

# The Community Character Plan for Collier County, Florida

County government is often dismissed as a weak link in the management of the nation's land resources. Poorly funded, understaffed and politically vulnerable, counties have been regarded as easy marks for the one-size-fits-all projects of well-heeled developers and the ill-considered schemes of local cronies.

Then, as if to counter such cynicism, along comes an effort such as the Community Character Plan for Collier County, Florida, which demonstrates the potential for integrated planning at the front lines of battles over sprawl, traffic, ecology and social equity.

Most significantly, the Collier plan interprets the public realm as including not only streets and urban open spaces but also systems of habitat and waterflow, as well as traditional patterns of rural life. Within this context, it tackles a range of contemporary physical planning issues, such as creating a better-balanced transportation system, retrofitting introverted subdivisions, transforming arterials into great streets and helping inner-ring suburbs age gracefully.

## Upmarket Gridlock

Situated at the southwestern tip of Florida, Collier County is hemmed in by the Everglades to the east, the Gulf of Mexico to the west and stands of coastal mangrove to the south. Its older built-up areas, Naples and Marco Island, mark the affluent southern tip of a string of waterfront communities that extend north some 150 miles to Tampa–St. Petersburg.

For the last twenty years Collier County has seen an explosion of gated residential compounds that have threatened to rob it of its charm. Inland, problems have surfaced with the continued development of large, subdivided areas of forest and swamp, originally sold off as unserviced five-acre lots during the Florida land scams of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Development pressure has also mounted in eastern portion of the county, which contains valuable agricultural land as well as some of the last viable habitat for the endangered Florida Panther.

According to Victor Dover, whose South Miami firm, Dover, Kohl and Partners, was lead consultant for the plan, many of Collier County's difficulties arose because it "had built itself into gridlock through very upmarket renditions of conventional sprawl." This eventually led the state to challenge the sufficiency of the county master plan, and caused citizens to publicly question the county's "business-as-usual" development practices.

As part of a settlement with the state, the Collier Board of Commissioners agreed to both redo its official plan and undertake a broader community planning effort. Emerging from the second of these tracks, the Character Plan was

directed by a citizens advisory panel and adopted in 2001. Its purpose was to increase citizen interest, generate new ideas and set a new direction for county policy.

Because a key element of the effort was consciousness-raising and consensus-building, the plan included an intensive period of public input: Ten large public meetings were held, including four hands-on planning sessions. The final plan was illustrated with photorealistic before-and-after simulations, diagrams and change-over-time scenarios whose purpose was to help county residents visualize the implications of community-design decisions.

The bulk of the plan is contained in manuals devoted to community design, mobility and green space. These are followed by an implementation section that translates general recommendations into precise suggestions for change to official county planning documents. The intent of this implementation work was to make it as easy as possible for county planners to follow the thread of public interest through to the correct formulations of technical language.

