

MSU CENTER

Builds Growth Management Resources for the Gulf Coast



Marco Nicovich

Dr. Dayton Whites and Patricia Southerland discuss the 30-acre greenway under development in the George County town of Lucedale.

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Bob Ratliff

The new Plein Air neighborhood in the village of Taylor in Lafayette County includes sidewalks and other smart growth elements found in old-fashioned, traditional neighborhoods. The new homes also are within easy walking distance to the village's shops and restaurant.

By Bob Ratliff

Dr. Dayton Whites is as proud as anyone could be of his hometown, and he should be. In addition to being a physician, Whites also serves as mayor of Lucedale, the only town in George County.

“We have beautiful woodlands, the Pascagoula River and a 30-acre greenway we’re developing in downtown Lucedale,” he said. “Lucedale also has the best medical facilities of any small town in the state, with 18 board-certified physicians on staff at our community hospital.”

One of the things his community lacks is major industry, but the mayor does not see the absence of big factories as an obstacle to the quality of life in his area of Mississippi.

“We have about 1,500 people in George County working at Ingles shipyard in Pascagoula in Jackson County, and they enjoy living the country life here,” Whites said.

George County, along with Pearl River and Stone counties are just north of Mississippi's Gulf Coast counties—Hancock, Harrison and Jackson. The three inland counties have been mostly rural and sparsely populated, despite being neighbors to New Orleans on the west, Mobile on the east and the industrial and tourist areas along the Gulf Coast, which is less than 30 miles from their southern boundaries.

"Mississippi's three counties just north of the Gulf Coast are projected to experience rapid population growth," said Patricia Southerland. "With the right planning, these areas can retain much of their small town or rural character while avoiding some of the problems associated with development."

Southerland is project manager of the Center for Urban Rural Interface Studies at Mississippi State University's Coastal Research and Extension Center in Biloxi.

The center was established in 2006 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The mission of the center is to produce information to help local officials throughout the Gulf Coast region make growth-management decisions.

"Before hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast, growth was moving north of I-10 into rural areas from Texas to Florida in the form of sprawling developments," Southerland said. "Almost two years later, growth continues to move north of I-10 into counties adjacent to the coastal counties, and in some areas it is occurring faster than before the hurricanes."

While new construction can add tax money to city and county coffers, Southerland said the extra income often does not make up for the loss of quality-of-life factors resulting from sprawl.

"Sprawl occurs when everything is scattered: schools, civic buildings, shops, etc., and everyone must get in their car to get to any of these places," Southerland said. "Smart growth is a viable concept that communities can use to manage growth without sprawl."

Smart growth is a term most coastal residents probably had not heard prior to Katrina. Since the storm, it has been debated and discussed in most south Mississippi communities.

"Smart growth is a comprehensive land-use planning tool that addresses more than just land use zoning," Southerland said. "It takes into account transportation, public welfare, health issues and aesthetics, as well as guides for creating new housing developments. One important principle of smart growth is designing walkable communities where neighborhoods have sidewalks and are within easy walking distance of shops, parks, schools and civic buildings."

The other principles of smart growth, Southerland said, are to mix land uses, take advantage of compact building design, create a range of housing opportunities and choices, preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas, strengthen and direct development toward existing communities, provide a variety of transportation choices, make development

decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective, and encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

Following Hurricane Katrina, architects and planners from across the nation came to the Mississippi Gulf Coast for a series of "charrettes," or planning sessions with their local counterparts. The result was a master plan for applying smart growth and new urbanist principles in rebuilding 11 coastal cities and towns.

"The master plan produced in the charrettes is incredible," Southerland said. "The challenge now is implementing and adapting the plan to meet the needs of the coastal communities. The next challenge is to develop a sustainable regional plan that addresses the new growth areas in George, Stone and Pearl River counties."

Stone County is an area where implementing elements of the master plan could have a significant impact in years to come, according to county engineer Jon Bond.



"Stone is the same size as the surrounding counties, but right now we only have about 17,000 people," he said. "We are beginning to grow, and a couple of big developments are planned that could affect growth tremendously. We can do one of two things—we can cover the land like an urban sprawl and then figure out where we went wrong, or get some things implemented in the next couple of years to manage growth."

Once fully established, the Center for Urban Rural Interface Studies will be available to provide technical and design assistance and information to local policy-makers about land-use strategies and related population growth issues. The center also includes a resource library with publications, DVDs and CDs showing examples of communities designed for sustainability and successful policies used in other areas.

"Good examples are out there," Southerland said. "County and city officials are overwhelmed and understaffed at this time, and it costs a lot of money to hire firms to write comprehensive plans. With the center, we are able to offer assistance by bringing in experts for workshops and charrettes in order to demonstrate the successful examples already in use."