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# 1000 Friends of Florida Endorses the Lake Wales Envisioned Plan

By Paul Owens  
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**Editor's Note:** This guest Commentary is the second of a series of guest editorials that will address the effort known as *Lake Wales Envisioned*.



Paul Owens has a Bachelor of Arts in History with honors from Swarthmore College and a Master of Arts in Journalism from Stanford University. His numerous awards include First Prize in Editorial Writing from the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors in 2016, First Prize from the Florida Bar Media Awards in 2013 for editorials on judicial independence, and First Prize in Editorial Writing from the Florida Society of Professional Journalists in 2012. - From <https://1000fof.org/about/staff/>

Since our founding in 1986, 1000 Friends of Florida has advocated citizen-driven planning to protect our state's environment and quality of life amid its rapid growth. That explains why we enthusiastically endorsed the *Lake Wales Envisioned* process from its launch last winter. And it's why we're now calling on city leaders to approve the bold, visionary plan that has resulted.

The Lake Wales Ridge is one of Florida's distinctive plant and wildlife habitats, with species, including endangered ones, unique to this region, as well as wildlife refuges and state forests. But it's not just the environment that's distinctive.

The City of Lake Wales itself has a historic downtown and heritage dating back to the famous Olmsted brothers. It's one of Florida's unique and special communities. But this region will face increasing development pressure as Florida's population keeps growing, and sea level rise gradually forces our state's residents, who have been concentrated on the coasts, to move inland. This is confirmed in a pair of reports we released this year with the University of Florida, Sea Level 2040 and Sea Level 2070.

This looming population shift is coming along with another significant challenge confronting the region, the existential crisis facing the citrus industry.

How the signature city on the Lake Wales Ridge responds to increasing growth pressures and profound economic changes will have a large and lasting impact on the environment, quality of life and prosperity in this distinctive region far into the future. It could set a precedent on properly planning for growth, not only for the Lake Wales Ridge, but for other environmentally sensitive areas in Florida.

Doing it right in Lake Wales would provide an example that would resonate up and down the Florida Peninsula. But without a bold, visionary plan, Lake Wales risks becoming one more community whose character and quality of life fall victim to urban sprawl, an environmentally and fiscally irresponsible development pattern.

*Lake Wales Envisioned* offers such a plan, the product of extensive community engagement guided by experts on transportation, economics, conservation and land development, and spearheaded by a nationally renowned planning firm, Dover, Kohl and Partners.

The plan's combination of preserving and connecting green spaces while promoting the development of traditional walkable and affordable neighborhoods would enhance Lake Wales' environment and quality of life as well as its economy, because top employers and top talent would be attracted by these amenities.

Achieving this vision will require leaders from local governments, businesses, nonprofits and other civic players to come together to agree on necessary improvements to the city's comprehensive plan and land development regulations to promote traditional neighborhoods, affordable housing, historic preservation and pedestrian friendly tree-lined streets.

It will likewise require effective collaboration to identify, connect and protect high-priority green spaces. While these goals won't be realized without determined and sustained efforts, the benefits will endure for generations to come.

1000 Friends of Florida looks forward with great anticipation to the future that Lake Wales will chart in this special part of Florida. That future truly begins with the City Commission's approval of the *Lake Wales Envisioned* plan.

*Paul Owens is the President of 1000 Friends of Florida, a nonprofit advocate for planning to promote environmentally and fiscally sustainable communities.*

