

Stacking up our future

Forward thinkers plan area's growth with Legos.

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Take 300 mostly headstrong developers, government officials, professional planners and corporate executives. Then ask them to reach consensus about how the Tampa Bay area should grow and develop by the year 2050.

Miracle of miracles: That's pretty much what they did Friday at a brainstorming session called Reality Check at the Tampa Convention Center.

Hunched over war-room style maps on which they stacked plastic Lego blocks and strung ribbon, participants found room for the 3.2-million new residents and 1.5-million new jobs demographers expect to arrive by 2050.

The scale of the undertaking was best summed up by nationally-renowned planner John Fregonese, credited with helping make Portland, Ore., a byword for good living.

"You have a pretty intimidating future," Fregonese said after looking over some of the 32 maps teeming with Lego obelisks to represent millions of new homes and jobs. "That's an eye popper."

Three top goals emerged from the Who's Who assembly: Create a fast, seamless transportation system using cars, buses and rail. Cluster live-work-and-play neighborhoods around transit hubs. And preserve Florida's trademark beaches, swamps and woods.

"You can't pave the bay away," Wachovia bank president Roy McCraw said to his group as they prepared to make over their map.

Some of the scenarios assembled on the 6-foot-by-7-foot maps were not for the faint of heart. The group to which Tampa lawyer Ron Weaver belonged superimposed ribbon, representing a loop road, on highways such as U.S. 301, County Line Road in Hernando County and U.S. 19 in Pasco and Pinellas counties.

"We've just done an Atlanta type beltway," Weaver enthused.

Weaver's group was unusual in spreading Legos fairly thinly around the seven-county region in a concession to current suburban housing trends. Most other groups tried to cram jobs and homes in predictable high-density spots near city centers, highway intersections and mass transit stops.

"We don't have six Manhattans," Weaver said of his group's approach. "We're giving people 400 choices."

During a keynote address to the Reality Check crowd, Fregonese outlined the next step. Most important will be for the region to turn its agreed upon principles into an instruction manual. One move in that direction is this year's creation of

a Tampa Bay regional transportation authority to serve as a pipeline for federal subsidies.

"A vision without action is hallucination," Fregonese said.

The message fell upon some of the area's biggest power brokers. All seven of the region's county administrators were there, as were most of the big city mayors and an array of university presidents, major landowners and top developers.

In the mind of Clearwater Mayor Frank Hibbard it was all about legacy. By 2050, semi-rural Pasco and Polk counties will likely join Hillsborough and Pinellas counties in the million-resident club. Would that development be well planned or a hopeless jumble?

"We've been called to plant seeds for trees we may not sit under, " Hibbard said.

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