



Rural Clusters

Review of Comprehensive Plan Policies Relating to
Sub Area Plan Process and Recommendations

**Alachua County Growth Management Department
For Board of County Commissioners Meeting of August 13, 2013**

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Executive Summary

The Board of County Commissioners has requested that staff comment on the Comprehensive Plan policies which call for updates of the boundaries for each of the 13 designated Rural Clusters through a phased schedule of sub area plans. In response to the Board's request, staff provides the following review of the Comprehensive Plan policies on Rural Clusters and recommendations for amendment of the policies to streamline the process for delineation of more precise parcel-based boundaries.

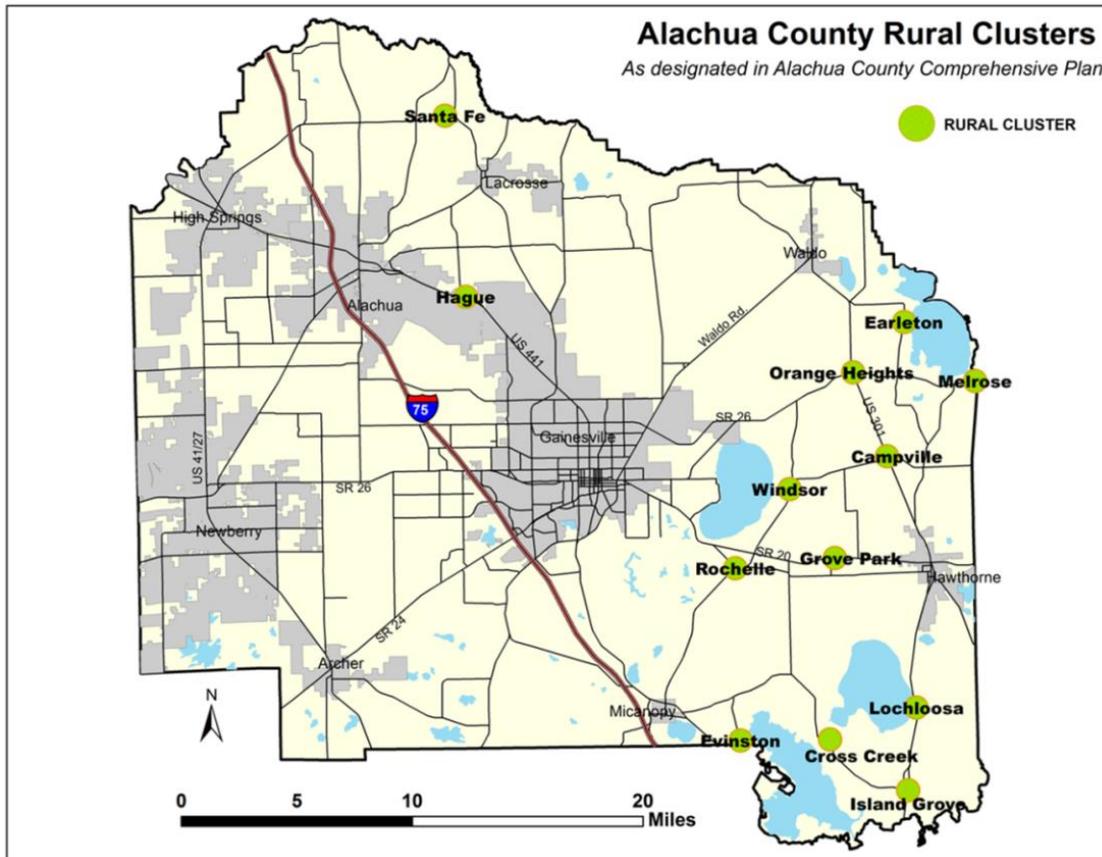
Based on the review of the existing policies, staff is recommending that the Board direct staff to prepare a Comprehensive Plan text amendment for review and authorization to advertise that would provide for delineation of more precise boundaries for Rural Clusters on the Future Land Use Map through use of the standard Comprehensive Plan amendment process pursuant to Florida Statute and County Code requirements. The text amendment to revise the policies would remove the requirement for preparation of sub area plans for such Rural Cluster boundary delineations, while retaining sub area planning as an optional process to address specific issues as identified in Policy 6.4.5 of the Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Element. Staff will return to the Board at a future meeting with the draft Comprehensive Plan text amendment for authorization to advertise public hearings.

