpose of the meeting, guidelines, and process. Focus Group members introduced themselves and the discussion followed. The following is a general summary of the questions asked of participants and the comments and responses.

What is quality development?

- Lately development has moved towards neotraditional development (Celebration)—advertised as “the answer” (built around people) but the live, work, play doesn’t really work because the people that work in the community cannot afford to live there.
- These new communities are too gimmicky, not sustainable, but do have very good characteristics/elements that may be suitable for redevelopment (walkable, green spaces, inviting).
- We need to figure out what is really important so that we can determine what we desire for our future and how to attain it.
- Example—Portland (Orenco Station) has a light rail line available so that people don’t have to drive; there is an urban growth boundary in Portland which retains the residential development into a predetermined area; however, this type of community may not work here, especially Pinellas because it is essentially “built-out.”
- Cannot force livability on people if they cannot afford it.
- In Pinellas County redevelopment is the main focus (northern portion of County might have more area for greenfield development).
- We need to consider affordable housing.
- The State has requirements to look within 10 miles (or 10 minutes) for affordable housing.
- Don’t shut out the environment and push the environmental aspects of the land out (i.e. don’t remove a wetland to build one somewhere else). Remind people that environment exists when they create their plans.
- The Department of Community Affairs is focusing on multimodal to make it a more standard practice in Comprehensive Plans; Pinellas County needs to address multimodal aspects in the plan, and work on telecommuting/working out of their homes (allowing for assistants and visitors).
- The Pinellas Trail works very well for recreation and commuting—locker rooms, showers, and bike storage are needed at employers.

- Encourage people to use other means to get to work (walk, bike, transit).
- There need to be more regulations on “light rights” and defining mixed use/granny flats (St. Petersburg used to have regulations that allowed that), how much yard is turf grass vs. non turf grass.
- Recognize that in post-industrial society, we are going back to pre-industrial cottage industries.
- Working from home (telecommuting or home-based businesses) helps with transportation problems.
- Do not go to the extent that Houston went—there are no regulations about what types of land use can go next to each other.
- The key problem in Pinellas County is the transportation issue (need safer bicycle facilities, local train, bus service); critical focus—figure out where transportation should go (i.e. old railways) and build around that.
- Add pocket parks—a large lot or a couple of small lots assembled to create areas that are open spaces near the residential adds to quality of life.
- All of the places on the water need to be held to the highest standards to ensure they don’t degrade our environment—waterways are amenities.
- Environmental ordinances need to be everywhere, not only on coastal areas—all areas affect the water system—everyone lives in a watershed, all runoff eventually goes into our waterways.
- Hybrid buses should be used more; make bus service more accessible for people and for residents or employees to work across County lines.
- Subdivisions try to emulate the green space in them—provides a sense of place, community gathering place.
- If you plan for people, not for cars, the environment will benefit.

How well has Pinellas County protected the environment?

- It’s difficult to differentiate between what is happening in the unincorporated County vs. what is happening in the cities.
- Low areas (where water collects) exist half in the County, half in the cities—therefore having a plan that protects the low areas will need to be coordinated between plans or you are chasing your tail.
- All waters are not created equal—impaired waterways need more attention and care.
- The key to handling all new development is noise ordinances.

- New developments must be allowed to increase density because that's how developers make money.
- People will live in much smaller homes if given the right location.
- The regulations are focused on the here and now, we need to focus on the future (at least 15-20 years).
- Should we consider density transfers? There are probably housing units available in some of the new areas (such as Brooker Creek); Pinellas County does not currently have a true Transfer of Development Rights system; if a developer builds near a transportation center, they should be allowed more units on their land.
- The County needs a plan stating that anyone living in a low spot could live in that location for 50 years but in 50 years their home turns over to the County.
- Corridor routes—start now identifying where you will need to put future transportation corridors and purchase the land (could use utility lines).
- Look at the wetlands regulations here—Pinellas County has had a net increase in wetlands over the past 50 years—however many of the wetlands in the County are manmade and may not serve the function of the original wetland it is mitigating. (see next bullet)
- The Environmental Protection Agency is studying the function of wetlands—nutrient cycling is important to consider, therefore not all manmade wetlands do their job—manmade wetlands may work to capture runoff, but may not create a quality environment for how some wetlands are supposed to function; to combat this, developers should look at the natural features of a place and work around those features instead of relocating them or destroying them.
- Try to work with the natural features on their properties.
- The fertilizer ordinance has been created in addition to other regulations and policy, but will it be effective? It's a great start, but other counties around the bay need to be involved to make it effective.
- Infill needs to happen—quality means more environmental, less building—protect the environment as you develop.
- Use pervious services whenever possible.
- There may be ways to accommodate redevelopment and improve the stormwater management at the same time—in the past water quality was not a concern.
- Pinellas County needs a framework that takes the environment into account.
- When someone redevelops, give them a clear-cut list of the incentives available.

