

# Growth and Development

## Smart Growth Gap Analysis

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**Alabama Coastal Region**  
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## **Introduction**

**Coastal Alabama is experiencing growth and development different from the state growth rate. The impact of this growth combined with lack of local land use controls is causing sprawling development on the fringe of central downtown districts. In the Pew Oceans Commission Report on “Coastal Sprawl”, the trends of migration toward coastal areas will continue to put excessive pressures on already “at risk” environmentally sensitive lands.**

**The purpose of this study was to report on the leaders perceptions of growth and development along the coastal region of Alabama. An interview process was devised to gather these perceptions and allow the use of statements in the research report. A core group of volunteers, representing diverse organizations, helped to define the process and create the guide to be used in the interview. Then 30 volunteers were trained to schedule and conduct the interviews. The latent affect of using volunteers was the education gained when meeting face to face with local leaders. All involved gained knowledge of smart growth and its potential impact on the region.**

**The report is an initial draft written in a conversational style which allows the respondents statements to be woven together in a readable document. It will be used as a backdrop for dialogue in the region and continue to be fine tuned as public reaction is added to the report.**

## **Growth and Development- A Balancing Act**

In the beginning, there was peace and tranquillity; now it seems there is not enough time to complete a sentence nor the energy to wonder why. There is now a “hurry up and wait phenomenon”. Our coastal region is growing so fast and developing in such a way that our quality of life is changing. Rapid growth has “stolen the charm” from our communities. Change has become a factor in every facet of our community, from the economy to education, and from our environment to our neighborhoods. So what will all this change bring to our future?

In order to get a picture of our community, interviews of leaders in the region were carried out to determine their perceptions of growth and development. The leaders were asked about their perceptions and the pressing issues facing our region today. The first part of this document is a synopsis of comments made by the respondents. The second part of the document is a commentary addressing the contradictions and the lack of cooperation in the region. As this report progresses, keep in mind these are opinions given anonymously and not necessarily an expression of political will to act for change. The hope is, however, that the community will use this report to see what the future holds if conditions continue at their present pace using the regulations available.

### **Zoning and Property Rights**

In all facets of the issues surrounding growth and development, there seems to be polarized positions hindering open discussion of potential solutions to the uncontrolled growth occurring along our coastal region. While zoning is seen as “the way growth is managed,” property rights advocates say “if you don’t own it, you can’t really say how it’s to be developed.” But even those who are concerned with property rights see the need to have some type of planning and regulations put into place. Rural communities tend to oppose zoning “because they don’t want anyone telling them how to use their land.” When problems arise the rural communities “often react because they realize too late in the development that regulations are necessary.”

The tension between the perceived need for zoning and the rights of property owners<sup>1</sup> seems to be heightened by the lack of authority in the counties to regulate development. While Mobile County has no authority to regulate development, Baldwin County “is

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<sup>1</sup> “Various parties involved in growth and development have different goals that set them in conflict with one another.”

proactive with subdivision regulations” and district zoning. However, “the mindset of people in Mobile County is one of distrust of commissioners and aversion to zoning. They are anti...they are against everything.”

There is much concern about the lack of planning authority and the need for working together.<sup>2</sup> Informants stressed the need for balance and control on growth.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the informants agreed that zoning or some regulations are necessary to manage the growth. However, the lack of authority, as well as inadequate planning are realities at present.<sup>4</sup>

### **Uncontrolled Growth and Annexation**

The rate of growth along our coastal region is expected to accelerate, according to the Pew Oceans Commission report on “Coastal Sprawl” (2002). They expect that 50% of the population in our country will move to within 50 miles of any coastline by 2020. “Our region is the fastest growing region of the country,” and with no planning and few zoning regulations, uncontrolled growth is taking place.

The cities and towns feel the pressures of growth in the un-incorporated areas. The lack of planning and zoning causes “helter-skelter growth” to occur just outside their borders. The cities usually extend services such as police and fire protection and planning outside their city limits which causes some concern because of the cost to the citizens in the towns. The municipalities tend to see annexation as a solution to some of these issues.<sup>5</sup> Annexation can increase revenue but it also increases cost.<sup>6</sup> But the residents of the municipalities

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<sup>2</sup> “Mobile County needs planning authority. Baldwin County needs to have their planning authority strengthened. So I think the counties can work together on finding what it takes to strengthen their powers and educate one another ..... on how to use their power.”

