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International News:

Sao Paulo, free of billboards, shines anew

Almost two years ago the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil, ordered the downsizing or removal of all billboards and most other forms of commercial advertising in the city.



While many business people at the time worried that the ban on billboards would negatively affect businesses, those concerns have largely proved groundless and the city has taken on a revived look. Where signs once covered up historic buildings, the original facades have been refurbished and allowed to shine as they were meant to be seen.

Time Magazine has filed [this report](#) on Sao Paulo since the billboard ban went into effect. Could cities here in the U.S. learn a lesson from South America's largest city?

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Editor Comment: The number of 'smart growth' articles is significantly more now than last year. Many comments and articles are tied to economic times being experienced. They seem to all echo the sentiment that Florida's real value lies not in development but in protecting its natural resources and historical life style. Over dependence on development with promised but unrealized future benefits has taken its toll with city, county and state budget shortfalls. This is an opportunity to re-allocate scarce public resources and make public investments that enhance the quality of life as illustrated by Lee County's investment to protect one of the county's last rural areas. Every county has a 'last rural area' that can be protected.

Regardless of the factors involved, Tampa's decision to allow digital billboards is unfortunate. If you are interested in either temporarily or permanently protecting your area from becoming 'Las Vegas East', consider the sample ordinance at the [Scenic Texas website](#). Scroll down to the form ordinance link.

Billboards

Tampa to allow digital billboards as part of settlement

By [Janet Zink](#), Times staff writer
In print: Friday, November 21, 2008

TAMPA — Digital billboards, with their flashy array of pitches, are coming to Tampa.

The question is how many and where will they go.

City code now forbids the electronic signs, considered state-of-the-art technology in the billboard

world. But an agreement settling 10 years of legal wrangling with two companies would allow them.

City Attorney Chip Fletcher on Thursday asked the City Council to approve the settlement, which also requires the companies to remove nearly 90 billboards from Kennedy Boulevard, Florida Avenue and other streets.

But the council delayed the vote until Dec. 18 so it can have more time to address such concerns as how close the digital billboards can be to homes.

"This is a very significant issue," said council member Linda Saul-Sena. "It's a policy change under the guise of a settlement agreement."

The pact would permit the electronic signs 200 feet from homes. Hillsborough County already permits the signs.

The agreement also would allow the signs to change images once every six seconds. City code limits image changes on small electronic signs to every five minutes.

If someone complains that light from a billboard is intruding into a home, the billboard companies will have to plant trees that will block some of the light within five years.

Council member John Dingfelder said he wants to see a map showing where the new signs would be allowed and which billboards would come down.

Negotiations with billboard owners Clear Channel Outdoor Inc. and CBS began after the city required the companies to take down billboards to improve the look of roads but offered no options for relocation.

The companies say they also have removed more than 180 billboards from the city for reasons other than aesthetics, such as road widenings. The agreement outlines options for some to go back up, with one digital sign allowed in exchange for every three that came down.

Saul-Sena questioned if that tradeoff was too generous to the companies, who can sell space on one digital billboard to multiple customers.

She said she wanted information on struggles to control digital billboards in Los Angeles before the council votes on the agreement.

There, Clear Channel and CBS filed lawsuits after the Los Angeles City Council passed an ordinance banning new billboards. A settlement reached in 2006 allowed the companies to convert 850 print billboards to digital. But after hearing from residents who complain the bright screens distract drivers and shine into their homes, the council is considering a moratorium on conversions so city officials can craft new rules for regulating the billboards, reports the *Los Angeles Times*.

In Tampa, neighborhood leaders told the council that, among other things, they want the allowable distance from homes increased and they want to know the number of signs that qualify for relocation.

"We're looking for more protection for residents," said Randy Baron, who lives in Seminole Heights. The signs, he said, "have the potential to make the city look more like Las Vegas or New York than Tampa."

Attorneys for CBS and Clear Channel could not be reached for comment.

Janet Zink can be reached at jzink@sptimes.com or (813) 226-3401.

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Farmland Protection

County's Alva land purchase may help preserve open space

Lee County's recent decision to buy more than 1,700 acres of ranch land could help prevent major development in one of the county's last rural areas.

The Alva area along North River Road, a 10-mile stretch of County Road 78 in east Lee, became an attractive area to developers during the real estate boom a few years ago, with its large open space and proximity to the Caloosahatchee River and its tributaries, Owl, Trout and Telegraph creeks.

Three development plans that combined for more than 4,300 new homes were sure to meet resistance from the county, environmentalists and area residents. But now only two plans remain, one potentially a decade away from breaking ground. And both might never get approval now that the county has invested more than \$65 million there in conservation efforts - \$23.9 million almost two weeks ago to buy the 1,726-acre Argo Ranch and \$41.5 million two years ago to acquire 5,620 acres of Babcock Ranch.

