

3 | Critical Community Issues

Four critical community issues were identified through the EAR process: livability, strong connections, community character, and sustainability. This chapter provides an analysis of each issue, along with an assessment of how the Lee Plan relates to each issue, a summary of unanticipated changes in the county related to the issue, and a discussion of challenges and opportunities that have resulted from the unanticipated changes. Substantial changes to existing Lee Plan goals and policies and, in some instances, substantial changes to the overall organization of the existing element will be needed to address the critical community issues. Therefore, the assessment and analysis of how the Lee Plan relates to each issue contained in this chapter does not include a line-by-line assessment of the goals and policies for each element as it exists today. Rather, the assessment and analysis highlights at a more general level how each existing element relates to the four issues. An evaluation of existing goals and policies in the Lee Plan and a discussion of recommended changes to the Lee Plan as a result of this analysis of the four critical community issues are provided in the Chapter 4 of this EAR. Guidelines for recommendations for EAR-Based Amendments are provided in Appendix B. Recommendations for Ear-Based Amendments based on changes to state law are listed in Appendix C.

Issue #1: Livability

BACKGROUND

Livability describes the qualities that promote Lee County's character, identity, and lifestyle that enhances the quality of life for its residents. A truly livable community evolves in order to ensure that the county's vision addresses current values, needs, and priorities.

The issue of livability is not new to Lee County. Many residents were drawn to Lee County for the quality of life offered by the county's neighborhoods, parks, open spaces, natural resources areas, and other amenities. What is new to Lee County is a heightened concern by the community that aspects of the county's livability may be weakened in the future if changes in direction are not considered. Issues and opportunities related to livability include three primary

components: approaches to development form; parks, public spaces, recreational and cultural facilities; and public services. Opportunities for each of these three components are described below.

APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT FORM

- **Traditional Development Pattern** - foster opportunities for a more traditional development pattern throughout the urban and suburban areas of the county by fostering an integrated, walkable development pattern that considers the existing context of the community, walkability, character, scale, form, and roadway, pedestrian, and bicycle connectivity.
- **Walkable Neighborhoods and Centers** - encourage neighborhoods to be walkable, interconnected with other neighborhoods and activity centers, and accessible to facilities and services.

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- ***Delineate Between Different Areas*** - contain the spread of sprawl development by encouraging delineation between urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- ***Community Centers*** - promote redevelopment to encourage walkability, connectivity, and an integration of uses.
- ***Public Spaces, Parks, Open Spaces, and Conservation Lands*** - review opportunities to provide an array of active and passive public resources including parks, public and open spaces, historic resources, cultural centers, walking trails, and conservation areas.
- ***Transit-Supportive Development Patterns*** - promote the development of compact mixed-use centers and activity centers at transportation hubs and along transit corridors.



Compact, pedestrian and transit-oriented development patterns help promote a more livable community.

- ***Cohesive Approach to Platted Lands*** - develop formal solutions to address vacant and fragmented development of platted lands including the supply of necessary infrastructure.

PARKS, PUBLIC SPACES, OPEN SPACES, RECREATIONAL, AND CULTURAL FACILITIES

- ***Enhanced Parks, Public Spaces, Open Spaces, Recreation, and Cultural Facilities*** - foster the development of parks, public spaces, open spaces, recreation, and cultural facilities to meet future needs of county residents.
- ***Neighborhood Community Spaces and Gathering Places*** - foster community social activities by encouraging neighborhood community gathering places.
- ***Pedestrian and Bicycle Connected Parks*** - develop parks, open and public spaces, and recreational amenities with enhanced pedestrian and bicycle connections.
- ***More Accessible Facilities*** - encourage parks, public spaces, and recreational facilities that serve multiple neighborhoods and interconnect communities while discouraging resources that serve a single neighborhood or development.

PUBLIC SERVICES

- ***Public Service Provision*** - continue to provide and support high quality public services including emergency management, public utilities, health and human services, and community planning.
- ***Community-Oriented Public Services*** - improve access to public services through such practices as on-line government services, local meetings, and other service delivery options.
- ***Schools as Community Centers*** - coordinate with the Lee County School Board to integrate schools into communities and neighborhoods and to make school facilities available for increased non-school activities.

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

Lee County residents value its relaxed lifestyle, family-friendly neighborhoods, and readily accessible services, parks, natural areas, beaches, and other amenities. Together, these and other existing attributes help make Lee County a livable community and enhance the quality of life of its residents. Maintaining or enhancing the attributes that residents, visitors, and employers value today is important as the county continues to develop and change over the next twenty-five years.

According to population estimates released by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR) at the University of Florida, unincorporated areas of Lee County have grown steadily since the 1940's, with the largest percentage increase in population occurring during the 1970's (74%). Although the overall percentage increase in the county's unincorporated population decreased between the 1990's and the 2000's (from 62.5% to 55.6%), Lee County as a whole netted nearly 100,000 new permanent residents between 2004 and 2009. Nearly half of these new residents reside in unincorporated areas of the county. Although growth pressures have temporarily stalled in the wake of the current economic recession, BEBR's Medium Range Projection Series suggest that the county will continue to grow, adding just over 400,000 new residents by 2035. This combination of historic rapid growth combined with projections for future growth reinforces the county's need to directly address the livability issue in this EAR and resulting Lee Plan update.

As a result of Lee County's many years of rapid growth, some of its livability elements have been weakened. Neighborhoods, commercial services, and employment areas have become increasingly spread out and segregated from one another. Residents continue to be reliant on the automobile as a primary mode of travel to meet daily needs and traffic congestion on the

county's roadways has increased. As travel times increase, residents experience a corresponding decrease in the amount of time available to enjoy the many natural and recreational amenities that the county has to offer. In order to sustain Lee County's livability over time, individual attributes that contribute to that livability must be reviewed and strengthened within the context of each Lee Plan element.



Lee County residents value its relaxed lifestyle, family-friendly neighborhoods, readily accessible services, parks and natural areas, beaches, and other amenities.

Lee County recognizes the important role the Lee Plan plays in addressing the livability components outlined above. In its current form the plan addresses various components of livability (e.g., land use, community development, transportation, parks, recreation, and public services and facilities); however, it does not clearly emphasize the need for strong relationships between the various components in the development and decision-making process. The Vision

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Framework contained in this EAR outlines specific of a livable community components including definition of urban, suburban, and rural spaces as well as development of mixed-use centers. As the framework is implemented over time, it will help to enhance a sense of place and promote livability in Lee County's diverse communities in the future.

ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS OF HOW THE EXISTING COMPREHENSIVE PLAN RELATES TO LIVABILITY

Each of the Lee Plan's elements was analyzed from the standpoint of how they relate to the issue of livability using the following question as a guide:

How well does the Lee Plan guide the development of livability features, such as urban centers, suburban neighborhoods, rural areas, parks, public spaces, recreational facilities, and public services?

By definition, the issue of livability is influenced by a wide range of considerations; therefore most of the Lee Plan's elements factor into this discussion. An assessment and analysis of how each element relates to the issue and how well the element helps guide the development of livability features is provided below.

II: Future Land Use

The Future Land Use Element plays an important role in the long-term livability of Lee County as it guides the design and development of new neighborhoods, centers, and rural areas over time. The element establishes policy guidance for existing neighborhoods and centers in the county; guiding the preservation and/or revitalization of these areas. It also provides policy guidance specific to twenty-two individual communities in Lee County about how to promote their

unique characteristics. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of livability as follows:

- ***New development vs. infill/redevelopment***—development patterns in many areas of the county are already well-established and include a mix of existing stable developed areas, areas that are or may be redeveloping, and developing greenfield areas. However, the element does not distinguish between greenfield areas (new development) and established areas (infill and redevelopment) in its goals and policies.
- ***Mixed-use development***—other than as provided for in Goal 4, *Sustainable Development Design* and in certain community-specific policies, the element provides limited policy support for land use options such as mixed-use development; as a result, it continues to promote suburban development patterns.
- ***Enhanced connections***—the element should more directly address the need for stronger pedestrian, bicycle, and transit linkages between urban centers and neighborhoods as a means of increasing travel options and enhancing livability.
- ***Public gathering spaces***—the element does not directly speak to the role parks, open space, community facilities, and public space play in shaping the livability of different land uses or speak to the importance of establishing a strong physical relationship between these amenities and the land uses they serve.
- ***Distinctions between types of places***—the element could be strengthened by more clearly identifying and establishing distinctions between urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- ***Compatibility of infill and redevelopment with established neighborhoods***—in general, the element does not address the desired form and character of infill and redevelopment or its relationship to established neighborhoods, other than to policies that apply to specific communities.