- More natural habitats need to be retained or rehabbed.
- Need to consider the submerged lands when updating the Code.
- Opportunities to build are limited, so the County needs to look for opportunities as they come up—look at US 19 where there are numerous abandoned strip malls to possibly redevelop these areas and retrofit them into a new Code.
- Stormwater is a resource; keep it onsite so that it can filter through the ground naturally—stormwater “reuse.”
- Take the small victories where you can get them.
- Developers need incentives to develop properly—make it easier for them to do “good things.”
- Teach environmental scientists and engineers how to incorporate low impact development into their plans (ponds that connect, swales, green housing, etc.)—this needs to be in the Land Development Code.
- Local governments need to strengthen the requirements of redevelopment (i.e. should stormwater facilities be built onsite).
- Sometimes central business districts are required to contribute to the treatment of water but the County’s land development code does not include any of that for redevelopment.
- Pre-application conference comes to too late to change things—needs to be in the regulations to be required up front before they get to this point.
- Incentivize sustainable practices; the developer needs to know ahead of time—focus on the natural layout of the land before the plan is made—County must be inflexible.

What are your thoughts about parking lots?

- Parking is where pervious surfaces have been successful.
- Example—Walmart parking lots must be designed for the busiest day of the year—make enough parking spaces for everyone, but have all the extra parking as pervious/grassy areas—include that in the ordinance.
- Land Development Codes are suburban-designed and need to more adequately reflect urban development patterns.

What are your thoughts about bicycling and walking?

- Residents and visitors must be able to walk and bike safely throughout the County.
- St. Petersburg has one of the best bicycle plans, but it is difficult to get from Clearwater to Safety Harbor.

- There are a lot of areas around the County where bicycle lanes or bicycle safety could be improved.

What are your thoughts about landscaping?

- Create Codes that encourage natural habitat landscaping; can there be rules that require HOAs to allow it?

Should there be regulations that protect the solar shed?

- Regulations may sometimes conflict with historical aesthetic.
- If someone has solar panels, the neighbor may need to take that into consideration before planting a tree as to not block the sunlight; however, the amount of solar energy being achieved should be taken into account—consider levels or thresholds; consider if the tree canopy is better for the common good.
- Does shade work better to save energy than solar panels?
- Carrot woods are springing up in the unincorporated area.
- Regarding exotic plants in general, it seems that the County only reacts when they become out of control—need prohibition or enforcement about planting exotics, or cannot build within a certain perimeter of a preserve.

What impact will the impending stormwater regulations have on the County?

- The Estuary Program has contracted to educate local governments and hopes to expand to developers and planners that need to be aware on regulations and what it means to them, how they will need to incorporate these regulations into the plans.
- NPDES MS4 permit is very primitive.
- There is discussion underway regarding watershed boundaries vs. municipality boundaries in regards to stormwater treatment.
- Salinity shock (too much or too little) must be addressed—has been identified as the top pollution problem in estuaries.
- County needs to better educate, better enforce, and instill stricter penalties on builders regarding best-management practices during construction.
- Can Pinellas County have an EPC person on staff to report issues to, like Hillsborough?
- Once the development is completed, the construction companies need to remove the silt barriers.
- We need to understand where the natural areas are and who owns them so that these areas can be protected (could use GIS to develop a database). When a such a property comes to the County (through tax liens or donations) the County should see if can be turned it into open space.

- Is there a database to show the privately-owned conservation easements given to the County? If not, could one be created? Is it possible to tie this database into the Code by requiring the donor to provide official record of the donation? Record it in the title?
- Check Collier County's rural land stewardship program.

What business practices or development practice in commercial areas and make them more pedestrian-friendly?

- In suburban design, if the sidewalk is too close to the road it is not pleasant; can the sidewalk be buffered from traffic? (Example—good job on East Lake).
- Can we add an ordinance that establishes road width based on the maximum time it takes someone to cross a road?
- It is impossible to codify human behavior.
- There is a large elderly population and they must be taken into account in pedestrian design.
- Transportation is the major problem in the County.
- We don't have a political leader in this area to push mass transit—to pass it needs political leadership.
- We need to think more clearly about where we put sidewalks—don't need on both sides of the street on every street.
- Make sure that sidewalks are shaded where possible.
- Add benches for people to rest.
- As long as parking is cheap and plentiful, people will drive.
- We don't have employment centers that would make logical transit hubs.
- Build with transit in mind.
- The key to walkability is transportation—rail/bus—walkability is attached to transportation access.
- The concentration of where people live and work is important to creating a pedestrian-friendly environment; walkability depends on density—cluster businesses so that people can walk to them.
- Pull the buildings closer to the street to make areas more walkable.
- There is concern from business owners that if drivers cannot see the parking they won't patronize the business (Example—Naples).

- TOD is required in the Comprehensive Plan—how is the County going to implement it? If there isn't going to be rail service, what is the transportation that it is centered around? It is going to cost our community a lot more to cluster development.
- If we can build TOD it will bring the transit; if we get transit, the stations will become hotspots for development.
- Seniors are moving back to the central cities because they cannot or do not want to drive—this should be an important driver to put in cleaner, safer public transit.
- Get away from dead end roads and back to grid streets and interconnected neighborhoods—can we “undo” that by opening some of the closed developments? Encouraging grid streets encourages walking and biking.

Parting Thoughts

- Encourage neighborhood shops to come in near residential areas (however, may be market-driven).
- Example—Davis Islands, in Tampa, allow for people to have amenities within walking distance making it a very desirable location to live.
- Local governments need a definition of mixed use.
- Need to make sure that in mixed use developments, those that work there can afford to live there.

Gary thanked the participants for their input and announced there will be two more focus group meetings, in May and November next year. There will be a draft zoning portion to discuss in May, and a final draft of the complete QCC in November. A summary of this meeting will be sent out to the participants, and if there are things you want to comment on, please let contact Liz Freeman.