



TOWN PLANNING

Florida town adopts ‘Big Green Network’

An Olmsted-inspired plan for Lake Wales, Florida, would revitalize the core, promote new growth in walkable neighborhoods, and preserve green space around the town.

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE OCT. 23, 2023



Lake Wales City Commission unanimously adopted [Lake Wales Envisioned](#), a growth plan for the Central Florida community built around a network of green spaces, walkable neighborhoods, and a wide range of mobility options.

The plan prepared by Dover, Kohl & Partners evolved from [Lake Wales Connected](#), a 2019 blueprint drawing upon a 1931 city design by the Olmsted Brothers, who conceived Lake Wales as “a city in a garden.” *Lake Wales Connected* described dozens of projects to revitalize the downtown area, enhance pedestrian appeal, and bolster greenery. The plan prioritizes mixed-use settlements with sites for large and small employers.

“On a [map](#) depicting the possible future of Lake Wales, the dominant color is green,” the [Lakeland Ledger](#) reports. “A pair of green arrows flank the city to the east and west, pointing toward large swaths to the north and south labeled *Big Green Network*.”

The “neighborhoods” section promotes traditional, pedestrian-friendly designs, featuring houses with front porches and developments with sidewalks and street trees, the newspaper explains. The “mobility” section envisions intersections with roundabouts and a network of walking trails.

Lake Wales Envisioned drew strong support from the Olmsted Network, a national organization that champions Olmsted-designed parks, places, and principles. Dover Kohl worked with a team of new urbanists. “This is the story of a little, much-loved city in Florida that is coming together to combat suburban sprawl and chart a better future,” says principal Victor Dover.

“We need to legalize and incentivize traditional neighborhoods ... This approach sets standards for quality design while also removing barriers to a wider range of households,” says Eric Pate of Dover Kohl.

Unlike much of Florida, Lake Wales is well elevated because it is located on the Lake Wales Ridge, at the geographic center of the state’s peninsula. The town of 16,000 features a diverse population. It is facing considerable growth in the form of sprawl. “Some residents have objected to the City Commission’s approval of certain projects, fearing a loss of the city’s verdant charm,” the *Ledger* reports.

“The Big Green Network concept ... is one of the most important elements of this entire plan,” says City Manager James Slaton. “This is one thing that I care the most about, and that’s protecting those lands, the high-value lands that have real ecological value.”

The concept calls for natural lands to connect to conservation lands to form a network of protected areas to preserve biological diversity, enable recreation, store floodwaters, and provide a boundary for the city’s growth.

The plan promotes infill development and preservation around the urban core, which is underutilized, and nearby neighborhoods. A planned growth area immediately outside existing neighborhoods is drawn with quarter-mile pedestrian shed circles, designating neighborhoods built around the five-minute walk. There are more than 20 such traditional neighborhoods in the plan. The green network includes the existing parks and conservation areas, the Big Green Network, and a smaller green network at the neighborhood level. Employment centers are also designated.

The plan proposes an expanded trail network that would allow multimodal access to many areas and facilities in Lake Wales, allowing the city to capture a piece of Florida’s growing bicycle tourism boom. The plan also proposes reimagining and reconfiguring streets to allow for walking, bicycling, and other nonautomotive transportation.

The plan was founded on eight goals:

1. We will seek to assemble an enduring green network of open spaces and conservation lands.
2. We will partner with landowners, investors, and the community to encourage input, collaboration, and respect property rights.
3. We will make infill development and revitalization a priority.
4. We will emphasize economic prosperity by increasing property values through quality development.
5. We will facilitate employment opportunities by supporting a mix of land uses and industries.
6. We will seek to make traditional neighborhoods with walkable, connected streets that create a high-quality public realm the norm.
7. We will discourage conventional urban sprawl as defined in Florida Statutes Chapter 163.
8. We will grow a livable transportation network by implementing the Lake Wales Mobility Plan and including context-sensitive Complete Streets.

The following documentary video describes the plan in more detail:



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