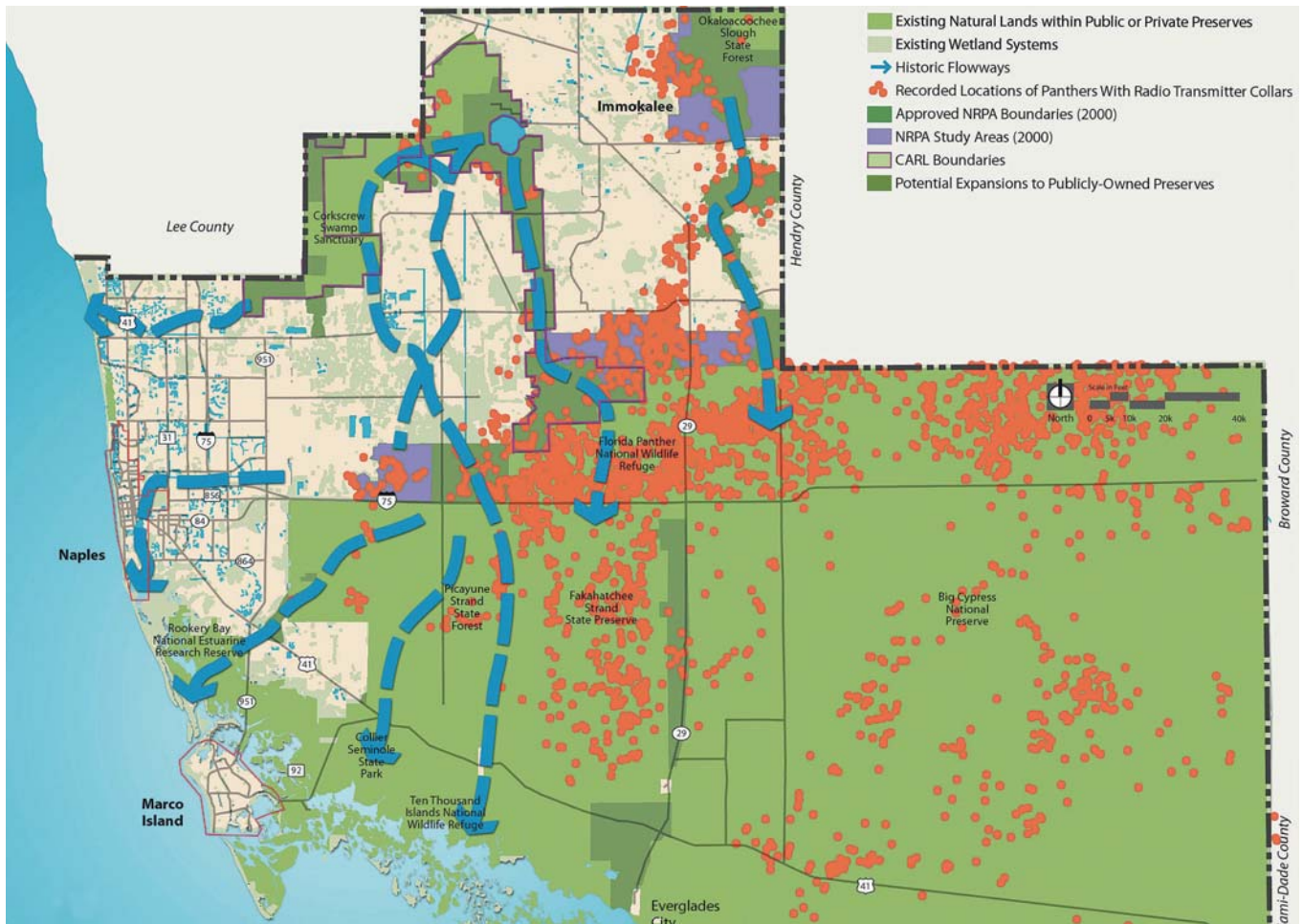
## New Urbanist Influences

Much of the material in the Community Design Manual will be familiar to proponents of Traditional Neighborhood Development. To re-establish a viable public realm, the plan advocates that existing communities build toward greater levels of density, interconnectedness and walkability. At the same time, it criticizes the existing planned unit development (PUD) process by which large parcels of land are developed without adequate connection to one other.

The manual contains illustrations showing how these goals may be achieved—ways to establish walkable neighborhood centers, promote denser housing and integrate big-box retailers into patterns of smaller-scale streets and subsidiary buildings. It also shows how existing PUDs could be retrofitted, although the real lesson of such studies is that the county should require more flexible, integrated development patterns to begin with, Dover says.

In addition to generic statements of principle, the manual also grapples with specifically local situations, such as North Golden Gate Estates, a semi-rural area that dates to the era of Florida land scams. Many lots there are swampy or otherwise exceedingly difficult to build on, resulting in a spotty pattern of development. And the area is largely devoid of infrastructure or services, and prone to wildfire and flooding. Nevertheless, the area provides some of the only affordable housing in the county.

Among the recommendations are that Golden Gate undergo a process of selective densification, leading to a pattern of new hamlets and village centers. It proposes new connector roads with distinctly rural characteristics



and calls for limited commercial development based on historic Florida “crossroad” stores.

### Connections to the Larger Scale

The two other manuals attempt to tie these recommendations for fine-grained community development to a countywide framework of social and ecological concern.

The Mobility Manual notes that while county population has risen dramatically in recent years, the miles driven per vehicle has increased even more. A key recommendation is to allow local traffic to remain local by establishing a network of secondary routes. It also proposes well-located new major thoroughfares, neighborhood traffic-calming and a hierarchical palette of tree-lined “great streets.”

The third component of the plan, the Green Space Manual, works from a fairly standard community-needs survey. While it finds the county to be generally well served by parks, many of these are so poorly integrated into neighborhoods there is little choice but to drive to them.

At the regional scale, the plan used GIS maps to evaluate research from a host of sources (including panther telemetry), making it possible to accurately correlate linkages between ecosystems, threatened species, natural patterns of water flow and development. The overlays make a convincing argument for a policy of county growth boundaries linked to broad ecological concerns.

To date, the Community Character Plan has spawned at least two new planning efforts. One aims to redo the North

Golden Gate Estates master plan. The other will lead to a specific plan for Naples Park, an older suburb that may greatly benefit from recommendations in the Community Design Manual.

