Osceola County is facing tremendous growing pains. Construction continues on Highway 192 east of St. Cloud, a half dozen DRI’s (development of regional impact) will change the face of thousands of acres around the east side of Lake Tohopekaliga and more and more residents are looking here for paradise in the Sunshine State.

While development expands across the middle of the state, a diverse group of concerned business leaders, scientists and environmental advocates are making plans to connect and protect the integrity of remaining ecologically significant lands.

Naturally Central Florida, a partnership between myregion.org and the University of Central Florida’s Metropolitan Center for Regional Studies, recently released a compelling report revealing seven critical Central Florida ecosystems. When releasing "Fitting the Pieces Together", the committee announced that these natural areas in our region deserve at least as much political and economic consideration as our Florida Everglades.

Treasures of green and blue amid the network of highways and houses, these ecosystems have been recognized as having regional, national and even global significance. They are valued for improving our quality of life and our economic base. They filter drinking water, prevent flooding, cleanse stormwater before it enters swamps, lakes, streams and huge rivers flowing north and south. These ecosystems are important for some species of plants and wildlife that have no other place in the universe to live.

"Fitting the Pieces Together" provides stories of seven key ecosystems of Central Florida and is available online from myregion.org or call 407-835-2444.

The east side of Osceola County falls within the St. Johns Mosaic and Econlockhatchee ecosystem. We are at the headwaters of this ribbon of connected lakes, rivers and springs that flow toward Jacksonville.

The western part of the county is within the headwaters of the Kissimmee River and is part of the Greater Kissimmee Prairie system with water flowing south to Lake Okeechobee. As the upper end of the Everglades, the environmental health of our area is linked to the health and safety of millions of residents in South Florida and billions of dollars in Everglades restoration.

The Florida Black Bear is considered the dominant mammal in the Volusia Conservation Corridor, but many more humans call the Deland to Daytona stretch home. Large tracts of preserved lands lack the important interconnectivity to provide adequate habitat for this threatened species.

The Wekiva-Ocala Greenway is another area that is prime bear country. The Ocala National Forest is the oldest national forest east of the Mississippi and was dedicated by President Theodore Roosevelt. A vast area of springs are threatened by pollution from expanding development because chemicals move easily through our sandy soils.

The Indian River Lagoon area which includes our Space Coast, encompasses estuaries where fresh water and the Atlantic Ocean meet, as well as coastal dunes and beaches. The area is known for its strong seafood industry and recreational value. It is also home to migratory birds that must feed and rest on their long intercontinental flights.

To our west is the Green Swamp, considered an important recharge area for the Floridan Aquifer, our underground drinking water source. The flat terrain allows rainwater to trickle down and filter through porous rock. Sparse population in this part of the region is one reason for high quality drinking water.

The Lake Wales Ridge, sometimes called the backbone of Florida, is made up of ancient sand dunes that stretch from Highlands County near Lake Placid north to Lake County. Highway 27 travels over the rolling hills of the ridge. The sandy soils were ideal for citrus groves until winter freezes forced the owners to sell out. Now, houses are sprouting like weeds in old grove land. Scrub jays, scrub lizards, scrub mint, gopher tortoises and many other species adapted to the ridge are losing ground as our human population expands our home range. This is another
key area of recharge for the Floridan Aquifer.

For many, the land’s importance is very personal reflecting memories of family visits or providing food and shelter. For some, the landscape is important for more than livelihood; it gives us life and a reason for living as we enjoy the outdoors. For others, the land is a place of peace, serenity or reverence.

Other living things depend on us for a future. So what can we do with this huge responsibility? Continue to support local, state and regional conservation land acquisition programs and work with business and government to balance growth with least environmental impact while still preserving our quality of life.

Charles Lee, of myregion.org and Audubon of Florida will speak about visionary strategies to preserve large amounts of natural Central Florida in the face of current and future development pressures at the Kissimmee Valley Audubon Society meeting on Tuesday, September 27, 2005 at 6:45 pm, in the Kissimmee Civic Center on E. Dakin Ave. in Kissimmee. Business leaders, political leaders and friends of the environment will find the program informative.

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