

## Development Process Needs Improvement, Panel Says

By KEVIN WIATROWSKI

NEW PORT RICHEY - County officials got a dose of tough love Friday morning from a panel of development experts invited here to study how Pasco handles development.

The weeklong analysis by the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Land Institute drew in part from interviews with dozens of people from government-types to developers to everyday citizens.

The final report, summarized during a presentation at Pasco-Hernando Community College's west campus, spelled out the places where the county has fallen short in terms of managing growth in recent years. Panelists also offered praise where deserved, however, and suggested ways the county can put itself on a wiser path.

"The panel applauds Pasco for wanting to improve itself," said institute panelist Michael Maxwell. "That's the first step toward improvement."

Among the highlights of the report, institute experts said:

- Pasco County has approved more than 300,000 future residential units, enough housing for the next 60 years.
- The county's long-range plan offers a blueprint for well-reasoned, sustainable growth but doesn't have the legal structure to guide development.
- As part of streamlining the development process, the Development Review Committee should be downscaled from its current role as a place where county officials and developers publicly negotiate their way to approvals.

Institute experts saved their most pointed critiques for the Development Services Department, which includes planners, engineers, zoning experts and others who oversee land use and construction in unincorporated areas.

In their report, institute experts said the county's development review process:

- Is too complex. "No one knows all the conditions to meet for approval," Maxwell said. Pasco's development review process is so complex institute experts couldn't figure out whether the department has four or five divisions.
- Is too territorial. The development review divisions "silo" their information rather than share it across the department.
- Is too removed from writing ordinances. The county attorney's office writes the rules of land use, frequently with no input from the development experts who must enforce them. That produces confusion and leads to "planning by variance," in which it's simpler to grant exceptions to conflicting rules rather than to enforce them fairly across the board.

The county development review system has been cobbled together over decades in response to growth. Developers have said the system is chronically short-staffed and takes months to do reviews that can take weeks elsewhere, Maxwell said.

The panel also faulted the county for unfairness when it comes to requiring developers to build roads. The current case-by-case system forces some developers to carry the entire burden for road projects that will benefit neighboring landowners who develop later, the panel said.

The panelists' critiques were nothing new to the people who must navigate the development review system.

"For having looked at it for a week, they were dead-on," said Longleaf developer Frank Starkey. "A lot of us have thought there needed to be changes, but couldn't articulate what."

For their part, county officials took their lumps without complaint. County Administrator John Gallagher, who has spent nearly 30 years at the head of county government, said the criticism was needed.

"The organization had a choice to continue as-is or bring people in from across the country to look at the planning process and the development process to help us do it better," Gallagher said.

Institute experts said county commissioners bear the burden of making sure the county's development review process works more smoothly and to keep it tied closely to the long-range plan.

The national economic downturn has given Pasco County the 18- to 36-month window of opportunity it needs to reorganize its development process, institute officials said. Using that time wisely will ensure Pasco is ready for the next wave of growth in the coming decades, experts said.

"The growth is going to continue to come," institute consultant Alex Rose said. "That's the nature of Florida." Reporter Kevin Wiatrowski can be reached at (813) 948-4201 or [kwiatrowski@tampatrib.com](mailto:kwiatrowski@tampatrib.com).