III: Transportation

The Transportation Element defines how people will travel through and within the county and provides a framework for future growth. While it focuses primarily on the county's roadways, it does include some policy guidance related to other modes of transportation. Roadway facilities can contribute to the county's livability if they are designed to relate to surrounding land uses and designed as complete streets that integrate a variety of multiple modes of travel. If the design of roadway facilities focuses solely on the need to move vehicular traffic and not on the movement of bicycles, pedestrians, and transit vehicles, the resulting roadways may serve as physical barriers between land uses and ultimately detract from the county's livability. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue as follows:

- **Alternative modes**—the element should provide more emphasis on multimodal options or the creation of complete streets that integrate alternative modes such as walking, biking, and transit facilities as well as automobiles. It also does not fully address the role that non-vehicular modes, such as walking and bicycling, can play in shaping community character and quality of life.
- **Context-sensitive street design**—the element should distinguish between the character and types of facilities suitable for urban, suburban, and rural areas. Complete streets can be adapted differently to each of these contexts and should be encouraged.
- **Local connections**—current policies focus on the arterial system. The need for enhanced connectivity between uses at should be emphasized.
- **Land use and transportation integration**—the element should reinforce the need for an integrated approach to land use and transportation as a key element of the county's livability.

IV: Community Facilities and Services

The availability of community facilities and services (or lack thereof) is an important factor in the livability of a community. The Community Facilities and Services Element defines how and where new services should be provided in Lee County. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue as follows:

- **Priority service areas**—the element does not distinguish between the provision of services based upon the distinction of areas as urban, suburban, or rural.
- **Levels of service**—the element clearly defines minimum level of service requirements for potable water, sanitary sewer, surface water management, and the full range of community facilities and services, but does not differentiate how requirements for services might vary between urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- **Timing of service provision**—the element does not stress development timing as a consideration service provision.



Livable communities promote an active street environment that accommodates all modes of travel comfortably.

V: Parks, Recreation, and Open Space

Parks, recreation, and open space are an important element of Lee County's livability. These amenities provide opportunities for residents to interact, promote physical activity and health, and enhance quality of life. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue as follows:

- **Park types and locations**—the element addresses the need for a range of different types of parks, recreation, and open space facilities to serve the county's population in a variety of locations. The emphasis at present is on larger, community and regional facilities.
- **Relationship to surrounding uses**—the element does not provide adequate emphasis on the interrelationship between parks, recreational, and open space facilities and other land uses, including the role that these amenities can play in shaping community character and livability.



Parks, recreational facilities, and open space should be visually and physically integrated with surrounding uses.

VI: Capital Improvements

The Capital Improvements Element addresses the issue of livability through implementation of the goals and objectives articulated in other comprehensive plan elements, particularly the Transportation, Community Facilities and Services, and Parks, Recreation, and Open Space elements. The capital budget helps to give definition and direction to all of these. This element establishes the priorities for the Capital Improvements Plan (CIP). The element relates to the issue of livability as follows:

- **Linkages to other elements**—this element in its present form does not directly make linkages to the goals and objectives that it is helping to address in the Transportation, Community Facilities and Services, and Parks, Recreation, and Open Space elements. This link could be strengthened.
- **Setting priorities and selecting projects**—the process outlined in this element for preparation of the annual Capital Improvements Program could be adjusted and strengthened in a way that would give more consideration of the plan's goals setting priorities and selecting projects.

VII: Conservation and Coastal Management

Lee County's coastal location and abundant natural resources and the associated recreational opportunities afforded by these features contribute significantly to the quality of life of county residents. These features also contribute significantly to the county's economy as a result of its desirability for tourism and as a second home destination. The Conservation and Coastal Management Element guides the management, protection, and use of these features. The element specifically relates to the issue of livability as follows:

- **Protection of natural resources**—the element provides clear policy guidance on the protection of the county's coastal,

wetland, and upland resources, as well as for water quality planning for coastal areas, water resources, air quality, fisheries management, commercial fishing, marine and navigation management, water access, artificial reefs, and shoreline management.

- **Hazard mitigation/evacuation planning**—the element provides clear policy direction related to hazard mitigation, evacuation planning and shelter space, post-disaster redevelopment, and intergovernmental coordination.
- **Linkages to other elements**—the element addresses the relationship between conservation and coastal management and other comprehensive plan elements which reinforces the need to preserve these resources as features that contribute to the county's livability.

VIII: Housing

The proximity of housing to services, schools, and employment can contribute to or detract from a person's overall quality of life; as can the type of housing that is available and its relationship to the rest of the community. The element relates to the issue of livability as follows:

- **Mix of housing choices**—this element was written primarily for the county's low income and special needs population; therefore, its policies do not specifically support mixed-income, mixed-use development (residential, commercial, office, and public facilities), transit, or live/work opportunities that contribute to the overall diversity of housing choices in the county.
- **Special needs housing/aging in place**—the element does not provide policy support for universal design or aging in place opportunities, which affect the quality of life of the county's special needs population as well as older adults.

- **Parks and open space**—this element does not directly address the relationship between the provision of parks and open space and development of new housing and the need to provide universal access to these facilities.



Lee County's historic resources contribute to its character and livability.

IX: Historic Preservation

As with its natural resources, Lee County's historic resources provide a unique context for residents and visitors that contribute to the overall desirability of the county as a place to live, work, recreate, and visit. Historic resources also help define and contribute to the unique character that distinguishes each of the county's communities. The element adequately addresses the relationship between historic preservation and other comprehensive plan elements and supports the protection of historic and archaeological elements that contribute to the character and livability of Lee County.

X: Intergovernmental Coordination

The Intergovernmental Coordination Element establishes policies to guide cooperation between Lee County and its intergovernmental partners on issues such as public services, level of service standards, roadway improvements, and growth management. The element adequately encourages cooperation between Lee County, its municipalities, adjacent local governments, and partner agencies on issues that have direct impact on livability, such as growth management, roadway improvements, and the provision of services within the county.

XI: Economic

The Economic Element establishes a framework for employment, tourism, and economic development in Lee County. Each of these economic factors plays an important role in the issue of livability—the availability of jobs helps support the overall stability of the county’s economy and the retention and attraction of residents; its focus on the efforts of the Tourist Development Council helps reinforce the role and importance of tourism to the economy; and its focus on economic development helps to attract new business and employment opportunities to the county. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of livability as follows:

- **Linkages to other elements**—the element could be strengthened with regard to linkages to other elements in the plan that support the quality of life needed to attract and retain a diverse employment base and population (e.g., Land Use, Transportation, and Parks, Open Space, and Recreation Elements).
- **Attractors**—the element could be strengthened with regard to the connection between the economy and attractors such as opportunities for businesses related to research and educational

activities at local colleges and universities; opportunities for green industries; and other new sectors and economic clusters.

- **Balancing competing demands**—the element could be strengthened with regard to the need to balance the needs of residents, employers, and visitors (which may conflict in some instances) as part of the county’s overall economic picture and its livability for residents.

UNANTICIPATED CHANGES IN THE COUNTY RELATED TO THE ISSUE

Many of the qualities that contribute to Lee County’s livability have been challenging to implement from a policy and regulatory standpoint. Suburban sprawl development has begun to have a detrimental impact on the county’s livability. The predominance of isolated, low intensity, and single use development has led to an increasingly disconnected community—both in terms of physical connections and social connections. Transit service is limited (both in terms of travel times/headways and service areas) and most land uses are not being built in a manner that will support additional transit service in the future. Public services and economic resources are spread out and not well integrated within the county. In order to address these issues, residents have expressed an interest in reviewing alternative forms of development in order to promote the county’s livability attributes and support the area’s quality of life.

CHALLENGES OR OPPORTUNITIES THAT HAVE RESULTED FROM THE UNANTICIPATED CHANGES

As noted above, the location and character of new growth has begun to have a detrimental impact on Lee County’s livability. Existing patterns of development are well-established in many areas of Lee County. This presents a challenge to adapt and improve established patterns. In order to address this concern and help promote a more

livable community, future planning efforts should be aimed at increasing a development's level of connectivity, density and intensity, and mix of uses. Infill and redevelopment in targeted areas should be supported to achieve these ideals; however, as illustrated by the phased mixed-use concepts in chapter 2, change will be incremental. The county can attend to these challenge through updates to the Future Land Use, Transportation, and Community Facilities and Services Elements which consider the issues regarding location, character, and form of future development in Lee County.

Despite the difficult challenges noted above, Lee County has a clear opportunity to clarify its vision of a livable community and to ensure it has the appropriate polices and regulations in place to support that vision. This opportunity includes:

- Incorporation of necessary background information to provide context and support for the goals, policies, and objectives contained in each element
- Creation of stronger policy linkages between plan elements
- Increased accountability in the development process to ensure that individual plan elements that play a role in the county's livability are integrated as part of a more sustainable planning approach.

