

VIEWPOINT

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Page 8 C

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OUR VIEW

Communities must chart own growth courses

OUR POSITION: *Growth, like politics, is always local.*

Four issues dominated the 2009 Legislative session, the scandal that unseated House Speaker Ray Sansom, the incredible growing budget gap, the stealth effort to open Florida's shores to oil and gas drilling and an amorphous blob of a bill known simply as SB360.

Sansom will fade into history as another politician with a tin ear for ethics, the budget will be balanced as required by the state Constitution and the oil drilling effort will be tossed into the landfill of dumb ideas. But SB360 is here to stay, the latest Tallahassee tinkering with the growth management process that adds more uncertainty and less oversight to Florida's key industry — growth.

As *Sun* staff writer Neil Hughes revealed in his Sunday article on SB360, the impacts of the legislation range from negligible in Charlotte County to unknowable in DeSoto County and the City of North Port. We don't believe the peal of protests from some quarters that developers would be allowed to run amok when review processes such as development of regional impact are eliminated in some areas. But we also don't concur with state Sen. Mike Bennett that the local, regional and state permitting and review processes are unnecessary duplications of effort.

We have long had misgivings about the concurrency policy that SB360 partially undoes. In many places, it was seen as a ticking time bomb that would either bankrupt local governments or stymie developments with its infrastructure requirements.

Fortunately, we have real examples locally of communities taking control of their futures regardless of the regulations *du jour* emanating from the capital. For example, TEAM Punta Gorda has been a force for change in the years since Hurricane Charley devastated that city. With committees exploring and advocating issues ranging from waterfront

improvements to business development to architectural standards, TEAM Punta Gorda has helped businesses, residents and local officials reach consensus on would-be controversial issues that could have derailed the city's remarkable recovery from the hurricane.

The Urban Land Institute is now studying the partnership between TEAM Punta Gorda and the city for use as a model of how communities can address both calamity and continuity. The organization's success has led leaders in other areas of Charlotte County to ask why they don't have a TEAM in place.

In Sarasota County, business and community leaders behind such organizations as Citizens for Sensible Growth and the Green Business Partnership are framing the debate over growth management and sustainability, even as competing groups vie for the ears of elected officials and their constituents. The vigorous debate ensures neither extreme will dominate public policy over growth management.

We understand and share the desire of existing residents of Southwest Florida to preserve the

character of the communities they built or adopted. But as the downturn of the past few years so vividly demonstrates, this region's well-being is dependent on steady, sustainable growth achieved in a way that does not threaten the very attributes and resources that make it such a desirable place to live and visit.

An engaged, informed public, not moving targets in Tallahassee, will determine how we grow or not.