

# **Gilchrist County 2030 Vision** **Final Report:**

**An evaluation of and update to the**  
**Gilchrist County 2020 Vision**

**Presented by the 2008 Vision Committee to  
the Gilchrist County Commission**

## **Vision Statement**

*Our vision for Gilchrist County in 2030 is rural communities working in harmony to provide opportunities for all its citizens through balanced growth and enhanced education, while preserving our proud heritage, natural resources and agriculture.*

## Acknowledgements

### **The 2008 Vision Committee Members:**

**Michelle Walker Crawford**  
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### **The 2008 Vision Committee Guest Speakers:**

**Marvin Weaver**, Gilchrist County Extension Agent, IFAS  
**Fred Shore**, Residential Developer  
**Don Bennick**, North Florida Holsteins Inc.

### **The 2008 Vision Committee Support Staff Members:**

**Ron McQueen**, County Administrator, Gilchrist County  
**Taylor Brown**, Planning Director, Gilchrist County  
**Belinda Wilkerson**, Planning & Development Assistant, Gilchrist County  
**Bruce Delaney**, Public Meeting Facilitator, University of Florida  
**Hank Cothran**, Public Meeting Facilitator, University of Florida

### **The Gilchrist County Citizenry:**

The Gilchrist County Citizenry, many of whom attended and spoke at public meetings, participated in visioning exercises, wrote letters, sent emails and shared their collective knowledge and life experiences during this public visioning process, simply for the betterment of the community as a whole.

## **Gilchrist County 2030 Vision Report**

### **A. Introduction**

#### **a. The 2020 Vision and the process for its development**

In the autumn of 1999, Gilchrist County set out to develop its first Countywide Vision for the future. The Gilchrist County Commission appointed a Vision Committee (“the 1999 Committee”) comprised of a cross-section of County residents. The Committee was charged with developing a Vision Statement to depict what the County would be like in the year 2020. It was the intention of the County Commission that such a Vision Statement would serve as a foundation for the County’s comprehensive planning efforts. The Gilchrist County Comprehensive Plan would then provide for the implementation of the County Vision. The Committee held public forums over an eighteen month period to seek input from citizens and to deliberate on issues and concerns of the community. Faculty members from the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) moderated these meetings. In the spring of 2001, the Vision Committee completed its work. The completed 2020 Vision Report includes the Vision Statement and two supporting lists. One list outlines steps the 1999 Committee believed the County should implement. The other list outlines pitfalls to be avoided.

#### **b. Reasons and goals for the 2008-09 Vision update**

Since 2001, the County, the State, and the Country have undergone significant social and economic changes. In response to these recent changes, in the autumn of 2008, the Gilchrist County Commission authorized the formation of a new Vision Committee (“the 2008 Committee”) to review and evaluate the 2020 Vision. The County Commission requested the 2008 Committee to update the County Vision taking into consideration the social and economic changes, and also to contemplate specific issues regarding economic and community development.

#### **c. General context**

After 2001, Florida experienced several severe hurricane seasons. Floridians suffered major property damage from winds, storm surges, and flooding events. The financial losses associated with these severe weather events have had considerable negative impacts on the current availability and cost of homeowners’ insurance. In other years, the State experienced extreme drought conditions which engendered wildfires and necessitated water use restrictions.

From about 2002 through 2006, the United States experienced steady economic growth. Much of that growth was generated from the housing sector, with extensive residential development and large increases in homeownership fueled by low interest rates coupled with lenient mortgage lending practices. Energy prices and inflation were stable.

For Gilchrist County, these years brought in new residents, numerous real estate developers and some commercial developers. Property values increased substantially throughout Florida and that resulted in large real estate tax increases.

In response to the outcries of taxpaying homeowners, the Florida Legislature decreased real estate taxes, but so far has not instituted any major tax reform to replace lost revenues. More real estate tax cuts are proposed for the next legislative cycle.

New national educational standards were stipulated for all school systems. Gilchrist County schools successfully implemented the nationally mandated educational reforms to become one of the very few "A" rated school districts in the state.