Using this more sustainable planning approach as a guide, Lee County has an opportunity to ensure that future growth and development (both greenfield and infill/redevelopment) occurs in a manner that helps create a more livable community in the future.



Connected land use patterns emphasize compatibility between places where people live, work, shop, and play and provide access to public spaces and activity centers.

Issue #2: Strong Connections

BACKGROUND

Strong connections — as established by the county's land use patterns, transportation resources, and public facilities — are essential to Lee County's quality of life, identity, and sustainability. Connected land use patterns emphasize compatibility between places where people live, work, shop, and play; provide access to public spaces and activity centers; and support a greater variety of housing and lifestyle choices for all age groups. They also help support other aspects of a more sustainable community by allowing residents to more easily live active lifestyles by incorporating walking and bicycling into their daily lifestyles. Transportation resources that

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focus on connectivity have street and transit networks that provide multiple options for travel and interconnected pathways for pedestrians and bicycles that link neighborhood-oriented residential, commercial, and public spaces. Public facilities such as schools, recreation centers, parks and other civic uses, tie all of our communities and neighborhoods together and provide places for residents to gather and interact. This relationship is enhanced if they are well-connected to the neighborhoods and areas and are accessed by a variety of travel modes. By strengthening the county's connections, Lee County will enable all community members to move through the community with ease, improve the linkages between different land uses and community areas, and promote a unified county identity. Key issues and opportunities related to Strong Connections are as follows:

A CONNECTED DEVELOPMENT PATTERN

- **Connected Neighborhoods and Activity Centers** - strengthen connections within and between neighborhoods and activity centers that feature commercial, civic, employment, and mixed-use areas.
- **Activity Centers in Key Locations** - evaluate priority locations for mixed-use activity centers (universities/colleges, airport, employment and major transportation intersections) and focus on interconnected development patterns, transit opportunities, and public services to provide for these areas.

MOBILITY AND TRANSPORTATION

- **Stronger Linkage between Land Use and Transportation** - strengthen the relationship between land use and transportation planning to emphasize better connections between destinations and limit roadway expansion in locations where it would be detrimental to community character and livability.

- **Complete Streets Design** - evaluate the complete streets transportation design approach for roadways, streets, and other public rights-of-way (both new and retrofit of existing streets) to accommodate transit, cyclists, pedestrians, landscaping, and automobiles.
- **Funding for Transit** - explore appropriate innovative strategies for funding transit in order to continue and expand service in the county.

ACCESS

- **Evacuation Planning** - assess the county's roadway network and land use connections to ensure proper capacity, efficiency, and accessibility during tropical storm events.
- **A Connected System of Parks, Public Space, Recreation Facilities, and Open Space Resources** - utilize the county's park, public space, and open space resources to connect neighborhoods, commercial areas, activity centers, and public service facilities through an interconnected land use and transportation network. Better physical connections will also reinforce the role that these areas and features play and will serve to enhance their livability.
- **Public Resource Access** - improve access to the county's rivers, waterways, beaches, and open spaces through an array of regional, community, neighborhood, and linear parks.

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

Strong connections are important to Lee County for a number of reasons:

Infrastructure costs – Disconnected land use patterns result in additional costs for utilities and public services infrastructure, as development in such areas cannot be served efficiently. The transportation costs associated with these development patterns –

ranging from school buses to police and fire protection – also increase. At a county-wide level, the accommodation of growth in outlying areas increases the separation between land uses and requires longer infrastructure connections such as utility lines.

There are limited opportunities within the county to widen roadways to provide additional capacity. These opportunities are further limited by roadway projects that are cost-prohibitive and/or lack broad community support. Additional transportation connections provide an alternative for increasing roadway capacity and mobility throughout the county. Increased transportation choices can promote infrastructure savings through the provision of a balanced transportation system that accommodates all modes as well as lead to more livable communities.

Improving connections through coordinated transportation and land use planning also leads to greater infrastructure efficiency. More intense and dense development patterns can be served with fewer roadway lane-miles. Bringing land uses together decreases vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and allows more trips to occur by non-auto modes. This can be accommodated most efficiently through implementation of complete streets throughout the county to promote safe and convenient mobility for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users.

Social equity – It is important to provide transportation choices for the diverse population groups within Lee County. In particular, youth and the elderly are often unable to drive and require a safe convenient transportation system that accommodates walking, bicycling, and transit use. Safety is a critical issue for these groups as well. Transportation decisions that increase roadway capacity may decrease safety for other modes. Similarly, disconnected and low-density development patterns in many suburban areas of the county hinder the implementation of a multimodal transportation system.

Economic development – Strong connections are important for providing access to employment opportunities throughout the county. In suburban and rural areas of the county, the existing development patterns segregate employment areas from residential areas. It is important to establish affordable housing opportunities in areas served by transit, so that those who cannot afford an automobile have access to jobs and other services. Improved connections to employment centers and population bases also increase the county’s competitiveness within the region for economic development opportunities.

ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS OF HOW THE EXISTING COMPREHENSIVE PLAN RELATES TO THE ISSUE

Each of the Lee Plan’s elements was analyzed from the standpoint of how they relate to the issue of strong connections using the following question as a guide:

Evaluation question: How well does the Lee Plan provide for strongly connected land uses, transportation options, parks, public spaces, and public resources?

An assessment and analysis of how each element relates to the issue and how well the element helps guide the development of strong connections is provided below.

II. Future Land Use

Providing transportation, park and recreation, public service and infrastructure choices within Lee County begins with establishing a variety of land use patterns. Additionally, it is important to ensure that a development can accommodate the many different transportation, park, recreation, public service, and infrastructure

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demands being placed on it in a manner that is appropriate to the land use type and local context.



Dispersed patterns of development in rural areas of Lee County limit travel alternatives to the automobile.

The dominant suburban and rural land use patterns within the county are auto-oriented, with walking, bicycling and transit as add-on alternate modes. Moreover, they discourage neighborhood parks and promote an inefficient public service and infrastructure delivery system. The current Future Land Use Element supports these dominant development patterns. It does not encourage land use patterns that support walking, bicycling, and transit use, either at a site level or at a regional scale. The Future Land Use Element also does not address design-related elements that can support multiple travel options, maximize infrastructure capacities, or provide for a variety of park and recreational opportunities. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- ***Distinctions between urban, suburban, and rural areas***—differences between urban, suburban, and rural areas are only suggested in the existing element, without a clear statement of the policy differences between them. Transportation, park and recreational resources, and public services and infrastructure investment decisions should be guided by the land use direction for the county, particularly for establishing priorities among travel modes, varied park resources, and maximized infrastructure capacity. Transportation, park and recreation, and infrastructure systems should also be designed to serve each land use area at the appropriate level. Clearer policy distinctions are needed between urban, suburban and rural areas. If these distinctions remain ill-defined, it becomes more difficult to prioritize and implement future transportation, park and recreation, and public service and infrastructure system improvements.
- ***Land use densities***—in their current form, allowable land use densities are too low in many locations to support the efficient provision of multimodal transportation options, varied park and recreation resources, and highly efficient infrastructure systems. Higher allowable densities are needed in urban centers to make transit service financially viable and to promote increased ridership on existing transit routes, increase the viability of different park opportunities, and maximize infrastructure capacities. Lower densities should be encouraged in rural areas to support lower levels of infrastructure provision.
- ***Transportation Investments***—clearer policies are needed to prevent or discourage higher levels of transportation investments in rural and conservation areas
- ***Infrastructure priorities***—additional policies are needed to better define the county's infrastructure priorities so as to discourage the extension of public services in rural areas and ensure that current systems operate at their maximum capacity.

- **Community facilities**—as written, the element addresses the provision of community facilities such as neighborhood streets, parks, schools, and public spaces in quantitative terms. However, the element lacks policies that address land use connections and the physical relationship of these facilities to supporting land uses. An example of such a policy is the site selection process for schools, where an important consideration is pedestrian access from surrounding residential areas. Additional opportunities exist for policies addressing the design, location, and connection of parks, schools and public spaces relative to surrounding land use areas.