<sup>3</sup> “The conflict of individual property rights versus the public good, as a whole, will need to be balanced for growth to be orderly.” “Controlling growth is politically hard ... if they don’t do something it will be like shooting yourself in the foot.”

<sup>4</sup> “Planning and cooperation between the cities and the county is most important. It is imperative for the city and county to work together on zoning, flood control, and traffic control.”

<sup>5</sup> “The biggest issue facing our town is the proposed annexation. It would expand the tax base as well as give the town more zoning control over areas that directly impact our quality of life.”

<sup>6</sup> “People expect services to be provided when they are annexed.”

“are tired of paying the tax for services that everybody else receives out in the police jurisdiction.”

So is annexation the answer to growth concerns? Not necessarily.<sup>7</sup> For one thing, the issue of overlapping territories between cities and counties causes tension over control and revenues.<sup>8</sup>

This lack of cooperation seems to exacerbate the control issue. The cities point to the counties as the culprit and vice versa, and both bemoan the lack of cooperation.<sup>9</sup> County people feel that the cities are just trying to grab whatever revenue they can, especially in the unincorporated areas, without considering the county’s situation.<sup>10</sup>

Still, the fact is that “city and county territories overlap. The county loses revenue to the cities from building permits issued in the expanded areas but the county still bears the other costs such as road maintenance. Cities have the benefit of enacting local ordinances, whereas the county does not have local control.” However, “Baldwin County is one of only seven counties, out of 67 (in the State Of Alabama), that issues building permits in unincorporated areas.”

The issue of uncontrolled growth continues to go back to county authority and control of development. Some see “home rule” (local control which isn’t applicable at present) as a way to allow counties to control growth and partner with the cities to establish “good zoning practices.”<sup>11</sup> The obstacle to home rule seems to be the state constitution.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “With annexation, growth is like a shotgun impact, scattered.”

<sup>8</sup> “Cities do not necessarily correlate with the regulations of the unincorporated areas. There is an extreme lack of cooperation between cities and the county. There is competition rather than cooperation.”

<sup>9</sup> “I am cynical about the lack of cooperation. This lack of cooperation can only be changed by the voters getting active and demanding cooperation.”

<sup>10</sup> “Currently many rural areas are not represented and cannot adequately influence governmental policies that affect them. Neither do they have a mechanism to regulate how development occurs.”

<sup>11</sup> “The counties have looked at home rule. That may have some merit. There needs to be some means for them to be able to control what goes where.” “Without local control, it is very difficult for the county to provide any rule of law that could benefit and impact rapid growth.”

<sup>12</sup> “The State of Alabama will not allow Mobile County to have zoning authority in rural (unincorporated) areas because of home rule provisions in the state constitution. (But) Baldwin County does have (some) rural zoning authority.”

### Cooperation and Coordination

What can be done to bring about some cooperation and coordination? Part of the solution has to come from the legislature,<sup>13</sup> which needs to cooperate in securing the authority local communities need.<sup>14</sup>

### Smart Growth and Sprawl

“Smart Growth” and “Sprawl” are terms used in planning circles but not well understood by ordinary citizens. Sprawl is used to mean uncontrolled growth. One can just picture the word “sprawl”, its growth looking like a beast with tentacles spreading out. The tentacles represent the infrastructure built by cities, counties, and the state with tax dollars.

Roads, schools, sewer, and water systems are instruments of growth management that can control rapid growth and determine where development can occur. They can also be instruments of uncontrolled growth used to develop land at a pace outrunning the growth in population simply because there are no restrictions in place. “Sprawl is a problem. In planning terms, you put utilities where you want the growth to occur, and the developers will come there. But that’s not necessarily the case,” and “developers are avoiding environmental regulations (curb and gutters, drainage) because they are building outside city limits..(where there is no zoning..”. The “unplanned commercial development has made the highways unattractive, and traffic congestion a problem.” So how do we manage the infrastructure in our region?