Since 2007, the United States, along with much of the industrialized world, has experienced a major economic downturn. The Nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is shrinking, the U.S. financial system is crippled, stock markets have nosedived, home values have dropped, real estate development has slowed significantly, and unemployment is on the rise. The Federal Government is bailing out U.S. automobile manufacturers and financial institutions, and has recently enacted an \$800 billion economic stimulus package to help get the economy moving. States and localities are undergoing substantial financial distress with program delays and cutbacks, employee pay cuts and layoffs, and service reductions. It is hoped that the stimulus package will reduce the financial pressures on state and local governments and preserve jobs. Many in the community are concerned about maintaining high educational standards as State funding continues to decrease.

#### **d. Selection of the 2008 Vision Committee**

The Gilchrist County Commission formed the 2008 Vision Committee to represent a cross-section of community leaders and citizenry. Each of the five County Commissioners selected three members. Additionally, the City Commissions of Fanning Springs, Trenton and Bell each appointed two members, as did the Gilchrist County School Board. The Committee Members are listed at the beginning of this report.

#### **e. Process for this update**

The 2008 Committee initially assessed the topics for discussion using the work of the 1999 Committee as a starting point. The 2008 Committee concurs with most of the subjects and issues considered important by the 1999 Committee but prioritized them differently.

The 2008 Committee held eight public meetings. A number of invited speakers made presentations to help the Committee gather information and ideas regarding the County's demographics and ecology, current trends and the future of agriculture, economic development, real estate and community development, and environmental and infrastructure considerations. The general public provided other ideas and suggestions.

The Committee concluded by recommending the adoption of this report to the Gilchrist County Commission.

### **B. Vision Statement**

The 2008 Committee agrees with the major principles and goals of the 2020 Vision Statement and commends the 1999 Committee for its work in developing that initial framework.

The Committee understands that a Vision Statement should not merely extend current trends into the future, but rather it should be aspirational. That is, it should include goals and objectives that are desired even though the pathway to achieving those goals and objectives may not be apparent today.

### **2030 Gilchrist County Vision Statement**

In 2030, Gilchrist County will:

- Host environmentally-friendly economic development, with a focus on innovative technologies in the areas of agriculture, alternative energy, education and health care services, fostered by an economic development council;
- Develop communities placed in carefully selected locations designed to preserve our agricultural, silvicultural and natural resources and to provide the maximum infrastructure and amenities to citizens;
- Support sustainable residential development that pays for itself;
- Develop sufficient infrastructure to support a growing population, including public water and waste water facilities, public safety, transportation, educational and recreational facilities; sustained by means of a diversified tax base.
- Protect our environment and promote eco-tourism, with particular focus on managing water resources through comprehensive regional coordination;
- Possess a superior, progressive educational system, including vocational training and post-secondary institutions for its citizens;
- Sustain a quality of life consistent with the rural heritage and traditional “small town” values of its citizens;
- Maintain a monitoring system to measure progress towards the successful implementation of this 2030 Vision.

Inevitably, changes will occur that are not contemplated in this Vision. We rely on the Gilchrist County Commission, its staff and advisors, to follow this Vision's intent and to use common sense to seek results that are for the best long-term interests of most County residents.

### **C. Commentaries**

#### **Economic Development**

##### **Background**

The County does not have much business activity. Income levels for County residents lag behind the State average. Major employers are government (education, prison), health care (nursing homes), agriculture (dairies, farms and nurseries) and forestry (chips, mulch, timber and pine straw). Government real estate is exempted from property taxes and agriculture and forestry properties have significantly reduced tax assessments.

Over 50% of workers residing in Gilchrist County commute to Alachua County or Levy County to work. Most retail shopping and entertainment dollars are spent there, too. These factors produce an artificially low tax base for Gilchrist County relative to neighboring jurisdictions.

##### **Recommendations**

The County should seek new businesses that produce both jobs and tax revenues. The Committee recommends that an economic development council be formed to proactively target desirable businesses.

The County should seek solutions for infrastructure limitations that impede growth in areas where growth is desired. The Committee recommends that continuing vigorous efforts be undertaken to increase the traffic allowed on State Road 26.

The County should consider focusing economic development on our strengths. For example, educational and medical services, that are both a local and regional strength, and agriculture and forestry, should be high priorities. Innovative approaches to growth and creation of new businesses in these areas should be explored.

The Country is moving into more high tech, bio tech and alternative energy production. The County should consider focusing economic development in these areas where many new small businesses may be formed over the next few years.