II. Transportation

The Transportation Element is among the most critical in addressing the issue of strong connections, since it provides the policy direction for countywide mobility and access to services. The current element is primarily focused on roadway capacity and was successful in providing roadway capacity for the county to accommodate suburban growth. However, it should provide more emphasis on multimodal options or the integration of multiple modes. Similarly, it should address coordination between the transportation system and related elements, such as land use, parks and recreation, housing, and community facilities. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Balanced transportation modes**—policies in the current element are organized in three categories: a.) Traffic Circulation, b.) Mass Transit, c.) Ports, Aviation and Related Facilities. This structure promotes the viewpoint of walking, bicycling, and transit as add-on modes, similar to the Future Land Use Element. As a result, there is not clear policy direction on balancing transportation modes within the county. More importantly, this structure does not acknowledge the county's various land use contexts (urban, suburban, and rural) and the differing transportation needs associated with these areas. As identified through the county's complete street policies, transportation systems in urban and rural areas are different from the suburban-based vision reflected in the current element's standards and policies.
- **Land use and transportation integration**—the element lacks policies regarding the coordination of land use and transportation decisions. At the regional level, these considerations could address desired locations for future growth and the identification of centers that contain intensities to support multimodal transportation choices. Priorities for transportation investments can reinforce land use goals for these centers and targeted growth locations. At the site level, transportation-related development regulations could address elements such as building design and orientation, mix of uses, parking requirements for automobiles and bicycles, and street connectivity. Policy guidance can be provided within the element to address these principles and their implementation in designated areas.
- **Local connectivity**—the element does not provide for local connectivity; instead, the emphasis has been on the arterial roadway system. This is consistent with State of Florida guidelines, which require arterial and collector roadways to be addressed. However, the implementation of connected land use patterns and multimodal transportation systems begins with local street connections. Arterial roadways are generally too sparse to provide meaningful travel connections at the local level, particularly for shorter-distance trips. Consideration of local street design and connectivity, particularly related to access to parks, schools, and public services, is important to addressing stronger connections within the existing element. Similar to

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other issues, the significance of the local street network varies depending on the land use context.

- **Level of service standards**—current transportation level of service standards in the element are roadway-based. The consequence of this and of concurrency in general is that development is encouraged in outlying rural areas where roadway capacity is available. In specific urban areas of the county, the development of level of service standards should recognize that a certain level of congestion is necessary to support a vibrant urban place and should include a more comprehensive assessment of level of service. This assessment should evaluate: transportation alternatives, necessary capital improvements, and equitable financing options. Additionally, urban development patterns contain connected local streets and parallel routes to provide additional capacity, neither of which are reflected in the structure of the existing system. Level of service standards for pedestrian, bicycle and transit modes is not incorporated into the concurrency management system. Updates to the Transportation Element should address level of service standards that account for all modes of travel as well as the differences between the urban, suburban and rural development patterns within the county.

IV. Community Facilities and Services

The Community Facilities and Services Element primarily addresses a wide range of utilities services, but also includes libraries, education, and health care facilities. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Integration of community facilities**—the element does not address the location requirements for these facilities, but provides an opportunity for distributing these facilities in

coordination with the overall land use direction and transportation strategy.

- **Infrastructure capacity and interconnections**—the element's link to the strong connections issue is particularly relevant in terms of appropriate connections to services for urban areas versus suburban and rural areas in order to ensure that public services are utilized to the maximum capacity and most efficient delivery manner.

V. Parks, Recreation, and Open Space

Establishing strong connections includes access to parks and open spaces systems, as well as the connections between these systems. The element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Pedestrian linkages**—the element does not address the need for pedestrian connections between neighborhoods and parks, recreation, and open space facilities or the need to consider proximity to transit as part of the siting process.
- **Integration of park facilities**—the element does not address integration of park facilities (particularly neighborhood parks) with surrounding residential land uses. Park facilities can be co-located with other facilities such as libraries and schools, improving access to these services, such as the Wa-ke Hatchee Park Recreation Center and the Alva School and community center. Similarly, additional opportunities exist to use school facilities as multi-functional community centers serving the public. Access from neighborhoods and activity centers to park areas is generally not addressed in the Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element, other than as related to a greenway facility.

VI. Capital Improvements

The Capital Improvements Element functions as the implementation mechanism for policies contained in the other elements. This element is directly relevant to the goal of achieving better connections between destinations for all modes of travel. Connected development patterns also allow infrastructure and public services to be provided more efficiently and at a lower overall cost. The element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Roadway level of service standards**—the element cites roadway LOS standards as the basis for providing transportation facilities. As previously discussed, however, this approach does not address priorities for bicycle, pedestrian, and transit infrastructure within the county. Similarly, a LOS-based prioritization system does not address the need for local street connections (both existing and new) to improve travel choices, as these roadways do not have LOS standards identified in the Lee Plan. Opportunities exist to restructure funding priorities between urban, suburban and rural areas in a way that provides travel choices that are appropriate to the area being served.
- **Public facility level of service standards**—the element focuses on level of service standards for the delivery of public facilities—potable water, waste water, stormwater management, and solid waste—and does not fully address issues related to system capacity. A system which evaluates system capacity in addition to LOS standard demands should be considered in order to ensure public services support the county’s urban, suburban, and rural land use framework.
- **Comprehensive plan consistency**—the element could be more effective in strengthening connections by revising the manner in which comprehensive plan consistency issues are considered. Currently, the element outlines a process for preparation of an annual CIP that brings in comprehensive plan considerations

such as connectivity near the end of a project selection process. Instead, these considerations could occur at the beginning of the process when projects are initially selected for evaluation.

VII. Conservation and Coastal Management

The Conservation and Coastal Management Element focuses on the preservation and enhancement of environmentally significant resources within the county. As such, the element does not explicitly deal with transportation connections between land uses and services in the same way as the other elements. Currently, the element does not provide policies for furthering connectivity of natural resources and systems through acquisition and management. Instead, the emphasis has been on either individual resources or at a generalized countywide scale. The opportunity exists to incorporate policies that address the connectivity of natural systems and access to natural areas, while recognizing that access to natural areas may not be appropriate in all cases. The element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Wildlife**—the element does not address the issues involved with the safety of wildlife and natural resources in the construction, maintenance, and use of transportation corridors and systems. The element should consider the need to provide for safe movement for all people and wildlife.

VIII. Housing

The Housing Element addresses the supply of a range of housing types and the distribution of affordable housing opportunities throughout the county. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Mixed-use neighborhoods**—overall, the element implicitly supports a separation between commercial services and housing

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by not speaking to the benefits of creating integrated mixed-use neighborhoods. The element does encourage the placement of housing opportunities near public transit, but given the limited availability of transit service, feasible locations are limited. For Lee County, most affordable housing has been constructed in outlying areas, rather than in centralized locations near services and employment opportunities. Even in centralized areas, however, many neighborhoods are not designed in a walkable fashion, often lacking sidewalks or bike lanes and containing pedestrian barriers such as perimeter walls.

- **Siting criteria**—this element places an emphasis on regional park facilities. It is recommended that the Housing Element establish siting criteria to address the desired proximity of housing to parks, services, and employment and multimodal connections between uses. These criteria would then be reinforced through policies in the Future Land Use, Transportation, and Parks and Recreation Elements.



Concentrated, mixed-use neighborhoods should be located where they can be readily served by existing or planned transit.

VIII. Historic Preservation

The Historic Preservation Element is currently focused on historic preservation. Including scenic preservation as it relates to viewsheds from the county's transportation corridors and its shoreline as part of this element could expand the focus of the county's preservation effort in a manner staff has identified favorably. The shared use of historic resources (e.g., for parks/open space, community centers) can also expand public access to the county's amenities. The element does not provide policies for furthering connectivity of historical resources and districts through identification and education. Instead, the emphasis has been on individual resources and districts or at a county-wide scale.

X. Intergovernmental Coordination

Intergovernmental coordination is a significant issue for the implementation of public services and transportation systems that lead to stronger connections. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Connections within and between centers**—many of the county's urban centers are located within the Cities of Fort Myers, Cape Coral and Bonita Springs. Improved coordination is needed between the county and cities regarding land use and transportation decisions to provide connections within and between these centers.
- **Coordination with facility and service providers**—coordination with other transportation providers is also needed for successful implementation of facilities and services. The majority of the arterial corridors in the county are FDOT roadways. Additionally, funding for transportation improvements is coordinated through the Lee County MPO. Similar coordination is desirable for utilities and public safety providers.

- **Coordination activities**—the existing Intergovernmental Coordination Element addresses these issues as required by Florida Statute. This element contains the necessary coordination activities to ensure meaningful community connections.

XI. Economic

The Economic Element addresses the provision of employment opportunities and the enhancement of the county's economic base. Currently, the element specifically relates to the issue of strong connections as follows:

- **Land use, transportation, and public services integration**—the element addresses a diversity of economic generators, but does not address the role of land use patterns, transportation needs, and public service demands associated with these activities. An example is that industrial and manufacturing uses may depend on transportation connections to rail or airport services and access to public service facilities with appropriate capacity. Similarly, access to transit service is an important consideration for larger employers, particularly in service sectors such as tourism.
- **Connections associated with targeted economic uses**—in conjunction with land use considerations, the element should also consider the needed connections associated with target economic uses within the county. These connections include utilities, transportation, and access to police and fire services.

UNANTICIPATED CHANGES IN THE COUNTY AS A RESULT OF THE ISSUE

The primary change within Lee County has been the promulgation of a suburban, auto-oriented land use pattern throughout the county.

