

## **Wayne Smith: Plum Creek plan would mean dense, sustainable development**

**By Wayne Smith**  
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Plum Creek's Envision Alachua plan has been the subject of many articles in The Sun. In addition, there have been public forums on the topic sponsored by various groups in the community.

This debate reminds me of when Alachua County's Comprehensive Plan (now referred to as "our plan") was being developed. The planners offered a proposal for high-density home developments bounded by open or green space. Local developers and their advocates came out in mass and squashed those elements like a bug.

Sometimes I feel that the Save Our Plan folks have not traveled east of Waldo Road. I live near the eastern edge of Alachua County, and I frequently travel the roads that crisscross east Alachua County.

As a forest soil scientist with more than 30 years of living in Alachua County and research experience throughout the Southeastern coastal plain, I know how to tell the difference between wetland soils and upland soils. So, contrary to the image that some paint, the area is not all wetlands. This becomes obvious if you ride the roads or hike the woods and take a look.

It bothers me to see the "Protect our Water" signs in east Alachua County and yet see no protest of paving and roofing over the ground-water recharge areas that characterize western Alachua County. Yes, the Hawthorne Formation does underlie east Alachua County, and where the overlying soils are shallow then wetlands occur. Overlying soils that are deep and drain well comprise the considerable acreages of uplands. These wetland features allow for wildlife corridors that Envision Alachua protects.

Equally important, the Envision Alachua plan does not fragment the forest such that critical wildlife habitat is lost. In fact, 52,000 acres (87 percent) are lands that will be protected from development with some as working forests that are managed in accordance with best management practices implemented in response to the Clean Water Act to protect water quality.

Where in west Alachua County have private forests not been fragmented? Unfortunately, Alachua County's Comprehensive Plan allows leap-frog developments and five-acre home sites each with a well and septic tank that create water threats. Both kinds of development promote diffused growth without protection of landscape values.

Growth is going to occur in Alachua County as long as Florida has no income tax, the state spends millions of dollars each year recruiting new visitors, and our favorable climate remains. Therefore, for Alachua County, planned, high-density development with residents living where they work, in the east, mainly along the U.S. 301/CSX corridor, is preferable to the Comprehensive Plan's diffused development.

I think it disingenuous to protest high-density urban centers in east Alachua County and to have never carried a picket sign to protest the Town of Tioga, Jonesville, Haile Village and now the rapidly developing Springhill.

Critically important features of Envision Alachua are the resource-efficiency requirements that curb wasteful use of water and energy — two of the most important elements required for real sustainability. Yes, some of these conservation practices envisioned have not been attempted, but because sustainability has not been a development principle does not mean they will fail. Let them try and perhaps this will establish a new development paradigm with a water ethic.

I have attended two public hearings intended for meaningful and factual discussion of the Envision Alachua plan. However, misinformation was presented at both that seemed designed to harm the reputation of Plum Creek and not provide factual information about the plan. Fortunately there were informed people at these two events to correct the misinformation.

At the forums I have attended a repeated charge made by the Save Our Plan folks is that Plum Creek will not develop the land according to Envision Alachua but sell it to professional developers who will immediately get exceptions, revisions, etc. until its core design intentions are lost. The long and tedious Comprehensive Plan amendment process and deed restrictions mitigate against and are an impediment to making such changes.

Why the distrust of the County Commission and other administrative bodies who could make these changes that they fear? Is it because past exceptions and revisions have established a behavioral pattern that concerns them?

Give the County Commission, water management district and other agencies a chance. They cannot stop our growth but they can channel it to where it is needed

and can support sustainability. And if they do not protect the conservation and sustainability elements of Envision Alachua, turn them out at the ballot box.

I support Envision Alachua and urge the county to take advantage of this planned, sustainable growth with economic opportunities where suitable and needed.

I do not know what decision will be made. Should the county not approve Envision Alachua, I urge them to improve the Comprehensive Plan by incorporating certain of the Envision Alachua's elements, such as preserved green space and planned high density development which allows people to live where they work, and adopt resource (water and energy) efficient practices in their living space. This will help move the county toward sustainable development.

*Wayne Smith lives between Hawthorne and Melrose.*