

Community Session #1 Summary

The first public session for the MEC Land Use Study was held at the Venice Community Center on Tuesday, December 5th 2006 from 6:00-8:00 PM. This public session was an opportunity to introduce attendees to the planning team and to the planning process for the Land Use Study. The planning team delivered a presentation on the current state of the county with respect to population and employment growth and current MEC locations. After that, attendees were broken into two discussion groups which addressed key issues relevant to MEC development.

County staff members present at the meeting included Scott Heinig, Jessica Ritter, Warren Richardson, and Brian Beatty. For the planning and urban design consulting firm EDAW, representation included Principal Ellen Heath, project manager Fredalyn Frasier, and urban planner Louis Merlin. For the economic development consulting firm ERA, representation included principal Thomas Lavash and staff consultant Aaron Smith. A total of twenty-three members of the public were in attendance, including neighborhood representatives, economic development representatives, developers, and technical committee members.

The presentation began with an overview of the project goal and planned phases for the project. Work to date was reviewed and the website, which will be a repository for all project materials, was introduced.

Next the future land use concept of MECs, or Major Employment Centers, was defined. A map presented where current MECs are. The consultant team noted that currently most MECs are designated for the northern half of the county.

The presentation then delved into a county profile, including a number of important demographic and economic trends in the county. Population growth and demographic change were discussed. Housing starts and housing development trends were also reviewed. Employment growth and the shift of employment within the county towards service-sector industries were presented. The strong sectors of the county economy currently include services such as health care, administration, arts and leisure. Sarasota's current economy is primarily driven by tourism and spending by the retired population.

The consultant team identified a number of issues that resulted from the analysis of the county's current demographic and economic state. The lack of a major economic engine for job growth in the county was discussed. Major employers in the county are generally public sector institutions and hospitals. Also, the disconnect between job growth in the north half of the county and housing growth in the south half of the county was highlighted. Finally, the consultant team noted that adequate economic development and employment opportunity is an important component of Sarasota County's quality of life. Therefore a successful outcome for the MEC Land Use Study is important to promoting quality of life in the county.

After the presentation, attendees broke into two groups for discussion. Each group designated a representative to report back to the whole group at the end of the discussion. Three framing issues were used to spark discussion with each break-out group:

- 1. Land Use & Character**

- What types of land uses in and around the MECs ?
- What type of character in the MECs (scale & style)?

- 2. Location**

- Where should the MECs be located?
- 3. **Economic Vitality – Employment Opportunity**
 - Where we are now?
 - What types of jobs do we want in our community?
 - How do we achieve this job growth?

Both groups held productive discussions that identified a number of issues that will require further research and deliberation. One of the challenges of the discussions was that MEC development is not an isolated issue, but rather an issue that connects with all other growth and development issues, including affordable housing, the urban service area, redevelopment and infill, transportation, and open space.

The following are some of the major themes that came out of the break-out group discussions. Following this list of major themes is a complete list of comments transcribed from each group.

Major Themes:

1. Major employment land uses cannot be planned in isolation from the regional context. Land use plans for Sarasota County's cities and adjacent counties are relevant to the study.
2. Sarasota's quality of life is the main engine for its economic development, but land and labor expenses must be reasonable to allow new companies to relocate to the county.
3. Industrial land uses cannot compete with most other land uses for the same land on a cost basis.
4. Holding the line on the Urban Service Area creates demand for all types of land uses. This demand could potentially be met through encouraging redevelopment and infill, but little redevelopment and infill is actually being approved.
5. Each existing MEC is in a unique surrounding context and needs to be planned to be compatible with surrounding land uses. There is no one-blueprint-fits-all for MEC development.
6. It may make sense to identify locations for future MECs in advance of development trends and infrastructure provision while land costs are lower. There are current opportunities to do this in central and south Sarasota County.

Complete List of Group Comments:

Group #1 Comments:

- Land Use and Character
 - Need a map of the whole county [ED: land use map with employment land uses]
 - Need to know land use in cities
 - Need to know adjacent county land use
 - Imbalance between population and employment growth
 - Population going to Northport
 - Where is the workforce population going?
 - Too much flexibility and variety in MEC land
 - Industrial cannot compete for land with retail
 - Variety of MEC designations
 - Truck traffic should be routed away from residential
 - Not enough urban land – residential is moving towards the south
 - Redevelopment is desirable but difficult to do
 - Concurrency is a key driver – conflicts with infill/redevelopment
 - Neighborhood opposition to redevelopment

- Political guts for hard decisions about higher density and infill
- Location
 - Use more affordable, precede residential development (i.e. River Road)
 - Expand areas on S. River Road, unpopulated area (Pine to Westchester, near Thomas Ranch)
 - Employers will put in their own water/sewer outside of the USB
 - New MEC in mid-county industrial park at the new interchange
 - Manufacturing will never be able to compete with valuable retail and residential uses, place it on less valuable land, further east and/or south
 - 681/I75 Intersection is an option
- Economic Vitality – Employment Opportunity
 - Cost of industrial land higher than in competitor regions
 - Create conditions for growth – access to labor and land
 - Need to attract higher paying jobs
 - Education system is inadequate
 - Companies locate where CEOs want to live
 - Need greater cooperation with Universities
 - Need to provide incentives for bringing employers
 - Impact fees are a deterrent to development

Group #2 Comments:

- Land Use & Character
 - Multiple zoning categories promote other land uses [ED: land uses other than employment land uses]. Big box, super centers.
 - MECs – Redefined uses allowed within.
 - How to create the balance? Incentives, density.
 - Infrastructure needs to be in place to support land use decisions
 - Compatibility with surrounding areas
 - Buffers
 - Potential MECs could happen with improved infrastructure on Fruitville and Bee Ridge east of Interstate
- Job Creation
 - Employment base cannot be too far away – i.e. in other counties
 - More than a minimum wage
 - MECs with stronger workforce housing element