Given the county's limited funds, the cost to serve this growth pattern is no longer sustainable. Additional water and sewer infrastructure has been completed as population growth has been accommodated in outlying areas. However, the cost to provide these services has increased as development is less centralized. The quality of public safety services such as police and fire protection are evaluated based on distance and response time. Disconnected development patterns within the county increase response times, meaning that these services cannot be provided as efficiently. The development patterns have also increased costs for community services such as schools, parks, and libraries

Although many areas contain the proper mix of uses and services at a macro scale, the design of individual developments and a lack of local-level connectivity have limited access to these services, particularly parks and schools. As these land use patterns have become more established, it has become increasingly difficult to fund and implement bicycle, pedestrian, and transit systems. Additionally, the design of many arterial roadway facilities within the county has created barriers to safe pedestrian and bicycle circulation. As a result, many trips that could be accommodated easily by other modes occur by automobile.

A second unanticipated change within the county is the lack of funding to maintain LOS standards for suburban, auto-oriented development patterns. In recent years, transportation funding within Lee County has dropped drastically, primarily due to declining transportation impact fee revenues and development activity. At the same time, existing development patterns have made the implementation of multimodal improvements (particularly transit service serving population centers) less viable financially. Similar decreases in funding have occurred for other county services such as utilities, schools, parks, and public safety.

CHALLENGES OR OPPORTUNITIES THAT HAVE RESULTED FROM THE UNANTICIPATED CHANGES AND/OR ISSUES

The predominance of suburban, auto-oriented development patterns in Lee County has created challenges at several levels. Many suburban communities throughout the county are well established, both in terms of physical form and population base. This often creates challenges in terms of implementing modifications to improve connections. Infill development and higher-density residential development can be used to improve connections in existing development areas while encouraging the efficient use of existing infrastructure. In established areas, however, this development pattern may be viewed as conflicting with existing community character, and connectivity improvements may not extend beyond the immediate site area.



Connected development patterns allow infrastructure and services to be provided and maintained in a cost-efficient manner.

As the existing infrastructure ages, the county will face more conflicts between maintaining existing infrastructure (for example, school renovations or replacing a sewer line) versus building new infrastructure to serve growth. Having connected development patterns allows infrastructure and service to be provided in a more cost-efficient manner, minimizing these conflicts and reducing costly retrofits to meet desired improvements to connectivity.

Development patterns such as gated communities and cul-de-sac street systems have limited the opportunities to establish new connections; as a result, there is not a consistent collector street network within the county. These collector streets would connect neighborhoods to each other and provide access to services such as schools and parks without using the larger arterial roadways. Many neighborhoods also have expressed opposition to increased local street connections, due to concerns about the negative impacts of cut-through traffic. In response to these concerns, neighborhood cut-through traffic has been addressed by closing streets and removing existing connections, rather than through traffic calming measures along neighborhood streets or by more frequent connections to limit the volume of traffic on any one roadway.

Existing policies related to the design of transportation facilities reinforce auto-oriented land use patterns, creating an institutionalized barrier to implementing transportation choices. The most significant challenge related to transportation facilities is the implementation of context-sensitive design, recognizing that streets and street networks in urban areas should interact with adjacent land uses differently from those in suburban and rural areas. While the county has begun to address this distinction through building and site design standards (for example, buildings oriented along the street in mixed-use areas and development buffers in rural areas), it has not been acknowledged in the design of arterial and collector roadways. As a result, policy conflicts occur

between automobile speed and capacity and pedestrian safety, as there are not policies that acknowledge the tradeoffs needed to achieve a balance between transportation modes. This is exacerbated by county and FDOT administrative requirements (based on suburban development patterns) that make it difficult to implement needed connectivity measures in pedestrian-oriented centers; specific examples include lower speed limits and increased local street access for arterial roadways.

Roadway design standards at the state level are changing and provide opportunities to address policy obstacles to implementing context-sensitive design. The design standards promote complete streets and provide technical justifications for design elements needed to support safe pedestrian and bicycle circulation. Additional opportunities for improved transportation connections are provided through land use decisions that promote infill and redevelopment, as these can serve to reinforce multimodal transportation investments. Increased density can make transit service financially viable, and redevelopment can be used to implement local street connections.

At a policy level, the existing automobile-based transportation concurrency system also serves as a barrier to higher-intensity development in designated centers, particularly in established urban areas. Similar conflicts occur between standards for the siting of public schools and the provision of safe and direct pedestrian connections to surrounding neighborhoods.

Florida Statutes provide several alternative concurrency management options to remove this policy barrier and promote infill and redevelopment. Transportation Concurrency Exception Areas (TCEAs) can be used to promote redevelopment and strengthen multimodal transportation options in existing downtown areas. Multimodal Transportation Districts (MMTDs) can be used to establish balanced transportation systems in suburban areas; in exchange for lower roadway LOS standards, additional standards for

bicycle, pedestrian, and transit systems are applied over time. Both of the tools should be supplemented with the development of a mobility plan that addresses the integration of transportation form, function and equitable financing of necessary improvements. This allows existing suburban centers to establish more urban development patterns over time. Both of these options should be considered as part of the implementation of improved connections within the county.

Regarding transportation funding, challenges facing Lee County include the lack of a stable funding source for transit and declining property tax revenues and impact fees. However, the limited funding and reduced reliance on developer impact fees provides an opportunity to focus on improving the efficiency of the existing transportation system through small-scale multimodal improvements. This is in contrast to the focus in recent years on large-scale roadway capacity projects to meet the demands of proposed development in outlying areas. The availability of Federal grant funding related to sustainability and energy reduction also provides an opportunity to implement multimodal transportation projects. Other non-traditional funding sources include Safe Routes to School grants, which can be used to implement pedestrian safety improvements.

Issue #3: Community Character

BACKGROUND

Lee County is comprised of diverse local communities, each with its own distinct character and identity. The character and identity of each community are defined by their unique attributes including their location (coastal, river, or inland), development pattern (urban, suburban, or rural), community design/master planning attributes

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(development form, streetscape, architecture, and transportation systems), and history. Lee County citizens have a strong desire to enhance and preserve the attributes of their communities. Participants in the Horizon 2035 planning effort expressed support for the county's community planning and conservation efforts that enable local community members to steer planning and development efforts. Additionally, they desire county-wide strategies that encourage more complete community-oriented land use, stronger connectivity, and sustainable development practices. Issues and opportunities specific to community character are as follows:



A pedestrian-oriented scale and historic character contribute to the character of this small community.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND APPEARANCE

- **Reinforce Distinct Community Character**—maintain and enhance the distinct character of individual communities within the county with emphasis on a local vernacular reflected in buildings, community design, and architectural features;

especially foster small town character in the county's rural communities.

- **Open Spaces**—reflect community character through appropriate open and public space requirements (i.e.: urban, suburban, and rural) that a one-size-fits-all approach will not meet the needs of varying areas.
- **Public Facilities as Community Shapers**—utilize local community resources and facilities (i.e.: neighborhood parks, schools, and public spaces) to reinforce the identity of each community area.
- **Enhance Landscaping and Buffering**—use landscaping and buffering to better transition between different land uses and to make transportation corridors greener.
- **County Sense of Place**—Unique Local Community - improve the county's sense of place by fostering the unique characteristics and attributes of the many communities in the county.

REGIONAL AND LOCAL IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY CHARACTER

- **Integrated Development**—encourage planning strategies that integrate local land uses together, provide for interconnected neighborhoods, activity centers, and public spaces, and link the local community together through a variety of transportation alternatives.
- **Regional Development Coordination**—be attentive to whether development practices of other local, regional, and state agencies and jurisdictions are consistent with Lee County goals for land use, growth management, environmental resources, and transportation and encourage our neighbors to consider their impact on Lee County.
- **Streetscape Design**—design streets and highways to have a positive impact on community character, including landscaping,

street graphics, street cross-sections, and traffic-calming measures.

- **Placement of Major Utility and Infrastructure Facilities**—consider community character impacts of the design and placement of essential infrastructure facilities and services and alternative energy generators such as utility pipes, wind turbines, and solar energy panels.

RURAL AREA TOOL BOX

- **Development Standards to Preserve Rural Character**—focus land development policies on the preservation of rural character and maintenance of the working landscape in order to maintain a strong distinction between rural communities and urban and suburban areas.
- **Preserve Open Lands**—conserve rural lands by developing a comprehensive rural preservation strategy that includes a diverse array of programs such as conservation land purchase programs, transfer of development rights, purchase of development rights, and farmland trusts.
- **Transportation Standards for Rural Areas**—standards for transportation and other infrastructure facilities in rural areas should maintain rural character.
- **Agricultural Lands Preservation**—consider agricultural lands preservation practices such as farmland trusts to protect agricultural lands.
- **Economically Viable Agriculture**—explore and encourage innovative solutions to protect the economic viability of rural areas and agricultural lands such as commercial agribusiness, farmers markets, and farm-to-table programs.