After the Board authorizes preparation of such Comprehensive Plan text amendments, and if they are ultimately adopted and become effective, staff would anticipate bringing forward individual Comprehensive Plan Amendments for authorization to advertise public hearings to delineate more precise parcel-based boundaries for each Rural Cluster on the Future Land Use Map.

Rural Cluster Introduction

There are thirteen Rural Clusters designated in the Alachua County Comprehensive Plan. Most of the communities that are currently designated as Rural Clusters were originally established as rural settlements along rail lines, lakes, or canals over 100 years ago.

Exhibit 1. Alachua County Rural Clusters Map



1984 Comprehensive Plan

The Rural Cluster land use designation was established as part of the update of the Alachua County Comprehensive Plan in 1984. The 1984 Comprehensive Plan established an urban services area, which was the area where most new development and infrastructure investment was expected to occur. The 1984 Plan also established rural areas, which consisted mostly of agricultural land uses, environmentally sensitive areas, and rural residential areas. The policies for rural areas also recognized the presence of some centers of existing development within the rural areas, including policies for such areas. This included policies for Rural Clusters. The 1984 Plan described Rural Clusters as areas “characterized by a concentration of permanent population of persons outside of an urban cluster...[that] serve as a focus for the rural community and generally contain

lots of less than 5 acres and retail commercial at a level to serve the immediate population ” (Policy 7.5.1 of 1984 Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Element), and stated that “Rural Clusters shall generally include areas within ½ mile from the easily discernible focal point of the cluster...” and “should be construed as containing all of the more developed areas and contiguous intervening open (i.e. developed) areas, but not undeveloped land lying outside of or beyond the areas” (from Policies 7.5.1.3a. and b. in the 1984 Comprehensive Plan). The policies from the 1984 Plan indicate that the ½ mile radius was a generalized way of identifying Rural Clusters on the Future Land Use Map, with additional detailed criteria to be used in applying the Rural Cluster policies to specific properties.

2002/2005 Update of Comprehensive Plan

New requirements for designating the boundaries of Rural Clusters came about as part of the 1998 Evaluation and Appraisal Report (EAR) on the Alachua County Comprehensive Plan: 2001-2020 and the follow-up amendments to the Plan based on the EAR recommendations. In the 1998 EAR, one of the recommendations was to: “Use GIS mapping capabilities to depict existing development patterns and more accurately depict Rural Clusters ... in accordance with infill policies rather than a circle on the Future Land Use Map representing a ½ mile radius.”

In response to this EAR recommendation, amendments to the Comprehensive Plan were adopted as part of the EAR-based Comprehensive Plan update in 2002 to add policies requiring evaluation and update of Rural Cluster boundaries based on sub-area plans, as well as more detailed policies spelling out the types of commercial and institutional land uses allowed within the Rural Clusters. These amendments to the Plan went into effect in 2005 after the legal process related to challenges to other aspects of the 2002 Plan update were completed.

The current Alachua County Comprehensive Plan 2011-2030 addresses Rural Clusters in Objective 6.4 and Policies 6.4.1 through 6.4.6. Objective 6.4 describes Rural Clusters as “small settlements outside of an urban cluster” “that serve as a focus of an existing rural community. They generally lack public services and facilities identified as necessary for more intense urban development.”

Policy 6.4.1 provides that new residential development within Rural Clusters may have lot sizes of one acre or more with well and septic, or lot sizes as small as one-half acre with central water, subject to Comprehensive Plan policies on septic tanks. In contrast, new residential development in the surrounding Rural/Agriculture areas outside the Rural Cluster may have a maximum of 1 dwelling per 5 acres. Policy 6.4.3 further provides that up to 30,000 square feet of supporting commercial development may be allowed within

Rural Clusters. New commercial development is generally not permitted in the surrounding Rural/Agriculture areas.

