

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

At 280 square miles, Pinellas County is the second smallest Florida County in land area; yet, it ranks sixth in population with an estimated 942,000 permanent residents as of 2004 (In 1990, it ranked fourth).

There are 35 miles of sandy beaches and 588 miles of coastline. While it is the most densely populated county in Florida, 31,000 acres remain devoted to parks, open space, and natural preserves.

These are just some of the attributes that describe Pinellas County and its varied communities. As with most large urban areas, the reality is complex and difficult to grasp comprehensively; most often distinct pieces are observed and studied with the hope of taking action that improves the situation for that piece without producing unintended negative consequences for other pieces of the urban environment. Planning for urban communities requires “dealing simultaneously with a sizeable number of factors which are interrelated into an organic whole”. One of the rationales for developing a comprehensive plan is that it requires decision-makers to consider many (though not necessarily all) of the factors that come together and interact in complex variations when responding to the needs of their community. But to be effective, comprehensive plans and the actions taken in their implementation must respect and increase the public’s understanding of the interrelationships that exist between the numerous components of the urban environment. In other words, how all the pieces fit and work together. In fact, the public often has an intuitive understanding of these interrelationships, particularly as they apply to their immediate neighborhood. Capturing this understanding during the update of the comprehensive plan is an important component of an effective public involvement program.

It has been a key objective of the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan to stress the interrelationships between the various elements of the Plan, not to analyze each element in isolation, but to understand how the various elements (e.g. land use, transportation, housing, parks and open space, natural environment, and utilities) interact to create an urbanized county of almost one million residents that hosts almost 5 million visitors every year. Pinellas County is currently evaluating the effectiveness of the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan as required by the State Growth Management Act, and it is intended that this latest update to the County’s Plan will result in a plan that responds to the changing circumstances affecting Pinellas County and its municipalities and improves integration between the different elements of the Plan.

The primary purpose of this Evaluation and Appraisal Report (EAR) is three-fold: (1) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan since January 1998 (which was when the amendments implementing the previous EAR were adopted by the Board), (2) to identify major planning issues that need to be resolved, and (3) to identify any actions that are anticipated to address the major issues. The comprehensive plan adopted by the Board in 1989 had a planning time frame that looked out to 2010. The County's planning program continues to use a 20-year planning time frame, so the EAR considers the needs for the County out to the year 2025. This timeframe is consistent with the recently adopted Long Range Transportation Plan of the Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization.

The planning program of the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners occurs at various levels based on responsibilities identified in the County Charter, State law, or specific agreements. The Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan addresses these various levels of planning responsibility. These different levels of planning responsibilities are summarized below:

Regional	Member of Tampa Bay Water, member of Tampa Bay Estuary Program
Countywide	Solid waste disposal, regional park system, natural preserve system, Water and Navigational Control Authority activities, County transportation network (roads, airport, trails, greenways, blueways), economic development, tourism and convention programs, Community Redevelopment Area Program, historic preservation, disaster planning, countywide planning responsibility as vested in the County Charter
Multi-jurisdictional	Potable water treatment and distribution, sanitary sewer collection and treatment, reclaimed water systems, housing
Unincorporated area	Future land use, recreation facilities and programs, local stormwater systems, housing, environmental programs
Individual communities	Examples include Old Palm Harbor, Lealman, High Point, and Greater Ridgecrest

Planning in Pinellas County has not been idle since 1998; in fact there are several planning initiatives that have either recently been concluded or are underway. Most of these initiatives are in some way related to the transition that both the County and its municipalities are undergoing as they transition from a rapidly growing urban area to a mature collection of communities where development is primarily occurring as urban infill development or as redevelopment. This situation has brought forth a set of challenges that local

governments must address if Pinellas County and its municipalities are to retain and improve the quality of their communities. These various planning initiatives are summarized below:

