

Wildland-Urban Interface Case Study: Mediating for Change in Martin County, Florida¹

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For decades, the residents of Martin County, Florida, have worked to manage the growth in their county. Martin County (population 138,700 in 2008) lies on the southeast coast of Florida, just north of Palm Beach County (1,265,000 people in 2008), Broward County (1,750,000 people in 2008), and Miami-Dade County (2,400,000 people in 2008). To help manage growth and reduce anticipated interface problems, the county developed a comprehensive plan in the early 1980s, long before most Florida counties had such plans. The plan established guidelines for environmental protection, a height limit for buildings, and an urban service district boundary. In 1990, even stricter policies were introduced.

In 1997 Martin County became one of five counties designated as a Florida Sustainable Community by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA). The program was developed from a recommendation by the Sustainable South Florida Study Commission to help test models of sustainability that could help restore the Everglades. As part of the project, Martin County residents and officials conducted a community visioning process to create a plan for their community. They also

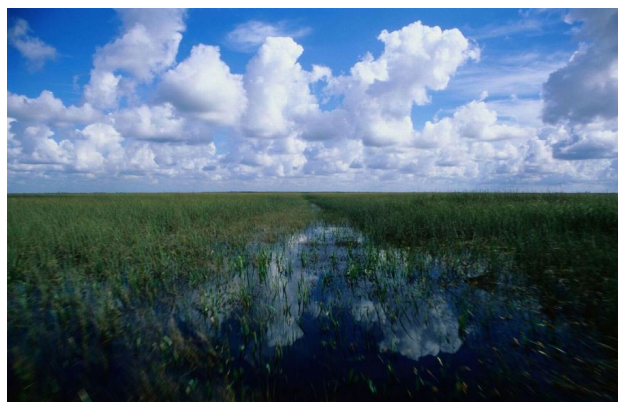


Figure 1. Protecting the Everglades is a priority in south Florida. The Everglades Restoration Project identified rapid, poorly planned growth as a problem and spurred the visioning process in Martin County. Photo courtesy of Everglades National Park.

generated a hazard-mitigation strategy and developed plans for a sustainable community resource center. The county was encouraged by the DCA to use the visioning process to build consensus within the community on growth and development issues. This process engaged a wide range of business, civic, educational, environmental, and neighborhood representatives, along with interested residents to determine what a sustainable Martin County would look like.

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In 1998, community planners held workshops throughout the county to develop and refine a vision for a sustainable Martin County, focusing on environmental, land-use, and transportation issues. Workshop participants also articulated the vision's guiding principles and identified 52 indicators of sustainability. The Martin County Commission formally adopted the vision as part of its comprehensive plan in July 1999. The project won the 2000 National Association of Counties Achievement Award and the 2000 International City, County Communications and Marketing Association Savvy Award.

The county partnered with the Florida House Institute for Sustainable Development to design the Sustainable Communities Resource Center within the county's new Indian Riverside Park. The center was to serve as an energy- and water-efficient demonstration building, as well as a neutral forum for citizen-based planning, conflict-resolution, and community development meetings. The resource center has not been constructed as of this writing because of a funding shortfall.

The Sustainable Communities pilot project led to the creation of the Sustainable Martin Alliance. This nonprofit group helped to develop plans for the resource center, assisted with a project to determine indicators of sustainability, and promoted public education on concepts of sustainability. The group also helped to create "Martin County 101: It's Different Here," an educational program that provides new and long-term residents with an overview of the natural and built characteristics of their county, and its economic, environmental, and social issues.

A member of the Sustainable Martin Alliance and former county commissioner founded a nonprofit organization called Friends of Martin County in 2004. The organization aims to offer community members a nonpartisan, nonpolitical forum for discussing the county's growth management issues and options, assuming that a desirable future requires broad, active participation from the public. The organization's objectives include creating grassroots support to implement a county land acquisition program. The group's steering committee includes

the founder, an officer of the local Audubon Society Chapter, a hospital executive, and a developer. After struggling with conflicting perspectives, the group asked a professional mediator from the University of Florida to facilitate its meetings. During the first facilitated meeting between the steering committee and local stakeholders, the group discussed each participant's interests and concerns related to land use in the county; defined and discussed the ground rules and characteristics of the group; and decided to include expert presentations by the county planner, tax assessor, and water manager in future meetings. Once the ground rules became habit, everyone was able to listen and work together. Each stakeholder was given a chance to speak and all participants vowed to listen.



Figure 2. Unplanned growth can contribute to a number of natural resource challenges. Photo by Larry Korhnak.

Through this process the group learned that steering committees must be representative of the stakeholders, the facilitator must be neutral and enforce group ground rules, and the process must reveal all views of the group members. Expectations of the group grew more reasonable as they gained more knowledge about land-use issues. Involving stakeholders in the visioning and decision-making process was a strategy that served everyone and encouraged group cooperation. The Friends group continues to guide growth in Martin County and protect natural resources through collaborative and cooperative community effort. They have also assisted the development of the "Martin County 101: It's Different Here" program.

Martin County has been pro-active in managing its growth issues and is committed to involving as many stakeholder perspectives as possible in

discussions and decisions. They have made a variety of efforts to promote sustainable development within their community.

As part of the regional effort, Sustainable Treasure Coast, Martin County joined with Indian River and St. Lucie counties to develop a regional plan to promote sustainability. The final report (see <http://www.sustainabletc.org>) includes 164 recommendations in five categories of things to sustain: quality natural systems; rural lands; built environment; access to education, health and cultural opportunities; and economic diversity and prosperity. While many recommendations call for regional plans, clearinghouses, data sharing, and secure funding, some target specific action items, such as:

- Protect and plant trees and vegetation to improve air quality;
- Develop easily understood measures of water quality;
- Steer development to lands where it would have the least impact on the functioning of natural systems;
- Promote direct sale of agricultural products in ways that connect local production with local consumption;
- Give preference to development that minimizes dependency on the automobile while accommodating public transit;
- Create a science and technology high school;
- Develop a regional oral history program.

While these recommendations are still new and saddled with economic challenges, the energy and commitment to quality planning that the county has shown in the development of these recommendations will help the local leadership reach to these suggestions when decisions are being made.

Sources

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