“Roads breed growth”. Deciding “where those new roads go and how they’re built could determine how growth occurs.”<sup>15</sup> Some areas in the region are struggling with issues of increased traffic and residents say “something needs to be done about 98.” “Residents in the western part of Mobile County voted against the highway loop because they did not want that kind of growth in their area. (They) believe the highway department does not take environmentally sensitive areas into consideration, areas such as Big Creek Lake, the source of Mobile’s water supply. ‘They proposed to

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<sup>13</sup> “I believe that the state and/or the legislature has to step in and help define certain things. The way the laws are now, they create contention among the counties and cities.”

<sup>14</sup> One of the legislators said “The most important thing the delegation can do about growth and development is to go through a process where we are thinking and planning with local county commissioners and municipal officials to help them get the authority they need to provide better planning and regulations.”

<sup>15</sup> “What happens when you build or widen a road, it hastens development....you have to be deliberate about where you build and expand roads.”

run this ring right through the side of it', the people screamed."

Some municipalities see the placement of roads as critical to their vitality. Interstate systems in particular have hurt small communities.<sup>16</sup> And yet, decisions about road placement are made quite often without input from local leaders who have to deal with the results. The State Highway Department is viewed as insensitive to local conditions.<sup>17</sup>

In some areas of the region "infrastructure is not keeping up with the rate of growth." There seems to be "dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of an adequate plan to address the growth in the county. The results of this is the granting of permits to allow development without regarding the impact it will have on the quality of life of the adjacent town."

Smart growth is a concept some have heard of but are not sure what it means. "I like the concept of smart growth. I think it is poorly understood....There are things in the smart growth concept that will become commonplace in the not too distant future. We just don't know it well enough yet for it to become embedded into what we do and the quicker we do that the better off we all will be."

There were a few who mentioned smart growth but more talked about the individual concepts common to smart growth principles such as bike paths, parks, walkable communities, mass transit, good schools, liveable wages, strong neighborhoods, and so on.<sup>18</sup> The principles of smart growth offer alternatives to the "status quo" when it comes to development, jobs, and community. Smart Growth also allows for a more balanced approach to protecting our environment and our quality of life.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Traffic patterns have made things difficult for us. When they opened up the interstate, it took a lot of traffic out of our town." Another person said, "Interstate systems and county roads seem to be major players in emptying out of the downtown areas and affecting the economies of the cities and especially the small towns." So now "We don't have a lot of growth."

<sup>17</sup> "When planning highways; they lack sensitivity to what is already in place....it is a bureaucratic nightmare...they just don't have a high regard for environmental issues, all they think about is asphalt and dirt. Put it down and do it as cheaply as you possibly can."

<sup>18</sup> "I think in the next two decades, we have a window of opportunity to create for the people a much higher quality of life based upon how we use the land and water we have here."

<sup>19</sup> "I see development and protection of the environment and quality of life as being two parts of the same thing."

### Long Range Planning

While most recognize that "Mobile and Baldwin Counties lack a long term master plan to handle growth," they also agree the counties "should have zoning density restrictions and should have some plan regulating growth." As part of controlling growth, "there should be more long term planning for infrastructure and should include planning for environmental concerns."

There is a real recognition "the environment plays an important role in our community and we try to reduce the adversity between our civilization and the environment". *Balancing the forces of growth and development with the environment is the only way smart communities will be created.* "While we know there is a fine line between growth, prosperity, and progress, there is only one environment to deal with and we need to make sure that while we do what we need to do, we don't cause harm to our environment."

### Water Quality and Sewer

There is concern in both counties about water quality<sup>20</sup> and wastewater treatment.<sup>21</sup> Some cities are facing the issue of "the location of a sewer system. The 'not in my back yard' attitude will play a big role in that decision".

A concern in Mobile County is "sewage (is) being pumped over the divide (high point) to eastern Mobile County and is overloading the sewage system." But Mobile County is "looking at having a north county wide sewer treatment system". This will affect development in those areas served by such a plant.