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

What is Community Character?

The concept of community character builds on the concepts of livability and connectivity to organize forms at a community-appropriate scale—whether that community is urban, suburban, or rural. These forms are organized in a manner that fosters and supports the unique attributes of a neighborhood or collection of neighborhoods that collectively comprise a discernable community area. This organizational pattern should take into account the natural environment, the established development context, the relationship of the community to other communities, its size, and the resulting social and economic characteristics.

Community character is the diverse combination of all the traits that make a community unique and that establish a sense of place for its residents, businesses, and visitors. While some traits, such as friendly atmosphere are intangibles, others, such as proximity to an attractive, centralized mixed-use transportation hub are very tangible.

Why is Community Character an Issue for Lee County?

Participants in the New Horizon 2035 planning effort remarked consistently that many areas of Lee County lacked a discernable community character. As the planning effort proceeded, it was determined that this lack of community character was, in part, a result of the suburban development patterns that exist throughout the county. Participants noted the strong contrast between these patterns and other areas in Lee County identified as having strong community character, such as: Boca Grande on Gasparilla Island,

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Captiva Island, and the River District in downtown Fort Myers. Other features identified by participants as contributing to a strong community character include Lee County’s extensive network of parks and natural resource and conservation areas.

The form and pattern of areas identified above as having a positive community character can be linked to series of simple design or form principles as outlined in Chapter 4 of this EAR.

The Lee Plan can address design, form, and scale issues by establishing policies that require development patterns to protect the urban, suburban, or rural character of communities or to retrofit areas where desirable. Other policies can direct the form and scale of new buildings to appropriate activity centers. Policies may also provide for architectural standards consistent with community character and encourage appropriate redevelopment of commercial strip areas.

ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS OF HOW THE EXISTING COMPREHENSIVE PLAN RELATES TO THE ISSUE

Each of the Lee Plan’s elements was analyzed from the standpoint of how they relate to the issue of community character using the following question as a guide:

Evaluation question: How well does the Lee Plan promote local community planning efforts and establish county-wide strategies that encourage community-oriented land use, connectivity, and sustainable development practices?

An assessment and analysis of how each element relates to the issue and how well the element helps protect and reinforce community character is provided below.

I. Future Land Use

The Future Land Use Element has a significant impact on the character of the various communities in Lee County as it guides the design, development, and redevelopment of these communities. A key issue identified by participants in the New Horizon 2035 process with regard to community character was the need for a clearer distinction between urban, suburban, and rural areas in Lee County. Changes to the Future Land Use Element are needed to address this issue and to ensure clear policy guidance is provided to guide the character of both new development and infill/redevelopment. Specifically:

- **Distinction between urban, suburban, and rural areas**—policies related to future land use categories could be strengthened to providing a clearer distinction between urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- **Mix of land uses/integrated site design**—the element addresses some aspects of community character such as its policies that promote cluster development or its Mixed-Use Overlay policy that promotes a mix of land uses and integrated site design, but this concept is not addressed in a complete or cohesive manner.
- **Infill and redevelopment**—policies could be strengthened with regard to infill and redevelopment and the revitalization of established neighborhoods and centers. In areas where infill and redevelopment are desirable, policies should identify key issues to be addressed to promote compatibility with the surrounding neighborhood—e.g., scale and architectural character.

II. Transportation

The Transportation Element guides the focus, construction, and operation of the county's transportation system network.

Transportation systems can contribute to community character or detract from it, depending on the approach and emphasis of this element. Lee County has recently adopted a complete streets resolution, the provisions of which will guide that focus, construction, and operation of the transportation system in a very different way than past practice. Currently, furthering community character raises the following issues with the element:

- **Traffic calming**—the element does not provide clear direction on the integration of traffic calming devices and other features to enhance the safety and character of county roads and streets.
- **Complete streets/context-sensitive design**—policies do not acknowledge the role of transportation facilities in helping define the character of the public realm and the community as a whole. Context sensitive street design and complete streets both play a significant role, not just in the function of individual streets, but in their character and relationship to surrounding land uses.
- **Facility types**—policies do not reflect the difference between the type of facilities needed to serve different area-types—urban, suburban, and rural.

III. Community Facilities and Services

The location and design of community facilities and services is an important factor in the character of Lee County's various communities and the county as a whole. Investment in community facilities and services in established areas can help promote reinvestment and revitalization which in turn enhances community character. Consideration should be given to the design of

community facilities to ensure they are compatible—in terms of their scale, mass, height, and architectural character—with the surrounding neighborhood context. Specifically:

- **Integrated water resource planning**—the element does not include specific policies that address integrated water resource planning. In addition, the structure of the element which separates policies into different sub-elements may be a limitation to implementing integrated water resource planning policies.
- **Neighborhood context**—the element could be strengthened with regard to the consideration of neighborhood context and compatibility when locating community services.

IV. Parks, Recreation, and Open Space

Parks, recreation, and open spaces contribute significantly to the character of the communities in which they are located and the county as a whole. Parks and open space in particular provide visual relief from developed areas of the county. Lush vegetation, grassy expanses, water features, and tree canopies all serve to enhance the appearance of the surrounding neighborhood. Specifically:

- **Neighborhood parks**—the element does not address neighborhood parks. Although they are not currently part of the parks and recreation vision, they are often built by private developers within individual developments without much guidance on location and form or integration with the community.
- **Maintenance responsibilities**—the element does not reinforce the responsibility of developers to maintain neighborhood parks provided within individual development.

V. Capital Improvements

The Capital Improvements Element does not specifically address community character and should be modified to include such considerations. Specifically:

- **Resource allocation**—the element supports the protection of distinct characteristics of the county’s individual communities by laying out a clear, transparent process for the allocation of resources. The clear process allows opportunity for the diverse communities of Lee County to advocate for projects that promote community character at a localized level. Supporting these efforts within the county’s communities also promotes the retention of unique characteristics and results in a more diverse and interesting character for the county as a whole.
- **Process**—the element is less supportive than it could be in that the process does not incorporate policy considerations outlined in the Lee Plan until late in the project selection process.

VI. Conservation and Coastal Management

The goals, objectives, and policies of the Conservation and Coastal Management Element play a significant role in preserving community character. Participants in the New Horizon 2035 process acknowledged the value of Lee County’s natural resources as a key element of its character, livability, and sustainability. The current element supports the protection of these resources and its implementation has been successful. Continued support for these policies should be emphasized and strengthened.

VII. Housing

The development of a range of housing types in conjunction with commercial and other land uses in compact, mixed-use buildings can do much to enhance a greater range of development form and pattern that combine to establish community character. As it exists today:



The development of a range of housing types can enhance community character.

- **Location and form**—the element does not directly address the issue of community character with respect to housing decisions such as location and form, and does not include a policy linkage to the Future Land Use Element and its community-related policies.

- **Mix of housing types**—the element addresses mix of housing types only very generally. A policy linkage to the Future Land Use Element should be provided, with a particular emphasis on the desired character and form of housing in different areas of the county. Additionally, the element should emphasize the connection between location of affordable housing and accessibility to mass transit. Finally, establishing a strong community character through the design of visually appealing and diverse neighborhoods and through compatible infill and redevelopment should both be addressed.

VIII. Historic Preservation

Like the urban, suburban, and rural context of communities, a community's historic and archaeological resources contribute to its unique character. The element supports the preservation of historic and archaeological resources, but could be strengthened with regard to the role that historic preservation plays in preserving Lee County's community character. In addition, policies should be expanded to address the preservation of scenic views.

IX. Intergovernmental Coordination

The Intergovernmental Coordination Element is limited to two goals, Service Coordination and Growth Management. The element is not directly related to the issue of community character; however, it does support coordination with partner agencies and municipalities on public infrastructure improvements and growth management issues which will indirectly influence the character of the county.

X. Economic

The Economic Element provides a framework for employment, tourism, and economic development. Community character can play

an important role in centralizing and supporting these aspects of the county's economy. First, private investment often follows public investment. Therefore, a demonstrated commitment to the protection and enhancement of the community's character on the part of the county through continued investment in parks, open space, and infrastructure can help build confidence among private sector developers and employers that Lee County is a desirable place to invest. Second, attractive, livable communities are more likely to attract a diverse and skilled workforce. Therefore major employers are increasingly factoring in quality of life considerations of their employees as they consider siting requirements for new facilities. Currently, the element supports a diverse economic base, but could be expanded to emphasize areas in which there is a particular economic focus.

Due to the synergy that can be created through its location in relationship to higher education facilities; transportation facilities including I-75 and the airport; availability of vacant lands; and airport master planning efforts, future economic development efforts should target the Research Diamond area.

