

## OUR VIEW

# Questions on growth need fresh answers

Like that hypothetical river we can't step into twice, Florida has always had a way of passing its people by, shape-shifting into some new set-change of scenery that is scarcely recognizable, and confounding our feeble attempts to preserve what we think of as its heritage.

If our state has a tradition, it's often one of enchantment as a gateway to disenchantment. We all know the pattern: Tourists come to our region, fall in love, find a home that answers the siren calls that brought them here. The first five years are golden; the next maybe a bit brassier. After a decade they begin to bemoan the changes that are robbing them of their special purchase on paradise — changes invoked to accommodate the influx of yet more people, people much like them but just dissimilar enough to be somehow irritating.

A homeowner who bought exuberantly into the first or second phase of a brand-new subdivision resents the traffic congestion and wildlife loss occasioned by construction of the third or fourth phases. Retired condo dwellers who settled eagerly into a tranquil downtown core with just the right amount of street life grumble when the joyful noise below their balconies begins to throb too vibrantly, disturbing their sleep.

Our leaders respond to such complaints by grappling with sound ordinances and traffic mitigation projects. But rarely do we as a body politic question the basic premise of Florida's business model, which is the perpetual motion of laundering the currency of tourism into unmitigated residential expansion.

So resistance to an insistence on growth that feeds on itself most often takes the form of environmentalism and land conservation. It's a logical focus, and the protection of our wild and open spaces supplies an excellent rallying cry to counter the pressures of economic expansion. But the act of setting aside natural habitats, no matter how laudable, does not really address the question of what we want our part of the state and its communities to be when they grow up.

The most recent heavy local lift in this regard happened in the last century, and resulted in what became known as the Sarasota 2050 plan. It was a compromise that left no one completely happy, based on a delicate balance between greenspace and clustered homes, and subsequent adjustments to the plan succeeded in upsetting that balance as well as some concerned citizens. Even without that tinkering, enough time has passed — and homebuilding has occurred — to justify a wholesale return to the fundamental issues 2050 sought to resolve.

The comprehensive plan amendment generated by a citizen-led group of Old Miakka residents, set to come before the county Planning Board on Thursday, would be an excellent prompt to restart that conversation. Even with a favorable planning staff recommendation, which it did not get, this ambitious move to redefine the terms of acceptable East County growth is probably doomed.

But the hard work that has gone into the initiative should not be allowed to disappear along with those citizens' rural way of life. As the makeup of our county commission changes under district elections, and residents once again turn their attention to our future quality of life, this revolutionary amendment should become a blueprint for a long-overdue, countywide dialogue on growth.

*The Herald-Tribune Editorial Board*



**Cattle graze in a field off Myakka Road in Old Miakka.** DAN WAGNER/HERALD-TRIBUNE