"We have made a huge commitment out there," said Commissioner Frank Mann, who represents the area and has used his platform against growth in the area to twice help win his commission seat. "That's why (big development) would be totally incompatible."

The land could be used to cleanse southbound water flowing into the river and creeks, to give the endangered Florida panther a place to roam, and to provide another park for area residents.

Like State Road 80, where Verandah, River Hall and Hawk's Preserve popped up during the housing boom, County Road 78 became a target for growth, too.

Benderson Development, a Sarasota company, had targeted Argo Ranch for at least 210 homes. Then the real estate market crashed - a downturn that has caused development pressure to wane countywide - and Benderson sold the property to the county.

And Lee commissioners have denied West Palm Beach developer Kitson & Partners its request for a special taxing district that would generate money to jump-start the building of 1,600 homes on 1,200 acres in Lee County. Kitson wants to build a new town of 45,000 in northeast Lee and southeast Charlotte counties, although the Lee portion of the development is postponed indefinitely because only Charlotte commissioners have approved the taxing district.

That has put the focus on the 2,500 homes the Bonita Bay Group wants to build on 1,268 acres at State Road 31 and North River Road.

The number of homes in the company's plans requires an amendment to the county's growth plan, which allows half that many, an amendment commissioners could be voting on in the spring. Until then, Bonita Bay officials have been working to make the community, North River Village, as attractive as possible.

They have scaled back the number of homes from 3,000 homes to 2,500, pledged to allow public access to boat and kayak launches, and promised to make every single-family home a "green" building that could use solar power and better insulation to make the homes more energy efficient.

"A lot of people just say (more homes) is a bad thing," said Susan Watts, a senior vice president with Bonita Bay. "It's how you do it, how you plan for it, and how you integrate it."

The revisions to their plans have helped.

"I'm not opposed to growth, as long as it's smart growth," said Tom Mulling, head of the North Olga Community Association, a grass-roots group of residents who live next to the Bonita Bay land. "You can even increase (the number of homes) a little bit and go with the national trend and cluster building and leave a lot of open space."

Mulling likes other facets about Bonita Bay's development, too: The public access. The central water and sewer system the community would bring, getting area residents off wells and septic tanks.

"The river is one of the great assets we have in east Lee County and it's used very little because

there's no public access," he said.

Even Florida Audubon, a prominent environmental group, is supportive of the project.

"We support planning that concentrates development in a smaller area and reduces the impact on sensitive lands," said Brad Cornell, a policy advocate with Audubon. "Looking at the landscape and the proposal, it seems to make sense from a lot of perspectives."

Hurdles remain

Wayne Daltry, the county's Smart Growth director, said the county has to be more concerned than ever about wetlands impacts and fire hazards that come with new development, now that Lee owns Argo Ranch.

"When the county owns land it has a trustee responsibility to the shareholders, (that is) the county residents, to defend it from loss of its value," Daltry said. "The county has property rights, too. It has additional responsibilities to protect it for the county at large."

Steven Brown, a policy specialist with the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, wants to protect the area.

"We would like to see more intense development around existing urban areas before we go into rural areas," he said.

Ruby Daniels, who leads Alva Inc., another area group, feels the same way.

"What they're wanting to build is a mini-city in a rural area and our goal is to protect the character of our rural area," she said.

Then there's Mann.

He has been at odds with developers since last year, when he unveiled his "Mann-ifesto," his promise to not allow the construction of more homes than allowed by the county growth plan.

"Until you put me in the ground," he said, "nothing's going to change with my position."

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Land Use & Smart Growth

Smart Investing Will Boost Local Economy

The Tampa Tribune

Published: December 7, 2008

Only a few years ago Hillsborough County and the rest of Florida looked on the financial struggles elsewhere in the nation with smug detachment.

While other states struggled as [manufacturing plants](#) closed, jobs were outsourced, and retirees fled South, Florida could count on its growth to keep the money and jobs flowing. Our state seemed virtually immune from economic downturns.

No longer.

This recession has slowed growth and brought the state to its knees. Florida now suffers more than most states.

It leads the nation in job loss. In the past year some 156,200 Florida jobs have vanished. And West-Central Florida's job loss is among the highest in the nation. Florida's 7 percent [unemployment rate](#) is

the highest in 15 years. Hillsborough's [unemployment rate](#) is even higher - 7.4 percent.

