3 Is Pinellas County Unique Among Urban Counties?

What urban counties around the country have reached buildout? What changes, if any, occur within a county when additional growth is limited by geography or jurisdictional boundaries? Since counties, unlike cities, are usually unable to expand their boundaries, buildout might generally indicate a leveling off, or even a reduction, in population. Indeed, practically all counties that completed their urban expansion prior to 1950 have experienced a drop in population. New York County, which comprises the island of Manhattan, and San Francisco County are examples. Developed prior to World War II, these counties are small in area and much more densely populated than Pinellas. They also continue to function as vital and viable urban counties in a much larger metropolitan area.   While their respective metropolitan areas have continued to expand outward, and their economies represent a decreasing percentage of the overall regional economy, Manhattan and San Francisco continue to take advantage of their natural, human, social, cultural, and political resources to maintain a unique community that entices people and businesses to locate there. Achieving buildout may reorient a county's focus from outward expansion to redevelopment, but it does not mean that the county will cease to be a vital, stimulating, and adaptable urban environment.

By 1950, New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia and many smaller cities had stopped growing. 1950 is probably as good a date as any to mark the end – or, more accurately, the beginning of the end – of traditional, concentrated cities.[i] Since 1950, the average population density of the 34 metropolitan areas in the United States that exceed 1 million people in size has decreased from 6,121 persons per square mile to 2,404 persons per square mile.[ii] This 52 percent decrease in the average population density of the country's major metropolitan areas from 1950 to 2000 is the direct result of the phenomenal growth in the nation's suburbs. This profusion of lower density communities was made possible, in large part, by the wide use of the automobile. This pattern of urban development is clearly seen in Pinellas County, which had an overall population density of 3,291 persons per square mile in the Year 2000 and a projected density of approximately 3,600 persons per square mile at buildout. These densities are roughly equivalent to the national average for metropolitan areas of more than 1 million residents.   For comparison purposes, **Table 6** gives the population densities of several selected metropolitan areas in 1950, 1990 and 2000. In most metro areas throughout the nation there was a decrease in density, although San Francisco and Los Angeles represent examples of urban areas that registered an increase in density.

Recent information on population and employment growth reveals that the decentralization of people and jobs in the United States continued through the 1990s.[iii] The 2000 U.S. Census has also shown that the average population density for many of the country's largest urban areas has again decreased.

TABLE 6
Urbanized Area Population Density per Square Mile

Urbanized Area	1950	1990	2000
Atlanta	4,783	1,897	1,783
Denver	4,752	3,307	3,979
Houston	2,596	2,466	2,951
Los Angeles	4,589	5,800	7,068
Miami	3,923	5,425	4,407
New York	9,813	5,407	5,309
Philadelphia	9,363	3,627	2,861
Portland, OR	4,500	3,021	3,340
San Francisco-Oakland	7,045	4,153	6,130
Seattle	5,057	2,966	2,844
Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater	2,267	2,629	2,571
All Areas in the United States	6,121	3,411	2,404

Source: U.S. Urbanized Areas 1950-2000, Demographic Briefs and Urban Policy, The Public Purpose.

But are there counties that are at a stage in their urban development comparable to that in Pinellas County? That is, what counties have experienced most of their growth during the age of the automobile and are at the point where all, or almost all, of the available land has been developed? And if there are such counties, can they provide any meaningful insights for what to expect in Pinellas County? Since most counties are much larger than Pinellas, there are few that were found to meet these two criteria. Arlington County and Nassau County, however, are of interest in that a significant share of their growth has occurred since 1950 and they are largely builtout. Nassau County, New York, with a population of over 1.33 million residents in 2000 within an area equal in size to Pinellas County, is largely built out and is experiencing redevelopment pressure. Furthermore, about half of its population growth has occurred since 1950; in fact, Levittown, the single-family residential development most often associated with the origin of suburbia, is located in Nassau County. Unfortunately, only limited information on Nassau County was readily available, making any useful comparison with Pinellas County futile.

Arlington County, located in northern Virginia across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., is a very small county of only 25.8 square miles. Although Washington served as the historic center for jobs and population, urban expansion into the surrounding countryside of northern Virginia and Maryland over the past few decades has resulted in Washington losing its status as the most powerful economy in the region. Washington started the 1990s with a respectable 33 percent of the area's jobs. Seven years later it had only 24 percent. Most of the job creation was occurring in the surrounding counties. Due to its proximity, Arlington County was the first northern Virginia county to experience urbanization as it expanded outward from the Capital. This urban growth has continued to the point that there is little land left in Arlington County that has not been developed. Consequently, the 1998 estimated population of 189,453 residents represented approximately 93 percent of Arlington's ultimate population.[iv] By comparison, in April 2008, Pinellas County's population was at roughly 94 percent of its ultimate population of approximately one million. It is important to note that growth in northern Virginia is increasingly occurring in the next ring of counties around Washington – primarily Fairfax, but also Loudon. The small size of Arlington County and the limited amount of undeveloped land rendered this inevitable. A similar situation is occurring in

the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater metropolitan area in that population and urban/suburban growth are expanding outward from the urban core centered around Tampa Bay and the Pinellas peninsula into adjacent counties and rural areas.

Two lines of the Washington metrorail system traverse Arlington County. Before the eleven metro stations located in Arlington were completed, the County developed a sector plan for each station location with considerable citizen involvement. The result has been the creation of "urban villages" with the metro station at the core and with the density and intensity of development decreasing as one moves out from the station. As Arlington County approached buildout several years ago, the response was to go vertical and allow higher densities and intensities around the metrorail stations. The result is one of the highest densities of any urban county in the nation – 7,343 persons per square mile – and a large concentration of office development, which increases the County population threefold during working hours. Most of the development in these urban villages (or metro centers) has been market driven, with the services sector and high technology job growth driving the local economy. Much of the housing growth has been in multi-family units constructed in the metro centers; the single-family neighborhoods have been stable and what little infill development occurs in these neighborhoods is of lower density.

As evidenced by a number of demographic and economic indicators, Arlington County remains a desirable place to live and work just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. It should be noted that redevelopment is focused around selected areas of the County (metro stations) and is planned so that it does not adversely impact the County's single-family neighborhoods. The relatively high population density, however, has stressed some of the County's infrastructure, such as the recreation and park system, and there is increasing resistance from local residents to higher density infill development.

Arlington County represents one county's response to buildout conditions. While it is possible that buildout conditions will lead to increases in development intensity in some locations within Pinellas County, it is unlikely that Pinellas County, with its large areas devoted to single-family development, will experience the overall residential density and concentration of employment achieved in Arlington.

What became most apparent when looking at other Post-war urban counties is that while many of these counties had a mixture of older and more recently developed areas, very few had run out of undeveloped vacant land limiting growth to redevelopment and infill urban development. This latter condition is more often confronted by municipalities than by counties; consequently city responses to buildout conditions can also provide valuable lessons for Pinellas County.

[i] *City Life*, 186.

[ii] U.S. Urbanized Areas 1950-2000, Demographic Briefs and Urban Policy, The Public Purpose. An urbanized area is defined as a densely populated area with a population density of more than 1,000 persons per square mile with a population of more than 50,000. This definition is independent of corporate city or regional government boundaries. A more detailed descriptive definition is provided by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

[iii] "Divided We Sprawl": Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley, *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1999, Vol. 284, No. 6, pg 28.

[iv] This discussion on Arlington County, Virginia is based on information obtained from Arlington County and conversations with staff at the Arlington County Planning Division.