Policy 6.4.2 of the Future Land Use Element requires that Rural Cluster boundaries “shall be updated as part of an evaluation of the designated Rural Clusters based on the sub-area planning process identified in Policy 6.4.5.” Detailed guidelines to be used in evaluating and designating the boundaries are provided in sub-policies (a) through (e) of Policy 6.4.2. The guidelines provide that Rural Clusters shall “generally include developed areas approximately 1/2 mile from the easily discernible focal point of the cluster”... “usually the intersection of two rural roads or some other prominent feature around which the community seems to be centered.” The guidelines also provide that, “the cluster shall be construed as containing all of the developed areas and undeveloped infill areas, but not undeveloped land beyond the extent of developed areas.” The guidelines further provide that the developed areas include “areas with commercial uses, non-farm residential areas where lot sizes are generally below 5 acres and usually below 1 acre, and other specialized uses not normally found in a rural setting. Platted, undeveloped subdivisions or other pre-existing developments where densities are higher than one unit per acre should be included, even if not developed, provided that the various lots or parcels are largely in different ownerships. The extent of non-conformity of these lots or parcels from County setback, access, and other regulations shall be considered in determining Rural Cluster boundaries.” Additionally, open space or conservation areas may be included within the boundary if they can be logically included given the other guidelines. Consideration may also be given to features such as jurisdictional boundaries, highways, railroads, or distinctive land use areas that help form a logical boundary.

Policy 6.4.5 provides that as part of the evaluation and update of the designated Rural Clusters, the county shall prepare sub-area plans which address the following: carrying capacities for appropriate levels of nature-based and heritage tourism, community vision and goals, consistency of the Rural Cluster with the surrounding Rural/Agriculture areas, community livability, protection of rural character, provision of amenities for residents, protection of natural resources, and linkages through heritage or nature trails and bikeways.

Policy 6.4.6 provides that new subdivisions within Rural Clusters may be allowed only after the Rural Cluster boundaries have been updated based on the completion of a sub area plan. This policy also provides that a phased schedule for preparation of sub area plans for each Rural Cluster, and the minimum requirements for sub area plans, shall be established by the Board of County Commissioners. The policy provides for privately initiated sub area plans in advance of the phased schedule, and that in such instances, “the applicant shall bear the cost of preparing the sub-area plan”.

Evaluation of Rural Clusters

Growth Management staff conducted an evaluation of Rural Clusters in 2005, after the updated Comprehensive Plan went into effect, in accordance with the boundary guidelines in Policy 6.4.2 (a) through (e), and using available parcel-based land use information. Based on this evaluation, staff prepared maps with more precise parcel-based boundaries for each Rural Cluster. Staff currently uses these maps (which are available at the Growth Management Department office and online), in addition to the guidelines in Policy 6.4.2, to make interpretations about the applicability of the Rural Cluster policies to particular properties. The more precise parcel-based boundaries that were delineated by staff have not yet been adopted on the Future Land Use Map in the Comprehensive Plan through the sub area planning process.

There has been minimal new development activity within Rural Clusters going back to the mid-1990s. Exhibit 2 below provides data on certificates of occupancy issued by the County for new residential or non-residential construction within Rural Clusters from 1994 to 2012. There has been an average of less than four certificates of occupancy issued each year within all thirteen Rural Clusters combined over the past 18 years. Most of the Rural Clusters have averaged less than one certificate of occupancy issued per year during this time period.

Exhibit 2. Certificate of Occupancy Data for Rural Clusters

Rural Cluster	Certificates of Occupancy Issued for period 1994-2012		Total Certificates of Occupancy 1994-2012	Average Number of COs Per Year
	<i>Residential</i>	<i>Non-Residential</i>		
Campville	0	1	1	0.05
Cross Creek	2	0	2	0.1
Earleton	23	0	23	1.3
Evinston	4	1	5	0.3
Grove Park	8	0	8	0.4
Hague	7	3	10	0.6
Island Grove	0	0	0	0
Lochloosa	0	1	1	0.05
Melrose	7	0	7	0.4
Orange Heights	3	2	5	0.3
Rochelle	2	0	2	0.1
Santa Fe	2	0	2	0.1
Windsor	5	0	5	0.3
TOTAL	63	8	71	3.9

All Certificate of Occupancy data in this table is for new residential and non-residential construction. Certificate of Occupancy data does not include additions or alterations to existing buildings, replacement of existing manufactured homes, or accessory structures.

Special Area (Sub Area) Plan Process

The County's Unified Land Development Code (ULDC) Chapter 402 Article 16 provides for Special Area Plans (i.e., sub area plans). According to the ULDC, Special Area Plans "are established as one mechanism to protect unique environmental, historic, or cultural resources within strategic ecosystems, significant habitat areas, listed species habitat areas, or to address specific needs and circumstances in other areas designated by the Board of County Commissioners in order to enhance livability, protect the character of a neighborhood, provide amenities, plan for traffic management, and facilitate joint planning with municipalities".

