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MEMORANDUM

TO: Fort Myers Beach Local Planning Agency
FROM: Bill Spikowski
DATE: February 1, 2005
SUBJECT: **EVALUATION AND APPRAISAL OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

This memo contains an updated list of issues that should receive special attention during the upcoming evaluation and appraisal process for the Comprehensive Plan.

These issues are broken into two categories: “major” and “other” planning issues. This distinction is important for two reasons. The first reason is that state statutes require any planning issue identified as “major” to be accompanied by a rigorous technical analysis that may be of little value to us, but which could constitute considerable expense. The second is that we need to focus public attention during our March charrette session on issues that will interest the public and about which public input will be valuable to the town.

For these reasons, I am suggesting the town focus on the following three major issues during the March charrette sessions and in the evaluation and appraisal report itself:

- 1. FUTURE LAND USE:** After five years’ experience, are the Comprehensive Plan’s “buildback” provision working properly, or should they be modified or repealed? Should the plan allow conversions from over-density hotel/motels guest units into over-density residential units? If so, would this policy cause a fundamental change in the economy of Fort Myers Beach, displacing the tourist economy and its locally-owned motels, restaurants, and shops in favor of condominiums? Would such a change be good or bad for Fort Myers Beach?
 - **Background:** The plan established a new concept for “pre-disaster” buildback of existing buildings that exceed the post-1984 density limits. Many questions have arisen from the town’s initial experience implementing this policy. For instance, should over-density buildings be allowed to expand further during the rebuilding process? What happens when motels are proposed for conversion into dwelling units – should the new dwelling units be required to meet current density limits (which have been in place since 1984) or should they be allowed to disregard those limits? Also, federal and state coastal regulations apparently require new beachfront buildings to be elevated so high that the ambience of the pedestrian environment will be degraded by the new buildings; creative ideas are needed for the town to ensure

that new beachfront buildings can improve the look and feel of Estero Boulevard while still meeting coastal regulations.

2. ESTERO BOULEVARD – entire length: The Comprehensive Plan established the following vision for the future: “Estero Boulevard has become the premier public space on the island, with a strong sense of place . . . pedestrians now cross safely and many people use the expanded fleet of trolleys to move around the island.” There continues to be a strong consensus to make Estero Boulevard more friendly to pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit and to make it more beautiful as well. Equally important would be burying utility lines to protect them from high winds and stopping the frequent “ponding” of rainfall that has nowhere to flow. However, there is still no consensus about how to pay for these improvements, or how they might be made in a logical sequence over ten or twenty years.

- **Background:** The 2000 Estero Boulevard Streetscape Master Plan projected a total cost of \$20–\$30 million to carry out all of its proposed improvements to Estero Boulevard (including placing power lines underground). This figure is well beyond the ability of the town to finance at current levels of taxation. One option had been to place tolls on the bridges and use a large portion of the toll revenues for pedestrian and transit improvements within the town, many of which are detailed in the streetscape plan. Unless the community’s resistance to tolling abates, another revenue source will have to be found or the streetscape improvements will have to be dramatically scaled back. One potential funding source is Lee County, which currently owns and maintains Estero Boulevard, but the county’s priorities may be different than those of local residents. Before Lee County hires engineers to design actual improvements, the town needs to decide on the basic form they will take so that the town’s livability and transportation goals will be carried out rather than being ignored.

3. ESTERO BOULEVARD – Sky Bridge area: The most congested segment of Estero Boulevard is near Times Square, and there is never a shortage of ideas on what to do about it. Many were described in the transportation element of the Comprehensive Plan, but this year there are two entirely new ideas. The town is studying reopening Center Street, which is now a public parking lot between Old San Carlos and Estero. The town is also analyzing the potential realignment of Estero from Crescent to the bridge through Seafarers and Helmerich Plaza. Would these alternatives noticeably reduce traffic congestion? How would they affect the surrounding area? Would they be more successful than ideas previously identified? What other alternatives might be possible to reduce traffic congestion while making Fort Myers Beach a better place to live and visit?

- **Background:** The town’s Traffic Mitigation Agency is investigating and experimenting with many promising transportation improvements. The TMA and its consulting engineers understand their mission is to find better ways to move traffic. In addition, the town needs to understand how potential transportation improvements would affect the beauty, convenience, and walkability of the town’s major streets before it can be decided whether they would be good, bad, or neutral for Fort Myers Beach.

- (1) **Center Street:** Consulting engineers for the town are working on plans to reopen Center Street to carry out a recommendation from the town’s Transportation Mitigation Agency. The purpose is to allow a second route from the Sky Bridge for drivers who are traveling to the north end of the island or to Old San Carlos.

- (2) **Realignment:** Due to common property ownership, the realignment of Estero Boulevard is a possibility for the first time. Rather than waiting to see if the landowners propose a realignment plan of their own, the town should take this opportunity to evaluate various alternatives, perhaps identifying one or more potential designs that respond to the varied public and private interests that would be affected.

In addition, here are four additional items that we can consider as “other” issues. These issues are more technical in nature and probably will not be the focus of our charrettes, but the designation as “other” does not imply that there is any limit to how much study the town chooses to apply to them or to any other issues that emerge.

4. **TRANSPORTATION:** Does the Transportation Element need to be amended or revised? Should some of the transportation alternatives that were analyzed in that element but not selected be reconsidered at this time? Should other alternatives be added?
- **Background:** Since the completion of the Transportation Element in late 1998, the town has moved forward on several transportation initiatives, including an intensive Congestion Mitigation Study that began in 2002. Although that study is not yet complete, it became controversial in part due to the serious consideration that was given to placing tolls on the bridges. Also, its advocacy of new traffic signals and other roadway improvements near Times Square differs in several respects from the principles set forth in several other studies: the Transportation Element itself, the Old San Carlos/Crescent Master Plan, and the Estero Boulevard Streetscape Master Plan.
5. **STORMWATER MANAGEMENT:** The Stormwater Management element called for the town to prepare a Stormwater Master Plan. Is this plan still a priority for the town?
- **Background:** Objective 9-F of this element called for a town-wide Stormwater Master Plan to be conducted by the year 2000. This plan would determine the nature of potential improvements to the existing stormwater drainage system, to improve drainage and also to reduce the level of contaminants running off into tidal waters. It would also evaluate permanent funding sources to carry out such improvements. Instead of conducting this plan, the town has begun to construct specific improvements to fix some of the worst drainage problems while experimenting with various methods of reducing contaminants. This alternate program has been successful and provides a reasonable alternative to the Stormwater Master Plan as originally proposed. However, without a Stormwater Master Plan, certain funding mechanisms would not be available, such as a stormwater utility.
3RELATED SUB-ISSUE: How could permeable paving be incorporated more fully into public and private improvements to reduce flooding and improve water quality?
6. **UTILITIES:** The water supply portion of the Utilities Element needs to be updated to reflect the town’s purchase of the potable water system from Lee County and to incorporate the ten-year work plan for improvements to the potable water supply system.
7. **HOUSING:** The Housing Element was based on 1990 census data. Now that 2000 census data is available, an assessment of affordable housing needs can be conducted.