Baldwin County has a different set of difficulties. There are a number of municipal systems as well as several private systems which cause special concern.<sup>22</sup> One respondent said, "I used to think the problem with the quality of our water was industrial effluent, but it is being eclipsed by problems with public and private sewer systems." He went on to say, "We also clearly have to do something about the private sewer companies and the public sewers as well. There needs to be local control and the industry even agrees." But the problem is increased because "all the little municipalities and areas want to control 'my own

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<sup>20</sup> "The number one issue concerning the environment is the water quality. It should be everyone's issue because that's why we come here."

<sup>21</sup> "The most important issue facing Mobile and Baldwin Counties is wastewater treatment."

<sup>22</sup> "The developers in Baldwin County put in little sewer systems with no central operation. If they go out of business it is unclear who takes over and runs them. Some of these systems do not meet municipal standards."

destiny'. There is no overall coordination, a problem in both counties."

These opinions arose because of the "number of sewage spills into the rivers and the bay" that occurred in the summer of 2003. "This summer has been a textbook case of sewage spills and people saying you can't swim in the bay." "Every effort needs to be made to prohibit spills into our waterways."

While it is perceived Mobile County is able to address its sewer problem, "Baldwin County has no .. plan" to handle the problem. In fact they have no authority to control or standardize the private sewer plants in the county. However, some respondents realize "there is a need for strong regulations concerning the disposal of sewage."

With both counties addressing the sewage issue so differently, how can any cooperative effort begin to arise? There is some concern we do not have a regional understanding of the effects one area has on another.<sup>23</sup> Some cities are working together as a first effort to move toward regional cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

The environmental situation (water and air quality) in Mobile "is improving. Several years ago leaders agreed to .....monitor and evaluate data regarding air and water quality and live with and respond to whatever outcome the data produces.....monitoring air and water quality along with diversification of industry is leading to a better Mobile environment." The perception is the "air quality is better than it was, but there is no plan to deal with air quality."

Water quality issues such as storm water runoff and potable water are important concerns in our region. As growth occurs, "potable water....will become a critical need." However, "a long-term regional water plan (potable water) for the Gulf Coast" is a possibility. "Presently, \$100,000 in the Corps of Engineers budget

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<sup>23</sup> One interviewee questioned whether we really have "a regional understanding ....(that) if there is a sewage spill in Prichard, it affects the quality of life in Fairhope. If there is a spill in Fairhope, it affects the quality of life of folks who live on County Road 1 or Fish River. We have to understand, and work together to make sure we have things in place to deal with this." Another pointed out that we need to have " a regional understanding of the effects of development in general close to water....in order to have development and some semblance of quality of life, you got to have some control on that development. We need to be coordinating (cities and counties) better about what's happening with the effluent that is going into our waterways."

<sup>24</sup> "We share a grant with (other cities) to collectively work on issues affecting Mobile Bay. Whether it's drainage, sewer, or whatever the case may be."

is available to match with local funds to develop this plan. Local officials are meeting to work on the proposal."

Storm water runoff and drainage becomes an issue with each new development and road being built. Some entities "make sure planned developments have adequate drainage to manage runoff water." Others are "doing a study for drainage and what can be done to improve it." But whatever the issue, "regional planning is the answer to development concerns because if you can control where water and waste water goes, you can control where your population growth will go. Such control is sort of back door to zoning."

### City Issues

Cities have their own set of issues to tackle such as storm water runoff, sewer system placement, downtown redevelopment, economic development, water and air quality, and transportation. The smaller towns are trying to "maintain that small town atmosphere" , while the City of Mobile is pushing "redevelopment of downtown" because "the urban core is the heart of the region."

Some people criticize Mobile as being "sanitized" and "opposed to change."<sup>25</sup> Others recognize "more needs to be done to encourage people to live downtown and draw in new business. The downtown core needs to be attractive and historic to promote city pride, present a unique city image, and draw tourists." Some of the smaller towns and cities are experiencing similar losses and gains within their limits. Trying to keep the center of town viable and healthy is a concern for every city.

### Uncontrolled Growth and Schools

Another issue affected by uncontrolled growth are our schools.<sup>26</sup> With uncontrolled growth the impact is immediate on the school system because schools follow development wherever it occurs.<sup>27</sup> This is encouraged by a state policy that "does not treat 'high growth counties' any different than other counties." "What really hurts...is that increases in property values do not result in an increased share in state funding." So the school systems must locate schools in areas where land is the cheapest. Some respondents said they think "developers should pay an impact fee to offset the increased infrastructure costs." Since "no one knows

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<sup>25</sup> "Mobile does not value the old. Mobile is sanitized, not gritty. This makes it less attractive to tourists. We need to bring diversity."

