Have you noticed more traffic on the highways lately? It is not just teenagers out of school for the summer; our population is increasing. Census data indicated 172,493 permanent residents in the year 2000. Projections for 2005 are nearly 202,000 and 231,500 in 2010. That's a 25% increase in ten years just in people who live here. That does not count our winter visitors and vacation guests. How can we improve our quality of life and still accommodate additional residents and guests?

Everyone in the community has needs. We expect adequate health care, safe neighborhoods, good education for our children, clean water, electricity when we want it, healthy air, good jobs and great places to play. Gardeners say, "Compost happens." Planners say, "Growth happens." Growth management is very complex. Cost of services, who will pay, impacts on economic development and environmental protection are all factors to consider.

While some citizens joke about a toll plaza at all roads and airports coming into the state, government officials are in major discussions regarding what to do about our growing population and increasing needs. Governor Bush visited Central Florida recently and shared some of his ideas concerning schools and development with key leaders. The Florida Department of Community Affairs just held a Growth Management Conference in Tallahassee. Community leaders, businesses and concerned citizens in seven local counties are organizing MyRegion.org, to develop regional strategies to address growth related issues.

Osceola County officials are also concerned about the pace of growth and are considering ways to provide better service to existing residents while preparing for our future. Planning and Environmental Services staff have been organizing workshops for County Commissioners to help our county prepare for continued growth. Consultants shared information on sustainable development and looked at alternatives to typical subdivisions. Commissioners, staff and interested residents recently toured examples of sustainable communities from Tampa to Winter Park to learn innovative strategies that can be used to produce communities that are environmentally sound, economically prosperous and socially equitable. Many of these suggestions will be considered as we modify our plans for future growth.

In 1985, our state legislature adopted Florida's Growth Management Act (Chapter 163, Part II, Florida Statute), requiring all 67 counties and 407 municipalities to adopt Local Government Comprehensive Plans. The comp plan, as it is also called, is an extensive document containing key guiding principles. More than words on pages in notebooks, these statements outline what type of growth is allowed and encouraged. More specific details are contained in the Land Development Codes, local ordinances that contain the "legalese" for what can be done.

The Comprehensive Plan contains chapters called elements. Florida Administrative Code 9J5 requires some elements but governments can also adopt others. Required elements include Future Land Use; Transportation; Housing; Infrastructure; Drainage; Solid Waste; Natural Ground Water Aquifer Recharge; Conservation; Recreation and Open Space; Intergovernmental Coordination, and Capital Improvements. Osceola County has added Education, Emergency Management and Library elements. Optional Elements being planned include Economic Development, Historic Preservation, Social Services and Urban Design.

Statute requires that each local government adopt an Evaluation and Appraisal Report (EAR) to assess the progress in implementing the local government's Comprehensive Plan. The report is intended to serve as a summary audit of the actions that a local government has undertaken and identify changes that it may need to make. Osceola County's EAR was adopted in 1998.

Osceola County Planning and Environmental Services staff are undertaking the monumental challenge of
revising the existing Osceola Comp Plan, based on the EAR, to guide us through 2020. Drafts of the elements are being developed for extensive review and suggestions. The drafts I have seen contained lots of useful background information as well as providing regulatory guidance for the future.

Citizens, businesses and organizations are invited to help shape the future of our communities. Notices of planning meetings and workshops are posted on the Official Osceola County web site: osceola.org.

Copies of drafts will be available for public review through several different methods. The county will post the drafts of each element on their web site and expects to have them available in July. Copies can be downloaded and printed or read online. Print copies of element drafts are also available at the Planning and Environmental Services Department for a cost of $0.15 to $0.25 per page. Realize these are extensive documents so costs per element could range from $16 to $40.

We are the ones that the plan will affect. If you care, please share your ideas and concerns. Every citizen representing all aspects of the community needs to be informed and involved to keep this process meaningful.

Osceola County Extension is offering free educational programs at the Kissimmee Valley Agricultural Center, 1901 E Irlo Bronson Hwy. Low Maintenance Landscapes will be offered July 9 at 6:30 pm. Butterfly Gardening will be offered July 11 at 6:30 pm. University of Florida reference books will be available for sale at both programs. Call (321) 697-3000 to register or for more information. Class schedules are also posted on the web at Calendar.

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