The County contains many natural wonders and protected environmental gifts that attract tourism, including hunters and fishermen. To expand eco-tourism, economic development should include retail outlets, lodging and eating establishments that will help attract tourists.

Economic development should be coordinated with the region and build on strengths, such as the University of Florida, as well as other institutions and businesses. As major business activities and facilities locate within the region, Gilchrist County can focus on developing complementary supporting businesses and educational resources to foster economic growth.

Finally, the County should consider what inducements, if any, it can offer to new businesses that generate quality job opportunities for young adults. Increased economic opportunity is vital to retaining our school graduates and to crime prevention.

### **Community Development and Agricultural and Forestry Preservation**

#### **Background**

Gilchrist County currently has about 5,900 households. During the housing boom these last few years' homebuilders have bought many lots in the county. This demand has driven up land prices. About 3,300 unbuilt lots, scattered throughout the county, are now available for development. It seems that population growth in this county is inevitable regardless of current statewide population trends. The public expressed concerns about how this growth will affect agriculture.

At present almost all County land is designated agricultural on the Future Land Use Map. These designations could lead to having many new houses built on inefficiently large sized lots (5 or 10 acres). Forestry is the largest single category of land use within the County (approximately 132,800 acres of a total of about 209,000 acres). Agriculture is still the backbone of the economy, but only about 30 Gilchrist County farms cultivate 400 or more acres.

Significant acreage within the County cannot be used for either agriculture or community development. It is restricted, conserved or otherwise unsuitable for these purposes, but it is valuable for hunting and other recreational uses.

Local farmers presented diverse views about the future of agriculture. Some predicted a decline in local farming. They mentioned that land is too expensive to buy for agricultural use, and larger established properties are being divided up among younger family members as aging farmers retire. It is very difficult to create or maintain the scale necessary to sustain farm families. Potentially, farming may become a part-time occupation for most individuals. These farmers will need to seek supplemental employment off the farm to generate sufficient income.

Others spoke positively about the future. As human populations grow, and food production pressures increase, farming remains essential. New innovative crops and farming techniques that increase yields can make smaller farms economically viable. Adjusting agriculture education and practices to focus on new crops and techniques is crucial.

## **Recommendations**

The Committee recommends changing the land use designations of selected properties to residential. These properties should be located within or near existing municipalities so that services may be delivered more efficiently, water and sewer systems fully utilized, and the pressure to subdivide agricultural property reduced. Within these areas, the County should encourage the construction of reasonably priced housing and rental units. Hopefully, new city residents will encourage further business development within communities, thus improving the tax bases of both the County and its Cities.

The County should streamline permitting and building inspection processes to the greatest extent possible while still maintaining high standards of quality and safety.

The County should continue to encourage and support agriculture and forestry. The agricultural community should proactively utilize UF/IFAS and extension service resources to seek new innovative crops and farming techniques to increase profits for farmers. Farming and forestry operations should follow Best Management Practices (BMPs) subject to the oversight of the Suwannee River Water Management District. The County should consider ways to retain and make the most of our timber resources. Agricultural and forestry leaders should provide ideas and direction for educational and economic development that is supportive of agri-business.

## **Residential Development**

### **Background**

Recent residential development has resulted in fragmented subdivisions often with inadequate infrastructure. A wide variety of housing developments have been proposed. Some would have just houses with minimal infrastructure and amenities. Others contemplate plans that include shopping, services, offices, recreational facilities and other amenities within a comfortable walking distance or a short drive. The variety of developments includes high-end vacation homes, retirement communities and affordable family housing.

The current County population includes a diverse mix of ages, educational attainment and occupations. As a whole, the U.S. population is aging as the Baby Boom generation enters retirement. This is likely to be reflected in the County's population growth and may impact the types of county services needed in the future.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee suggests the County favor clustered residential communities that include complete amenities and infrastructure development. Apartment zoning should be available to enable lower cost housing. Developers should arrange for infrastructure improvements and provide mechanisms for meeting the service needs of new residential

communities. Smart development includes careful consideration of long-term infrastructure needs. At a minimum, new development should pay for itself.

New residential communities must be carefully sited to take into account ecologically sensitive areas from both a county and regional prospective. Location decisions should also consider the impact on agricultural land. Layouts should be flexible to reduce the amount of road improvements required.