<sup>26</sup> "There is not enough planning for growth in the school system."

<sup>27</sup> "The county can't afford to locate schools in existing developed areas, schools are usually built on virgin land, a policy that stimulates growth."

how many new subdivisions will be built or how many students there may be”, we should “work to pull planning efforts together.” “In the face of growth and development, the county must continue funding a quality school system.”

### **Sprawl and Transportation**

“Transportation is another big issue” affected by sprawl. Most people think of auto travel when they think of transportation. But “there are other issues of transportation like mass transit that we haven’t thought through. We had a hearing...on the new spans for I-10 across the bay. The projected cost is 500 million dollars. Is that the best expenditure of public funds? Can we relieve the peak problems we are having in the morning and afternoon rush hours with high speed ferrys? There is not much thought being given to transportation alternatives. The norm seems to be ‘let’s just build roads’.” But not all believe mass transit will work. “City and County government are not interested in a public transit system. The attitude seems to be “Buses are for poor people.” So the question is “Who will pay for the transportation?” “Public transportation is not a realistic answer to the congestion because there is not yet the population to support public transportation.” So how can our region begin addressing the issue of transportation? One person suggested “regional planning is especially important with regard to transportation issues. One respondent suggested planning for future development of a light rail system when building the infrastructure for an additional highway across Mobile Bay.”

### **Growth and Economic Development**

The last issue of concern is economic development. The region has a diverse set of issues to face with regard to economic development. “Mobile is going through a transition, moving away from pulp, paper, and forest products that were heavy polluters but provided a lot of jobs. The challenge is how to diversify and define new objectives.” “From the mid 1980’s to late 1990’s, the city grew local companies. More local startups are needed. On the downside, many company headquarters have merged with other companies and no longer have their offices in Mobile. New strategies are needed to replace those high paying jobs.”

Other parts of the region have tourism as their main economic staple.<sup>28</sup> This form of economic development is considered to be a “diverse industry with high economic impact.” Some recognize their “economy is based on tourism...and that the

environmental issues play right into our major industry such as birding, fishing, etc.”

“Good roads are not just a county issue but also affects Alabama’s economy as well. Properly maintained roads are necessary to continue to attract tourists to Alabama beaches and to continue to reap the tax revenues from those visitors.”

So it seems “with growth have come better economies.” But in order to attract new industry or expand existing ones, “workforce training is the most important issue.” While “employment opportunities have declined”...some recognize the best “type of development ...is that which will provide jobs.” Some decisions made regarding economic development have created “no economic spin-off.” The decision to “build the airport at an outlying location caused property values to jump” but failed to address the long term needs of air transportation. “The bridge to be built over the bay will provide many contracts but little economic benefit to the poor.”

The University of South Alabama is seen as “taking a proactive role in developing the entire community by promoting business development that is environmentally friendly.” Another person said “the resources of the University of South Alabama could be a great help in dealing with the problems facing Mobile....(but they) will not get involved in research that might point a finger at some of the influential power elite as a source of the problem.”

There was some mention of the farming community and its struggles. One respondent said that “it has seen its heyday. It’s a thing of the past. We still have some big farms, but no small farms. It’s impossible to make a living.” This concern for farmland is related to the need for the “county to provide parks and green space to residents as the county grows so the essence is not lost.”

It appears “development consists of maintaining the status quo.” So “without a focus, committed leadership, and cooperation, nothing is being accomplished. The status quo is being maintained; actual improvements are not forthcoming.” One respondent says, “I believe the most critical decision we face is having diverse governmental units agree on a definition of growth over the next 10, 20, 30 years and have the willpower (the political will) to act on it. They need to have a goal for community maintenance that is a balance of quality of life and tourism.”