Dover says that since county voters rejected a half-cent sales tax for road-building in November, county planners have also begun to look at some of the corridor-management recommendations in the Mobility Manual. And interest is rising in a ten-year “green tax” to acquire new open space to link up existing parklands in built-up areas.

According to juror Peter Calthorpe, the plan “does something I haven’t seen done before, which is an adopted county-wide plan that truly integrates ecology, circulation and urbanism.” Its eventual impact, however, will depend on its ability to convince county residents of the importance of a bigger picture, one that gives new meaning to the pursuit of shared public values.

#### Collier County Community Character Plan, Collier County, Fla.

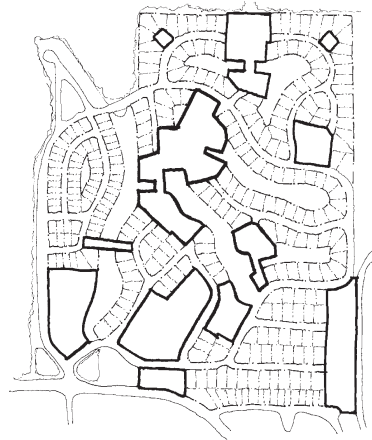
**Client:** Board of County Commissioners, Collier County, Fla. (Amy Taylor, project manager) and directed by a Select Committee on Community Character.

**Planning:** Dover, Kohl and Partners

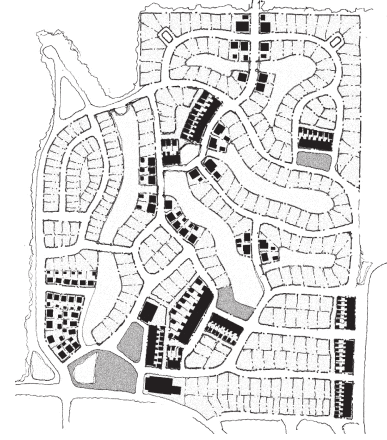
**Associated consultants:** Open space, transportation planning: Glattig Jackson (open space, transportation planning), Spikowski Planning Associates (implementation), Communities by Design (community image survey), UrbanAdvantage (visual simulations).



Existing subdivision pattern in a typical neighborhood.



Areas with opportunities for transformation.



Proposed reconfiguration of lots and streets.

## Jury Comments

*Calthorpe:* Collier changes the nature of the field. It says, okay, we are going to take the regional environmental framework, the regional circulation framework and we're going to integrate them with an urban design framework that addresses a whole range of issues from greenfield to suburban infill to town repair. That seems to me a qualitative shift in what planning is doing in America today.

*Rabaim:* My problem is the approach. It sets up expectations that to create this New Urbanist paradigm, to create these wonderful environments, this is the image of the place you have to have.

*Calthorpe:* Everybody gets caught up in the architecture. I think it's a bogus issue. This goes beyond the typical TND stuff. It operates on a larger scale: It tries to integrate an urban sensibility about development—not downtown development, but suburban development—to a larger-scale sensibility about green space and overall circulation. When the thinking moves to this scale, that's healthy.

*Fraker:* I admire the effort to do something at a regional scale, to address the issues of sprawl and circulation. But the prescriptive imagery of the kind of development that should take place is offered as an alternative to nothing. There are ways of presenting a plan where you are not giving such a prescriptive solution. What I see is a lot of the CNU tried-and-true "principles" applied at a larger scale and I don't know that they are appropriate.

*Rabaim:* We've seen these, but I don't think people in Collier County have. The folks that will be most affected by this are exactly the folks who need to be.

*Brown:* When you get citizens involved who often times have never had any kind of passion about planning or place,

such images can be very powerful. I agree the images can be trite and wrong for that kind of place, but I think in terms of getting involvement from the community, they can have an impact.

*Mozingo:* Isn't there something else we can play off here other than the plantation house? People are responding to the loveliness of the arches, but they are also responding to the socioeconomic aspirations it represents. There's a whole theory about class operation and how people yearn for the class just above them.

*Fraker:* We should emphasize that while we worried about some of the prescriptive images of buildings, it was the site-to-system effort that is really good. That is the real strength of the matter.

**Previous:** The plan proposes that wetland, habitat and waterflow patterns should shape open space and urban form of Collier County. Graphics courtesy Dover Kohl and Partners

**Above:** How an existing gated community might be retrofit, over time, to improve internal circulation, create neighborhood-scale public space and diversify housing choices.

**Opposite:** Existing conditions along U.S. 41 in Collier County, and simulated images of suggestions for improving the streetscape with new landscaping and development standards. Photo and simulations by Urban Advantage