The County's ULDC Section 402.100 outlines a three stage process for special area plans, such as those required for Rural Clusters. The first stage in the process is determining the Scope of Work, which is a collaborative effort between the County, property owners, and the public. The Scope of Work must be acted on by Resolution of the County Commission at a public hearing. In accordance with ULDC Section 402.100(a), all property owners within the area for which a Special Area Plan is being developed, "shall be notified in writing of the intent to develop a plan for the area at least 30 days prior to the public hearing [on the Scope of Work] and shall be encouraged to participate in the planning process". If a Scope of Work is approved, then Stage 2 of the process is the Special Area Study. The Study requires at least 1 Community/Stakeholder meeting, data collection and analysis, and development of options and recommendations for policy amendments or updates. Stage 3 of the process is the Special Area Plan, which would include a Comprehensive Plan Amendment to implement the recommendations of the Special Area Study, and in the case of Rural Clusters, to designate the boundary. The special area plan process would take at least 12 to 18 months to complete, and could be longer depending on the complexity of the issues to be addressed.

The Alachua County Comprehensive Plan has existing special area plans for areas such as Cross Creek and Idylwild/Serenola. In both of these instances, the special area plans were initiated by the community as a way to address unique land use, environmental, or historic resource issues. Both of these special area plans were developed in the 1980s at a time when the County's land use and resource protection standards were not as detailed and comprehensive as they are today. At that time, the special area planning process provided a mechanism for these communities to develop and adopt a unique set of Comprehensive Plan policies for these areas. Many of the land use and resource protection concerns that led to the development of the Cross Creek and the Idylwild/Serenola Special Area plans are now addressed in the generally applicable Comprehensive Plan policies and the Land Development Code.

Special area plans are a useful mechanism for open-ended community visioning within certain areas, and are generally more effective when initiated from within the community. The special area planning process entails a more comprehensive and broad-based community planning effort that goes beyond the particular purpose of delineating boundaries for Rural Clusters.

Summary and Conclusions

The guidelines for delineating more precise boundaries for Rural Clusters to replace the generalized ½ mile radius are provided in the existing Policy 6.4.2 (a) through (e). In order to streamline the process for delineating more precise boundaries in accordance with these guidelines, an alternative to the special area planning process would be to delineate the more precise boundaries for Rural Clusters on the Future Land Use Map through the standard Comprehensive Plan Amendment process. The Comprehensive Plan Amendment process, like a special area plan, includes at least one neighborhood workshop, multiple public hearings and other opportunities for public participation, as prescribed by Florida Statutes and the County's ULDC.

In order to allow for the more precise Rural Cluster boundaries to be delineated through the Comprehensive Plan Amendment process instead of a special area plan, the current Comprehensive Plan policies would need to be revised in a way that would make the special area plan an optional process for Rural Clusters, instead of a requirement (or prerequisite) for delineating more precise boundaries. Special area plans may still be appropriate for some Rural Clusters as a way to address unique issues relating to community vision or historic preservation, for example. The immediate need for designating the Rural Cluster boundaries on the Future Land Use Map can be addressed more efficiently through the Comprehensive Plan Amendment process. If the current policies were amended in this way, then staff could begin to bring forward individual amendments to the Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Map to delineate the more precise boundaries for all 13 Rural Clusters.

Staff is recommending that the Board direct staff to prepare a Comprehensive Plan text amendment, for review and authorization to advertise, that would provide for delineation more precise boundaries for Rural Clusters on the Future Land Use Map through use of the standard Comprehensive Plan amendment process consistent with Florida Statutes and County Code requirements. The text amendment to revise the policies would remove the requirement for preparation of sub area plans for such boundary delineation while retaining sub area planning as an optional process to address specific issues as identified in Policy 6.4.5. Staff will return to the Board at a future meeting with the draft Comprehensive Plan text amendment for authorization to advertise public hearings.

After the Board authorizes preparation of such Comprehensive Plan text amendments, and if they are ultimately adopted and become effective, staff would anticipate bringing forward individual Comprehensive Plan Amendments for authorization to advertise public hearings to delineate more precise parcel-based boundaries for each Rural Cluster on the Future Land Use Map.

Staff Recommendation (for Board Action)

Direct staff to prepare a Comprehensive Plan text amendment, for review and authorization to advertise, that would provide for delineation of more precise boundaries for Rural Clusters on the Future Land Use Map through use of the standard Comprehensive Plan amendment process pursuant to statutory and local code requirements, and removal of the requirement for preparation of sub-area plans for such boundary delineation, while retaining sub-area planning as an optional process to address specific issues.