### **Uncontrolled Growth and Quality of Life**

Quality of life is what draws people to our area. Communities have “encouraged agencies and charitable organizations to develop programs such as sports, recreation, entertainment, arts, and culture would

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<sup>28</sup> “Tourism is the way to make the town.”

improve quality of life.” There is a consensus that our quality of life has changed, but some uncertainty about the direction it is going in.<sup>29</sup>

Smart Growth may be a means to maintain and even improve our quality of life.<sup>30</sup> However, “most zoning ordinances inhibit smart growth. Developers tend to see smart growth as more of an expense. Consequently they will go on the edge of where the city is regulating and be ‘unsmart’ .”

Some smart growth concepts seem to be acceptable, such as the “village concept”, “bike paths”, “walking paths,” and “sidewalk plans”. One person said “cul de sac subdivisions” create traffic problems which can be solved by promoting the “village concept that allows for multiple entrances and exits to arterial roads.” But “selling the village concept to developers is difficult because the city has no control over land use in the extraterritorial jurisdiction.” Support was expressed for “neighborhood schools that will be accessible on foot and by bicycle.”

Some communities “allow for growth but it is controlled smart growth. We can protect the dunes, the wetlands, and protect all the things we have.”

### **“Everything is Connected”**

How does our coastal region begin to address the issues of uncontrolled growth and development? The thinking is that we need increased cooperation,<sup>31</sup> coming together to develop common concepts and a uniform approach.<sup>32</sup> It would also help if there were less

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<sup>29</sup> The quality of life has “changed completely but not all for the best.” “Quality of life is not seriously degraded yet but ... if we are not vigilant it could happen.” “I think there is inadequate planning and controls on development in general. As a result, it is beginning to negatively affect the quality of life in this area.” “For so long in this part of Alabama, we have been so used to doing what ever we want with our property. It was almost like a sacred right to do whatever they wanted. For a while this wasn’t a problem because there weren’t that many of us but with the increase in population and growth near environmentally sensitive areas, what we do with our property does affect the overall quality of life for everyone.”

<sup>30</sup> “One of the fallacies is that you can either have economic development or you have proper planning, regulations, and environmental controls. The truth of the matter is that the places around the country that are growing and growing smart are doing both at the same time.”

<sup>31</sup> We need to “have cooperation along the coastal areas. It has to come from the grassroots level, through the politics of working together.”

<sup>32</sup> “Somehow we have to get universally accepted concepts that we....want to do to address growth along the coast. There is no uniform approach. We are very

“apathy on the part of the general public” and more education of “planners and elected officials ... regarding growth and development, planning concepts, and legal responsibilities related to planning and development.” But will this happen?

It will if we recognize “we are all in this together.”<sup>33</sup> Whenever we come together, we learn from each other. There is nothing wrong with competition,<sup>34</sup> as long as we preserve our sense of interconnectedness.<sup>35</sup> Anything we can do collectively will help improve our area.

Ultimately, “We are only as good as our neighbors and until all the communities believe and hold that as a truth we are not going to be able to function regionally.”

### **Commentary**

Throughout the interview summary, one cannot help but see the similarities and the differences in the views of the leaders in our region. It seems as though the similarities are found in the issues the region faces while the differences seem to be found in perceptions of how to resolve the issue and who should be responsible.

For example, most say they think zoning is the way to control growth but they are quick to point a finger at others to resolve the issue. The finger pointing includes legislators, property rights advocates, and developers. It seems each group feels the other is either prohibiting the development of or imposing the implementation of zoning or any land use regulations. The cities and counties are pointing at each other and the legislators, while the developers continue to go where they can develop in the cheapest fashion. The legislators appear to know the issues but point to local jurisdictions for answers. In fact several legislators didn’t want to be interviewed because they didn’t have time, weren’t interested, or just didn’t think it was part

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competitive and very jealous and appear reluctant to give up anything for fear of losing what we have.”

<sup>33</sup> “We need to get along and we need to make sure that whatever we do isn’t harmful to our neighbor.” “There is a need to come together and share ideas. But each community needs to step up to the plate and do their share.”

<sup>34</sup> “There is a sense of competitiveness too. You want to work together but you also want to be able to distinguish yourself from every one else too.”