UNANTICIPATED CHANGES IN THE COUNTY AS A RESULT OF THE ISSUE

Population growth and resulting land development in Lee County has occurred in a manner that has often not established or preserved clear and unique identities for Lee County's various communities. This sprawling development pattern has often diminished community character where it once existed, and failed to establish character in the built environment as formerly undeveloped land has been developed. In general, the lack of parameters for development form with little or no proactive guidance has led to diminution of community character in newly developing areas.



Sustainable development patterns—such as this lively main street in Celebration, Florida—integrate social, environmental, and economic factors.

CHALLENGES OR OPPORTUNITIES THAT HAVE RESULTED FROM THE UNANTICIPATED CHANGES AND/OR ISSUES

Through the issues and opportunities identification phase of the Horizon 2035 planning effort, participants noted that Lee County has done a remarkable job in preserving environmentally sensitive areas and landscapes, but that recent development patterns have led to a lack of connected and functional transit, bike paths, and sidewalks, and a lack of community character. Recent developments at the macro and micro scales have provided opportunities for innovative strategies to address the changing situation of growth and

development in Lee County. Macro scale environmental issues like global warming and the greenhouse effect have focused attention on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and prompted the state legislature to enact House Bill (HB) 697 to require local governments to address these issues in their comprehensive plans. State statutory and regulatory guidance for local governments to address this issue identifies sprawling development patterns as problematic for energy conservation and efficiency and points toward compact development forms. The recent economic downturn brought on, in large part, by the dramatic downturn in the housing sector has had a major impact on Lee County. High growth and employment in the development sector have given way to population loss and high unemployment in all sectors of the economy. This absence of development pressure, however, gives Lee County a unique opportunity to step-back and revisit its historical development pattern. Looking within the county to places that have a development pattern and design style, like Downtown Fort Myers and Boca Grande, and places outside the county like Downtown Venice and Sarasota provide examples of how to better form community character. This opportunity to change our community forms can point the way forward to a more livable, connected, and sustainable future for Lee County's residents, businesses, and visitors. During the visioning phase of the New Horizon 2035 planning effort, participants suggested and agreed that a proactive approach to future development planning was needed to foster better community character where it was lacking, and to protect and enhance community character where it exists in Lee County.

Issue #4: Sustainability

BACKGROUND

In the context of New Horizon 2035, the term sustainability means the ability of the county and its residents to meet the needs of the

present population while ensuring that future generations have the same or better opportunities. This entails many traditional aspects of planning such as development patterns, environmental resources, housing, and transportation, as well as a wide variety of other topics such as community health and well-being, social equity, energy use and efficiency, and economic resilience and vitality. It is characterized by strategies to promote living within the county's inherent limits, and an understanding of the interconnections among economy, society, and environmental conditions.

The community has expressed concern over development patterns that lack connectivity, economic resilience, and environmental responsibility and detract from community character. Many in the county have expressed support for a more sustainable approach to planning in Lee County that integrates essential social, environmental, and economic factors. A sustainability-based approach to planning in Lee County can foster cultural diversity, expand the local employment base by focusing on clean industries and a diversified economic base, improve environmental stewardship, promote redevelopment and green building design, provide new opportunities for cleaner alternative energy sources, and promote the unique qualities that comprise Lee County's unique character and sense of place. The sustainability issue concerns four primary components:

ECONOMIC RESILIENCY

- **Expand Local Economic Opportunities**—improve the county's economic sustainability by fostering new and expanding existing industry clusters such as ecotourism, research and development, and green industries that are linked to area higher education institutions, international airport business opportunities, medical services, and other sectors.

- **More Diverse Employment Mix**—evaluate the county's employment center to incorporate a more diverse mix of employment generators.

ENERGY CONSERVATION, ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP, AND GREEN DESIGN

- **Avoid Development in Vulnerable Areas**—continue to direct development away from areas vulnerable to tropical storms, storm surge, sea level rise, flooding, and wildfire hazards.
- **Prioritize Water Conservation**—focus on potable water efficiency in development, water reuse/reclamation, and improved irrigation and stormwater best management practices.
- **Energy Conservation**—implement standards for energy conservation, including renewable energy resources such as solar and wind energy.
- **Conservation of Natural Vegetation**—protect trees, mangrove stands, and other areas of natural vegetation during the development process and preserve and protect coastal resources, native habitats, and landscapes.

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION

- **Coordinate Location of Services with Growth**—focus infrastructure in areas where growth can best be accommodated within the county's desired development pattern and aim for that infrastructure to be in place at the time that it is needed.
- **Plan Services to Support Compact Growth and Redevelopment**—develop solutions for utilities and public facilities needed to support compact development and redevelopment in identified areas.
- **Stable Funding Sources**—identify and secure sustainable revenue sources to finance the construction, maintenance, and operation of existing and future public services.

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Green roofs can be an effective way to capture and treat stormwater while reducing energy consumption related to heating and cooling.

- **Water Quality**—maintain and improve water quality control through enhanced stormwater management.
- **Enhance Recycling**—improve recycling efforts as part of solid waste services.
- **Manage Airport Impacts**—address and minimize growth impacts to the airport on adjacent development, including both noise and safety considerations.

- **Groundwater Impacts in Rural Areas**—promote innovative, sustainable, and environmental-friendly designs and processes to limit impacts on water resources.

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY

- **Community for All Ages**—emphasize activities that will attract and retain a diverse population by continuing to improve community resources, facilities, and services.
- **Sustainable Building Standards**—design buildings for long life, adaptability, and lower resource consumption.
- **Provide a Wide Range of Housing Opportunities**—consider the needs of all income levels, ages, and lifestyle needs, including those with physical disabilities, through innovative economic incentives to encourage home ownership and community stability.

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

Through its current policies and programs, Lee County is establishing a foundation for a more sustainable approach to development and county operations. As part of the New Horizon 2035 process, the county is seeking to build on its current efforts to ensure its comprehensive plan goals, objectives, and policies support a more sustainable future for Lee County. Lee County is not alone in its efforts to become a more sustainable community. During the 2008 session, the Florida Legislature enacted House Bill 697. House Bill 697 established new local planning requirements relating to energy efficient land use patterns, transportation strategies to address greenhouse gas reductions, energy conservation, and energy efficient housing. These new requirements became effective on July 1, 2008.



A key element of a more sustainable community is a compact pattern of growth that may be readily served by transit.

Lee County's efforts to increase the efficiency of its day-to-day operations and county facilities have been significant in recent years and are continuing. However, Lee County's comprehensive plan and land use code play a significant role in helping the county achieve its sustainability goals through actions of the private sector. Necessary steps may include the adoption of policies and regulations to support a more compact and efficient pattern of development that can support transit service and alternative forms of transportation; encouraging or requiring sustainable development practices; ensuring the rights to alternative energy capture on private properties (e.g., solar orientation and setbacks, wind turbines, and photovoltaic panels); providing appropriate opportunities for development of private alternative energy generation plants and local food production; and expanding transit service among others.

ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS OF HOW THE EXISTING COMPREHENSIVE PLAN RELATES TO THE ISSUE

Each of the Lee Plan's elements was analyzed from the standpoint of how they relate to the issue of sustainability using the following question as a guide:

How well does the Lee Plan encourage a sustainability-based approach to planning that fosters a development pattern that is based upon the interconnections between economic, social, and environmental conditions?

By definition, the issue of sustainability is influenced by a wide range of considerations; therefore all plan elements factor into this discussion.

II. Future Land Use

The Future Land Use Element is one of the most critical elements of the Lee Plan as it relates to the issue of sustainability. It guides the location, pattern, and intensity of future development and the overall balance of land uses in the county. These land use characteristics in turn influence how people move from place to place—i.e., are they able to walk, bicycle, or take transit, or do they need to drive their cars for all trips? The element specifically relates to the issue of sustainability as follows:

- **Mix of land uses/integrated site design**—the element addresses some aspects of the sustainability such as its policies that promote cluster development or its Mixed-Use Overlay policy that promotes a mix of land uses and integrated site design, but it is not addressed in a complete or cohesive manner.

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- **Balanced land use**—strengthen the need for a balance of land uses—both at the county level and within individual communities in the county.
- **Infill and redevelopment**—the element primarily focuses on greenfield development. Policies should be established or strengthened with regard to infill and redevelopment and the revitalization of established neighborhoods and centers and the role of these alternative approaches in a more sustainable planning approach. .
- **Mixed-use**—the element does not directly speak to or support land use options such as mixed-use development other than through its Mixed-Use Overlay policy. As a result, it still largely promulgates suburban development patterns.
- **Linkages between uses**—the element does not address the need for stronger pedestrian, bicycle, and transit linkages between urban centers and neighborhoods.

