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The road to mass transit

Broward County's rules about how we use our land could change to help ensure that newcomers have places to live and to spur interest in public transportation.

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TRANSPORTATION | BROWARD LAND-USE PLAN

It has become a common refrain among "smart growth" advocates across the country: Want to limit sprawl and improve public transportation? Encourage a dense mix of commercial and residential development along the major corridors.

To that end, Broward County officials have proposed two new "transit-oriented" land-use categories designed to promote redevelopment along routes like U.S. 441 and to group potential riders near major bus and rail stops.

The county's planning council unanimously endorsed the proposals Thursday, along with a measure that would change the way traffic fees collected from developers are used. Instead of applying the money toward new roads, the money would go toward public transportation projects.

"We can't just keep paving over everything," said County Commissioner Lori Parrish, a member of the planning council. "We have to look at mass transit as an alternative. . . . This is an example of us coming kicking and screaming into the 21st Century."

Taken together, the proposed amendments to the county's land-use guidelines mark the latest step in a continuing effort to plan for population growth while limiting reliance on cars. The idea is to encourage development that allows people to walk to work or easily use trains and buses.

The amendments could come before county commissioners for a final vote by year's end, following public hearings and review by the state.

Members of the State Road 7/U.S. 441 Collaborative, a group of Broward municipalities working to revive the rundown corridor, helped draft the new land-use designations.

One, called a Transit Oriented Corridor, would allow a mix of housing, shops, restaurants and offices along the entire length of a major road. The other, called a Transit Oriented Development, would encourage similar development in the areas around key bus stops or train stations.

Local governments would set the density and other guidelines within the zones, subject to review by the county. They would be required to plan for public plazas and features geared toward pedestrians, like benches, wide sidewalks, and streets that connect to one another.

Lauderhill commissioner Leanna "Lee" Mirsky, chairwoman of the collaborative, said the new mixed-use designations would attract money for redevelopment and eventually offer relief to people weary of long commutes.

"When everything is commercial or everything is residential, you lose out on the possibilities," she said, adding that her city plans to use the new designation along its portion of US 441.

In addition to improving conditions for public transportation, directing development to major corridors will ease pressure on the county's single-family neighborhoods, said Peter Ross, assistant director of the county's office of urban planning and redevelopment.

"We're projecting close to a million more people coming to the county in the next 30 years.... This is at least part of a solution."