<sup>35</sup> “There is not just one problem facing our region because everything is connected like a Rubics cube. Things happening upstream have effects downstream, and maintaining balance is very important.” “Mobile and Baldwin County need to work together since the two counties are so closely tied together. What is done in Mobile impacts Baldwin County and vice versa.”

of their responsibility. As one person said in their interview, "Various parties involved in growth and development have different goals that set them in conflict with one another." With this apparent conflict going on, no wonder our region is having an issue with uncontrolled growth and development. Several legislators said they thought the counties ought to have the authority to zone and to manage growth. However, without concrete help from their legislative delegations, growth management will continue to rest in the hands of developers whose only criteria will be to develop wherever a large profit can be made. Now you may ask "What's wrong with making a profit?" Nothing, except that ultimately it will be public funds paying for any air and water quality issues caused by unregulated development.

Public investment in infrastructure is the biggest contributor to uncontrolled growth. It is the roads, bridges, schools, courthouses, parks, and recreational facilities that attract and/or encourage development. Government should use infrastructure investment to aid in managing growth and carefully plan where to place them. Many of those interviewed thought long range planning should be a top priority especially around issues like water and air quality, transportation, and land use. But with the lack of governmental regulations in place, sprawl is occurring and infrastructure is lagging behind. Even with some zoning and subdivision regulations in place, Baldwin county cannot keep pace with the demands for more roads and schools.

The cities and counties seem to be in perpetual conflict over issues of annexation. The cities see it as a means to have some development controls, while the counties see it as a land grab to take in more revenue. What seems to be at issue here is a lack of understanding between local governments.

There is also little communication between the leaders which adds to the confusion. One person said that the local leaders never meet to try and discuss the major issues they all face.

One issue causing distrust between the local governments is lack of home rule. The cities can enact ordinances to address their local issues while the counties don't have home rule and need legislative approval in order to address any issue. This sets up a lack of respect for authority with each other hindering good dialogue about the resolution of issues. In hearing what the leaders were saying, it appears they don't know what the other has responsibility over and seem to have little interest in finding out. So the finger pointing continues and the citizens are left even more confused about their local governments. They are allowed to believe that legislators, city councils and mayors, and county commissioners are all doing what they can to

protect our quality of life and our environment when in fact there is a push-me-pull-me conflict in place that slows any real resolution from taking place. How can any real solutions come from groups that don't talk to each other?

What is being addressed here are government positions, not the individuals in those positions, because these local leadership positions are defined in Alabama's state constitution and other pieces of legislation. However, communication is not an issue regulated or structured by the constitution. So while relationships have been defined by law, there is no reason the individuals in these positions can't relate to one another; especially if it will help to improve and maintain our quality of life. But the underlying issue is a need for leaders to educate themselves about who is doing what and what needs to be accomplished together.

Other governmental agencies have a clear stake in how our region develops. Local School Boards locate schools often without any input from the cities or county in which they are located. The decisions about where to site schools, whether to repair a school, or the roads necessary to get to the new school contributes to sprawl and often follows the uncontrolled growth into prime farm land to accommodate new development. The policies regulating the location of schools are developed in Montgomery and have a strong impact on what the school system can build, how much land is required, and what formula to use to decide what schools should be torn down or abandoned. The inability of local boards to determine what is good for the community and control the design and siting of schools has helped continue sprawl. Local money to fund schools is not sent back to local systems and this makes the likelihood of cities having their own schools more appealing. Cities can keep all their funds in the city schools. If cities decide to have their own schools, there would be many things to consider since the total cost for education would be on that one government to comply with all state and federal regulations.

Often, the location of new schools is determined by sprawling development. As subdivisions are built in outlying areas served by little or no infrastructure, school boards are obliged to offer education to those underserved children. It is a costly proposition to play catch-up.

Education is the major benchmark for quality of life in a region. Without local control and active communication between all entities in the region, education will continue to lag behind development and be forced to provide schools to sprawling areas

Road building by the State of Alabama's Department of Transportation and the counties came out

strong as an issue in this report. There are small towns and large cities that have been affected by building highways without considering what it would do to the economy of those areas. In some cases unwise road building had a negative impact on the viability of our towns and cities.

