

**Environmental Leaders Roundtable**  
**Growth & Economic Development**  
August 1, 2025

**Introduction:** As representatives of environmental organizations focused on Indian River County natural resources, we were invited to participate in “discussion on the topic of local environmental conservation and sustainability issues” related to the County’s “preparation of a strategic action plan for economic development.” On June 30, 2025 a largely informal meeting and roundtable discussion of multiple issues was held at the County’s Intergenerational Recreational Center. These issues must be addressed by the County to responsibly accommodate population growth and concurrently provide for sustainable economic development. This document is to summarize these issues and appropriate County measures as recommended by our organizations.

The County is developing an Economic Development Strategic Action Plan (EDSAP) “to enhance economic growth, attract investments, retain businesses, and foster employment opportunities within the county.” Key elements of this Plan are expected to include “key investment areas and redevelopment zones” – which have the potential to adversely affect County terrestrial and aquatic natural resources.

The County’s 2014-2015 EDSAP espouses:

- the Indian River County/City of Vero Beach Enterprise Zone, which “encompasses all of the Vero Beach Municipal Airport and the adjacent Gifford community” – with expansion to include Fellsmere.
- Intergovernmental Coordination “to address concerns of business owners”;
- Indian River County’s:
  - “low millage rates”
  - “reduced impact fees for specific industries
  - “access to regional markets via I-95 and the Florida Turnpike”
  - “superb quality of life experienced within a coastal Florida county.”

As identified by the University of Florida Thompson Earth Systems Institute:

- Development has historically been “characterized by low-density residential housing, single-use spaces, and an increased reliance on personal automobiles to get around.”
- “Oftentimes, urban development encroaches on wildlife territory and destroys the natural landscape of the area. Widespread building construction is fatal to plant and wildlife habitats, and wildlife can be forced to cross dangerous areas dominated by human activity, such as highways. Overall, the destruction of these habitats due to urban sprawl leads to habitat fragmentation and a loss in biodiversity.”
- “Urban sprawl also increases demand for energy and water. The low-density neighborhoods that characterize communities experiencing urban sprawl consume more energy per capita than high-density neighborhoods that are closer to city centers.
- “Additionally, single-family houses, which are typical of a suburban setting, often require more water use than city apartments because of things like lawn care, swimming pools, and more of restrooms.”

In light of the above, it is generally recommended that County growth and economic development

- focus on existing urban areas – within the County’s Urban Service Area – to:
  - avoid impacts upon the County’s natural resources, and
  - minimize the land area affected by development to accommodate growth; and
- preserve County natural resources and promote ecotourism within the County.

The following describes specific recommended measures by Indian River County to shape growth and economic development.

**Funding:** The Florida legislature has drastically cut or eliminated key environmental programs - like Florida Communities Trust and Florida Forever – that provide crucial County matching funds for acquisition and conservation of environmental lands. To be optimally effective, the County's \$50 million environmental bond needs to be leveraged with State funding. Formal County requests to our State Legislative Delegation are warranted to restore these State programs. In addition, although some State funding has been available for several years for nutrient reduction projects (stormwater and septic to sewer). Increased State funding is needed – with local funding - to enable the County to meet BMAP requirements.

**Municipal Annexation:** The City of Sebastian annexed adjacent County agricultural land with the expectation of dramatically increasing density without committed water and sewer service to these areas. These annexations convert low-density rural areas (1 unit per 5 acres) to much higher-density development, creating sprawl that potentially strain County utilities infrastructure. It appears the County does not have the capacity to adequately serve Sebastian now, much less it's annexed areas. State legislation appears warranted to preclude municipal annexations without committed water and sewer service to the annexed areas.

**County Growth & Utilities:** The County recently received an increase in water usage under the County's Consumptive Use Permit but no additional increases are expected for the County's existing Utilities infrastructure. Without alternative sources of water, the County cannot viably provide water service for new development. A moratorium appears appropriate for new development in areas without water service until service can be provided. In addition, the County should implement ordinances that conserve water - including: increasing percentage of drought-tolerant native Florida landscaping and decreasing turf, restricting pruning of sabals and oaks to clearance unless removal is recommended and use of septic tank effluent and stormwater for irrigation. (to promote evapotranspiration and capture of rainfall directing it to the aquifer instead of runoff)

**Septic System Pollution:** Approximately 30,000 septic systems countywide contribute to groundwater, surface water, and Indian River Lagoon degradation. The State has mandated conversion to sewer by 2030. The County needs to make a huge investment in sewer infrastructure within the Urban Service Boundary to have the sewer lines in place – particularly in areas with close proximity to the Lagoon and tributaries to the Lagoon. This initial investment may require borrowing money from the State Revolving Fund. Once the infrastructure is in place, a mandate to connect with options for payback including via property taxes at a modest interest rate. Grant funding to assist with private side connection will be necessary in lower income areas. In addition, a tracking dashboard or accountability metric – available to the public - is needed to show the status of septic systems including areas of concern and promote use of available funding.

**Natural Resource Inventory & Density Transfers:** Develop a county-wide inventory identifying critical wildlife corridors, water recharge areas, endangered species, critical habitats and open spaces that would be protected from development through density transfers. The County already has a TDR program, allowing density transfer from rural/conservation lands to planned developments. However, it's underutilized and lacks clear public communication. The County should (a) refine and promote its use, and (b) actively focus on prioritizing land acquisition (non-ELAP) and stormwater projects east of I-95, where recharge is most critical for the health of the aquifer and the lagoon.

**Incentivize Sustainable Development:** The following measures are proposed as incentives for sustainable development:

- Density bonuses for clustered subdivisions and developments that integrate green infrastructure such as like bioretention, rain gardens, pervious pavements, and rainwater harvesting.

- Expedited permitting and potentially reduced impact fees for projects following green building principles (LEED, FGBC, Florida Water Star, etc.) or including affordable/workforce housing.
- Property tax credits or abatements for developers implementing low-impact development (LID) techniques.
- Grant and recognition programs to encourage rainwater harvesting, native landscaping, pervious surfaces, and other sustainable practices.
- Education about density and sprawl would do the county good as well.

**Climate Adaptation and Resilience Planning** - Indian River County lacks a stand-alone Resilience Plan, though it has relevant documents (Unified Mitigation Strategy, CEMP, 2022 Climate Vulnerability Report). These efforts should be consolidated into a coordinated, county-wide Resilience Strategy that:

- Sets resilience targets tied to land use and infrastructure
- Includes sea level rise and water supply threats
- Aligns with Comp Plan updates and funding requests (e.g. Resilient Florida grants)

**Education and Outreach Infrastructure** - Public education around issues like density trade-offs, green infrastructure, and land use planning is key. These should include:

- County-hosted workshops
- Green development "scorecards"
- Visual density comparison tools to combat NIMBYism and promote smart growth
- Community events with County Support