III. Transportation

The Transportation Element defines how people will travel through and within the county and provides a framework for future growth. As such, it is also a critical element of the Lee Plan as it relates to the issue of sustainability. The integration of land use and transportation decisions helps to ensure the future growth occurs in locations that may be readily served by existing or planned transportation facilities and at intensities that match the types of transportation facilities that are available. An integrated approach to land use and transportation helps promote a more compact pattern of growth, a more cost efficient pattern of growth, and promotes the creation of the types of mixed-use places embodied in the community's vision. The element specifically relates to the issue as follows:

- **Transportation infrastructure**—the element does not address the sustainability of the transportation network in terms of existing infrastructure and the efficient provision of new systems
- **Multimodal options**—the element does not provide adequate emphasis on multimodal options as a means of supporting a reduction in vehicle miles traveled and associated emissions.
- **Connectivity**—the element could be strengthened with regard to requirements for local connectivity needed to support bicycling, walking, and transit ridership.
- **Integrated land use and transportation**—the element should clearly establish the importance of striving for an integrated approach to land use and transportation as a means of promoting more compact and sustainable patterns of growth that can be more easily served by transit.
- **New technologies**—the element needs to address changing transportation technologies such as electric and alternative fuels vehicles.

See also Issue #2, *Strong Connections*, for more discussion of this topic.

IV. Community Facilities and Services

The Community Facilities and Services Element defines, at a broad level, how and where new services should be provided in Lee County. A sustainable approach to the provision and management of community facilities and services must consider their location and timing in relation to other land use and transportation decisions; construction practices used to build them and the long term costs associated with these practices; policies to address energy conservation and efficiency; and their relationship to the surrounding community. The element addresses the issue of sustainability through its references to county's water supply planning efforts;

however, it does not expressly include the relevant policy direction from that effort. The element specifically relates to the issue as follows:

- **Sustainable stormwater systems**—the element does not address the sustainable use and design of stormwater systems. The element should strengthen policies related to the design and integration of stormwater systems that mimic natural systems.

V. Parks, Recreation, and Open Space

The Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element establishes a framework for the distribution, design, and development of the County's parks and recreation facilities. Parks, recreation, and open space provide opportunities for residents to interact and promote physical activity and health, all of which are important components of a sustainable community. The element specifically relates to the issue as follows:

- **Community health and wellness**—the element does not address the role that parks, recreation, and open space can play in the county's sustainability by providing more opportunities for walking and bicycling both within and between parks and recreation facilities, from a transportation standpoint as well as a benefit to community health.

- **Funding mechanisms**—the element provides a strong policy linkage to impact fees and standards that help fund parks and recreation facilities.
- **Siting/land use linkages**—the element lacks a strong linkage to the Future Land Use Element, which results in the construction of private park facilities that are undesirable or not appropriately located and may become a financial burden to the county.
- **Resource protection**—the element lacks a policy linkage to the Conservation and Coastal Management Element, which presents challenges when parks and open space or conservation resources are adjacent to one another and have different access/use limitations or environmental sensitivities.
- **Shared facilities**—the element supports the co-location of parks with schools, but does not adequately address the opportunity to leverage public investments through other shared facilities.

VI. Capital Improvements

The Capital Improvements Element addresses the issue of sustainability through implementation of the goals and objectives articulated in other comprehensive plan elements, particularly the Transportation and Community Facilities and Services Elements. The Capital Budget helps to give definition and direction to all of these. This element establishes the priorities for the Capital Improvements Plan (CIP). The element relates to the issue of sustainability as follows:

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- **Funding priorities**—the element has potential for playing a key role in the accomplishment of sustainability objectives by helping to link funding priorities to sustainability goals in the plan.
- **Process**—the element lacks any reference to sustainable principles in the process or priority sections of the element.

VII. Conservation and Coastal Management

The Conservation and Coastal Management Element guides the management and use of the county’s natural resources. In addition to their scenic value and recreational value, Lee County’s abundant natural resources serve many practical functions. They provide wildlife habitat and connections, convey and filter storm water, and help off-set the greenhouse gases generated by the county’s developed areas and traffic. These functions are critical to the sustainability of the county and the region. However, the element does not address the important absorption functions that natural areas provide to balance the impacts from developed areas.

VIII. Housing

The Housing Element establishes policies to guide the availability, site selection criteria, funding, and conservation of housing for affordable and special needs populations. A sustainable approach to housing must consider the proximity of housing to services, schools, employment, and transit; the methods used to construct the housing; the efficiency of the homes from the standpoint of their energy and water usage; and the types and intensities of housing choices provided. The element relates to the issue of sustainability as follows:

- **Employee housing**—the element doesn’t address employer provided housing although some employers are already providing it in remote locations.



Lee County’s natural areas provide a variety of resource functions including serving as wildlife habitat.

- **Access to transportation and services**—the element does not address the importance of location and access to transportation and services as an aspect of overall housing affordability.
- **Green building techniques**—the element doesn’t address green building techniques, community gardens, and other sustainable development practices.
- **Affordable housing**—the element supports affordable needs housing (low income, senior, etc.), but implementation efforts needs to be maintained.
- **Workforce housing**—the element does not address workforce housing, which has become the new affordable housing due to the shift in housing market and current economic condition.

IX. Historic Preservation

The Historic Preservation element establishes a framework for identifying, evaluating, and protecting the county's historic resources through a variety of local preservation techniques. Lee County's historic resources help define and contribute to the unique character that distinguishes each of the county's communities. In addition, the preservation and adaptive reuse of the county's historic structures can help reduce the need for new building materials, infrastructure, and the consumption of natural resources. The element could be strengthened with regard to the issue of sustainability by addressing the important function that historic preservation plays in sustaining existing buildings and fostering reuse rather than demolition.



The preservation and adaptive reuse of the county's historic structures can help reduce the need for new building materials, infrastructure, and the consumption of natural resources.

X. Intergovernmental Coordination

The Intergovernmental Coordination Element establishes policies to guide cooperation between Lee County and its intergovernmental partners on issues such as public services, LOS standards, roadway improvements, and growth management. The element encourages cooperation between Lee County, its municipalities, adjacent local governments, and partner agencies on issues that have direct impact on sustainability.

XI. Economy

The Economic Element establishes a framework for employment, tourism, and economic development in Lee County. The health of the county's economy is a critical factor in its sustainability. Each of these economic factors must be considered as part of a more sustainable approach to land use and transportation planning. The element specifically relates to the issue of sustainability as follows:

- **Economic vitality**—the element could be strengthened with regard to the role of the county's economy in its sustainability and the importance of retaining areas for employment as a long-term strategy.
- **Linkages to other plan elements**—the element lacks a clear linkage to other elements in the plan that support the quality of life needed to attract and retain a diverse and sustainable employment base and population.
- **Target markets/economic diversity**—more specificity could be added in this element with regard to a broader set of targeted economic markets—e.g., not dependent on local economy.

UNANTICIPATED CHANGES IN THE COUNTY AS A RESULT OF THE ISSUE

Many aspects of Lee County's recent growth are not sustainable, particularly its development patterns that have an effect on so many aspects of overall quality of life. Low intensity residential and commercial development will be challenging to continue in its current form due to limitations in the availability of raw land and the fiscal reality of serving scattered development with transit and other amenities. Limited housing and employment options force residents to commute longer distances by car—reducing the time and resources available to focus on healthy activities and families. In turn, this increase in vehicle miles traveled results in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions and increased stress on the county's natural resources. The county and its stakeholders have expressed concern about these trends and have expressed a desire to implement their vision for a more sustainable future through the ideas and recommendations contained in this EAR.

CHALLENGES OR OPPORTUNITIES THAT HAVE RESULTED FROM THE UNANTICIPATED CHANGES AND/OR ISSUES

As noted above, many aspects of Lee County's recent growth are not sustainable. However, existing patterns of development are well-established in many areas of Lee County. This presents a challenge from the standpoint of trying to adapt and improve established patterns where increased connectivity, development intensity, and a broader mix of uses is desired to help promote a more livable community. Infill and redevelopment in targeted areas is supported to achieve these ideals; however, change will be incremental. This challenge is most closely associated with the Future Land Use, Transportation, and Community Facilities and Services Elements as they play the most direct role in the location, character, and form of

future growth in Lee County. However, related challenges will also indirectly affect each of the other elements in the plan.

Despite the difficult challenges noted above, Lee County is embracing sustainability as a framework for improving and creating more efficient government operations and transforming the county's approach to land use and transportation planning. As such, the county has already taken numerous steps to ensure it has the appropriate policies and regulations in place to support its vision of a sustainable community. This EAR provides an opportunity to incorporate a clear context for sustainability within the Lee Plan and to ensure the goals, policies, and objectives contained in each element support a balanced approach to development that considers community well-being and equity, environmental resource conservation, and economic resilience and vitality. In addition, the EAR provides an opportunity to establish clear policy linkages between plan elements.