There is little or no consideration given to the impact of road and infrastructure improvements on the environment. As a result, growth is drained out of the towns and into undeveloped areas. Most areas being developed are near the creeks, rivers, and watersheds for Mobile Bay. The impact of this development is silting and pollution. When the issue of the Mobile bypass was reported in the newspaper and the local water and sewer board objected because the road was proposed to go close to the city's drinking water lake, one of the DOT folks said "road projects should stand on their own and not be associated with other issues". Shows a lack of understanding of the impact of building roads.

The respondents said the lack of communication between the DOT and the local governments has created problems in the past. Building highways has isolated communities and land locked others. Road building has not always solved the problems they were designed to address. Regional planning could be an important tool as citizens and public officials in our region talk about mass transit such as ferrys, light rail, and buses.

Another result of road building and other public investment activities is our open space and farm land is being developed at a pace faster than our growth rate for the region. The "Scan for Smart Growth in the Southeast", a document prepared for the Funder's Network for Smart Growth in 2002, gave the following statistic for Alabama: "Alabama has a 10% growth rate but a 50% land use rate". Why are we developing faster than our population is growing? Is it simply because homeowners are upgrading or downsizing? Or is it due to the lack of land use planning? The coastal region of Alabama is growing faster than the state as a whole. There appears to be a rush to develop where land is cheap and regulations are few even though there are many existing homes on the market. But even with regulations, developments get variances due to the murky communication between cities, counties, and citizens. So the cycle of sprawling development continues followed by public investment in roads, schools, parks, fire and police protection.

"Smart Growth" is a fairly new buzz word in planning circles. Some area of the country are addressing issues of sprawl and uncontrolled growth in a more comprehensive way using smart growth principles. While development strategies should reflect

the local flavor, smart growth has certain principles defining development as one that serves the economy, the community, and the environment. It is about designing our region offering more choices in housing, transportation, jobs, entertainment and preserving what the area already has. The concepts of Smart Growth getting local support are bikepaths, parks, eco-tourism, and downtown redevelopment. But each of these has been addressed on an individual basis and not as part of any long range plan.

Smart Growth incorporates several principles that would encourage comprehensive planning such as strengthening existing communities and promoting stakeholder collaboration in development decisions. These cannot be addressed successfully without grassroots participation and by long range thinking which takes into account the whole community. Many areas incorporating "smart" planning have had strong participation by the public from the start. When issues arose later the public was supportive because they were part of the initial decision-making.

Is it enough for each city and county to do separate long range planning without "understanding the goals of other municipalities..."? No longer should political jurisdictions plan for the future without communicating, cooperating, and coordinating with regional partners. Regional planning will afford an "economies of scale" saving money and more adequately preserving and improving the quality of life.

Another issue suggested for regional consideration is sewer, wastewater treatment, and stormwater runoff systems management. There are definite regulations and requirements for each city and county with which to comply but some of the issues can and should be addressed regionally. Is there "a regional understanding" of these issues? Outlying areas of the region may see Mobile and Baldwin Counties as "two distinctly different areas and the geographic division of the regions by Mobile Bay lessens the dependence of one upon the other..." Is Mobile Bay a division of the region or a vital connector? If "Quality of Life is centered on the Bay and the Gulf," how can we disconnect ourselves from the very environment we depend upon? "It all goes back to the water, water, water."

Water and air quality are perceived improving in the region. Will this perceived improvement trend continue? Uncontrolled growth and lack of adequate planning may have an impact on the answer to that question. With the trend toward coastal living, do we have "a regional understanding of the effects of development in general along the coast?" It was suggested that Alabama's coastal region could "benefit from making site visits to communities and investigate

different forms of community planning and development.”

## **Conclusion**

Collaborating and cooperating in a Regional Comprehensive Smart Growth Plan would set the stage for *intentional development balanced with environmental and social concerns.* Smart” growth and development is a balancing act in which all sides have a place at the table. Through education and dialogue, residents of Coastal Alabama will hopefully come to understand that “everything is connected”. So any planning should include consideration for the economy, the community, and the environment as equally co-dependent. Working together as a coastal region strengthens neighborhoods and offers the opportunity for more and smarter choices in the way communities design and develop, work and play, and live along our beautiful Coastal Alabama.