Florida's once mighty [homebuilding industry](#) has been humbled. The state is second in the nation in foreclosures, with 440,000 filings. The market is glutted, with more than 300,000 unsold homes. So even if Washington should manage to quickly resolve the mortgage crisis, the state's [homebuilding industry](#) is unlikely to bounce back anytime soon.

More significant to Florida's long-term economic prospect is that even prior to the economic downturn, congested roads, water shortages, inadequate schools, pollution and the other consequences of [haphazard growth](#) and [inattention](#) to infrastructure combined to tarnish the state's appeal.

Retirees and companies alike have started to find the quality of life more attractive in North Carolina and other regions.

Now, with its economy in [shambles](#) the state is projected to face a \$3.5 billion [budget shortfall](#) next year, which will make [deep cuts](#) to services necessary. Florida's appeal is likely to further erode.

State and local leaders must recognize the urgency of ending their dependence on growth and begin to invest in a strong, diversified economy.

There has been a lot of talk in the past about such an effort. But not much action. Former Hillsborough Commissioner Ed Turanchik was widely ridiculed for his visionary support of a transit-oriented community, where business and homes could be developed along transit line. He clearly was ahead of his time.

It's encouraging that now a few leaders appear to have the courage to lead the charge for overhauling the local economy and its growth patterns. Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio, for one, is pushing hard to present voters a transit plan.

Hillsborough County Commissioner Mark Sharpe supports that effort and is promoting a "blueprint" for diminishing the region's dependence on growth.

He has been studying Charlotte, Houston and other communities best weathering the financial downturn.

At the top of the list in helping communities thrive and attract high-paying jobs are two major public investments: education and transit.

Companies want an educated workforce and strong research facilities that can collaborate with the private sector.

Sharpe points to Hillsborough's success in attracting Draper Laboratory as an example of the sorts of enterprises on which the community should concentrate.

Draper will partner with the University of South Florida, James A. Haley Veterans Hospital, and the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center.

The nonprofit firm headquartered at the edge of the MIT campus in Cambridge is involved in energy, surveillance, micro-electronics, health care and other research.

Draper was provided about \$20 million in state and local incentives to locate a branch here. But the company eventually will provide thousands of high-paying jobs for scientists, researchers, machine operators and other positions.

The enterprise never would have chosen Tampa were it not for USF and the trained workforce it produces, something lawmakers should consider as they hack away at the state budget.

Transit, as both Iorio and Sharpe understand, also is key to attracting high-wage companies. Young professionals want transportation alternatives. They also want lifestyle options, and transit encourages development patterns that allow for both dynamic urban centers and peaceful rural areas.

Sharpe points out that while Hillsborough is losing jobs, communities that have invested in transit, such as Charlotte, Houston and Dallas, are adding jobs. Transit ridership is high, and homes near transit lines are increasing in value, despite the real-estate slump.

All this doesn't mean the county should abandon the development industry, which eventually will regain steam.

But state and local leaders should see permitting far-flung subdivisions to claim the countryside will stress resources as well as diminish the region's appeal to the kind of industries that could secure a stronger economic future.

The focus should be on nurturing and attracting high-tech jobs and building efficient communities.

As Sharpe puts it, our current financial plight shows that elected officials can no longer afford to be "short-sighted."

Nor can they afford to blindly put all their economic hopes into hammers and nails.

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Scenic Highways & Trails

Jefferson County's Aucilla Sinks trail a treat for hikers

By Bruce Ritchie • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • December 1, 2008

GOOSE PASTURE —Weaving its way in Jefferson County through a forested landscape of lakes, sinkholes and deep cracks in the bedrock is what some hiking enthusiasts say is one of the best trail segments in the region.

The Florida Trail extends 12 miles along the Aucilla River and a series of sinkholes and lakes where the river goes underground. It's a good trek for experiencing the wilderness while trying to shed a few Thanksgiving pounds.

Walker Banning, who has maintained portions of the trail for the Florida Trail Association, said it's a great area to hike because of the limestone geology, referred to as karst. The area also has limestone formations and deep crevices.

"The southern end is the most scenic and geologically unusual segment of the trail — just spectacular," Banning said.

The trail extends through part of the 47,532-acre Aucilla Wildlife Management Area managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. It's a huge chunk of forested wilderness in Jefferson and Taylor counties located mostly north of U.S. Highway 98.

The agency is trying to improve visitor access to the trail and the wildlife area and has installed a kiosk at the trail crossing on Goose Pasture Road, said Liz Sparks, a recreation planner with the commission.

"It's one of the favored spots of the Florida Trail throughout the state," she said. "It is interesting for day trips. Its just so interesting where it (the Aucilla River) comes in and out."

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Wilton Rooks

Scenic Watch Editor

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