- Development of a **County Strategic Plan** that focuses on several elements of the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan – i.e. redevelopment, economic development, housing, transportation, public utilities, recreation and open space, and cultural amenities. The Strategic Plan is scheduled to be adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in the fall of 2005 or early 2006.
- Development of a **Recreation, Open Space, and Culture System Master Plan**. The Master Plan is analyzing recreation, open space, and cultural facility needs countywide and will provide direction on the role of the County in providing these critical services countywide and for the unincorporated areas. The Master Plan was approved by the Board of County Commissioners on June, 2005.
- Development of the **Economic Development and Redevelopment Plan for Pinellas County**. This is a joint effort between Pinellas County and the Pinellas Planning Council that is intended to provide an overall framework for economic development and redevelopment among the County's 25 local governments. This Plan is scheduled to be completed during late Summer 2005. Local governments are encouraged to incorporate concepts and strategies into their local comprehensive plans following the Plan's acceptance by the Board of County Commissioners in their role as the Countywide Planning Authority.
- **Livable Communities Initiative** through the Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). This is an initiative in which the MPO is coordinating with local governments to utilize planning tools and land development regulations, such as concurrency management, to promote use of livable community concepts in the built environment. This initiative is underway and is expected to continue through the summer of 2006.
- Preparation of a **Greenways and Blueways Plan for Pinellas County**. Development of this plan will continue through the fall of 2005 or early 2006.
- The **Gateway Master Plan** was prepared by a team of County departments in response to compelling short-term and long-term challenges within the County's major mid-county employment center and its environs. The Plan was presented to the Board of County Commissioners on July 12, 2005. The Plan will influence the discussion and recommendations on several major issues that overlap with

redevelopment planning efforts, and that affect existing elements of the Pinellas County Comprehensive and a new element that would concentrate on economic development.

- Pinellas County, its municipalities, and interested citizens initiated the **Pinellas Assembly process** in 2002 as a forum for identifying important multi-jurisdictional concerns and issues that affect the provision of public services and facilities and help determine the quality of local communities. After identifying the key issues and concerns, the Board of County Commissioners and the Council of Mayors decided late last year how they wanted to respond to these issues. Several of the issues identified through the Pinellas Assembly process directly relate to the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan and the EAR; they include annexation, recreation, and transportation and it is expected that decisions and actions on these issues will occur over the next year.
- The Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization has recently hired a consultant to work with the MPO and participating local governments in preparing a **Pedestrian, Bicycle, and Trails Master Plan** that will provide policy direction on how best integrate these essential facilities into the community, and what facilities would be needed to provide a safe and interconnected system that meets the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists. This plan is scheduled to be completed in the Fall of 2005. The Bicycle Advisory Committee to the MPO is also planning to develop a list of projects for consideration in the next Penny for Pinellas.
- Development of the **capital program for the third Penny for Pinellas** infrastructure sales tax referendum will begin this year. A vote on the third Penny is anticipated in 2007. The EAR process, in coordination with several of the planning initiatives discussed above, is being used to identify a capital program that would be needed to achieve specific policies and level of service standards in the adopted County Comprehensive Plan. Extension of the Penny for Pinellas program for an additional ten years would play a key role in implementing the Plan's Capital Improvements Element.

As if to corroborate the above discussion, most of these planning initiatives focus on one or a few of the factors that affect an urban community (e.g. recreation and open space, cultural resources, redevelopment). The EAR and subsequent amendments to the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan, therefore, will enable the Board of County Commissioners to place these distinct and more narrowly focused planning efforts in a more comprehensive framework to best determine how to integrate these different efforts into the County's overall planning program. The overarching scaffolding provided by the Comprehensive Plan

provides a structure that is large enough and sufficiently complex to show how the various pieces fit together and how they are interrelated.

The EAR is structured around the general theme of the Comprehensive Plan's most recently adopted element – "Planning to Stay". The theme as expressed in its title advances the simple idea that Pinellas County should be the kind of place where people and businesses plan to stay because they desire to live and work nowhere else. Throughout the EAR, the guiding principles adopted in the "Planning to Stay" Element provide a platform from which to consider the issues raised through the EAR process and help in formulating recommended changes to the Comprehensive Plan and related implementation measures. With the "Planning to Stay" principles serving as a backdrop to the entire process, the EAR identifies the major issues facing Pinellas County and uses results from the numerous planning studies or makes reference to ongoing planning initiatives whose results will be used, when available, to help draft recommended responses to the major issue(s).