

School siting depends on cooperation

Monday's editorial describing Orange County schools as "magnets for development" is dangerously misleading. Orange County is a metropolis, with an urban core, sprawling suburbs and rural edges. The school district and county government have inherited conditions resulting from past decisions. They are working successfully to respond to them and establish sound planning principles for a better future.

School-siting decisions are made through a collaborative process incorporating state and local policies. They depend on suitability, availability and cost of land, and are impacted by numerous requirements, such as storm-water management. Unique circumstances often require a case-by-case approach to achieve the best solution.

"Rural settlements" are along county boundaries or in scattered pockets. Most pockets are adjacent to urban areas, with infrastructure in place. That is the case with the cost-effective plan to rebuild Evans High School. The new campus would be built on its ninth-grade center site and a portion of an adjoining rural settlement, with retention ponds and wooded areas maintained as buffers. Major roads abut the property. Interestingly, a June 29, 2006, editorial, "A Fresh Start; Our Position: Evans High would benefit from a new location, even a new name," supported the plan when the School Board approved it, albeit rural settlements had not then been made an issue.

The County Commission recently approved the planned development of a new high school to relieve severely overcrowded Timber Creek High School where they anticipate even more residential growth. Urbanization in the east and south will be spawned by the University of Central Florida and its medical school, Burnham Institute, Innovation Way and Orlando International Airport; and continue to be fed by the East-West and BeachLine corridors. Many schools are being planned in these and other growing areas of the county.

New schools are built to meet growth demands, relieve overcrowding and serve communities' educational needs. Public schools have traditionally been considered essential services, like roads, water, sewer, electricity, fire and police. School districts are not "developers." Responsible school siting occurs when local governments value the critical role of public education and work with the School Board to ensure that school capacity is feasible.

As good school sites become harder to secure, flexible solutions become increasingly important. Discussions about multistory school buildings on more compact sites have been taking place for several years. In fact, a few current projects follow such a formula. Recently, COVE (Construction Oversight and Value Engineering Committee) and the School Board gave the go-ahead to intensify this necessary path.

Orange County Public Schools will continue to implement progressive policies for its building program and educational goals to fulfill our new vision to be "the top producer of successful students in the nation." Because of our responsibility to serve Orange County's children, there is nobody more concerned about building school campuses in an economical and effective manner than the Orange County School Board.

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