The Committee recommends that the County use sound innovative approaches to encourage higher densities to help preserve agricultural land and open spaces. For example, developers capable of providing water and sewer infrastructure should be eligible for “density bonuses”. A density bonus allows that developer to build more units per acre than would otherwise be permitted. Another approach that the County may consider is the use of Transferable Development Rights (TDR). TDRs permit increased density of residential development, over and above what would otherwise be allowed, with the objective of preserving land for agricultural use. However, any such TDR plans should be solely voluntary on the part of the property owner.

The Committee recommends that the County be fully apprised of demographic, environmental and infrastructure limitations that impact the determination of the maximum sustainable population for the County. They should use applicable benchmarks and measurements to determine the best locations for and size of new residential development. The County should strive to retain local control over these decisions to the greatest extent possible.

## **Infrastructure**

### **Background**

State Road 26, the principal east-west route through Trenton and the southern portion of the County, is at maximum capacity for transportation concurrency calculations. The County does not have direct access to an Interstate highway. It has very limited direct access to U.S. Highway 19. Many roads within the County remain unpaved.

Most County residents maintain their own septic tanks and water wells. Power (electricity, gas), communications (cell, landlines, internet, wi-fi connections), and cable services are likely to need upgrading to support a larger population.

The government provides police (County and City), emergency services and fire protection. Citizens have become more concerned about crime recently due to a wave of burglaries and home invasions. The increase in criminal activity may be due to the rise in unemployment associated with the slumping economy. The problem of local unemployment is exacerbated by poor skills and lack of local employers.

## **Recommendations**

The Committee recommends that the County seek support for innovative and alternative funding sources to pave key connector roads (ones that connect with major roads to improve traffic flow and safety as well as save on long term maintenance costs) and to make other infrastructure improvements. Examples are: a dedicated fuel or optional sales tax, special long-term property assessments, or special taxing districts or service fees.

Residential and community development as discussed above should facilitate opportunities for infrastructure improvements to meet the needs of residents.

The Committee urges every municipality within the County to have water and sewer facilities for all City residents. The Committee highly recommends that the County support and work with all parties (the Cities of Trenton, Bell and Fanning Springs, Lancaster Correctional Institution, the Suwannee River Water Management District, the Gilchrist County School Board, Lake City Community College, etc.) to jointly develop water and sewer systems for all urbanized areas of the County.

The Committee recognizes that citizens' participation in Neighborhood Watch programs and similar auxiliary activities is essential to maintaining public safety. The Sheriff, the State Attorney and other law enforcement officials are undertaking related outreach and educational efforts. The County should support these efforts on an ongoing basis. In addition to outreach and citizen participation, both economic and educational development can help reduce crime.

To the greatest extent possible, county and municipal resources should be pooled.

## **Environment**

### **Background**

Water is a highly valued natural resource. Citizens expressed concern about efforts by the State, other jurisdictions within the region, and private interests that seek to remove water from the local rivers, springs and aquifer. Citizens also expressed concerns about industries that require a high consumption of water.

The local eco-system is unique and provides wonderful tourism and recreational opportunities. Boating, swimming, fishing and hunting are major contributors to the quality of life of local residents.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee suggests that the County continue to pursue ideas and projects to protect and preserve water resources for the use and benefit of County residents. For example, coordinated planning discussions about forming a local water utility and efforts to preserve local control of water resources should continue.

All land use and development must be designed to protect the environment. Particular attention should be paid to water resources. For example, the Committee supports residential and community development that includes sufficient water and waste treatment infrastructure.

The County should clearly stipulate all land use regulations necessary to protect the environment in such a way that property owners can understand these limitations. Property owners should face as little restriction as necessary on their rights to use their property.

## **Education**

### **Background**

County residents are proud of the success of their schools, but are concerned about the impact of budget cuts. The Committee commends the success of the school district.

The County has new school facilities at both the Trenton and Bell campuses. Meetings have been ongoing with post-secondary institutions about locating facilities within the County. This could make it more convenient and less expensive for County residents to access a college education, thus encouraging more high school graduates to continue their schooling.

### **Recommendations**

The County should support post-secondary education facilities located within the County and continue to work with the School Board and colleges on these projects. Such facilities could foster new developments, such as nearby apartments, restaurants and shops, and would be attractive to prospective employers who want a well-trained and educated workforce available. For example, technical training resources, compatible with the construction and operation of the new Levy County nuclear facility, may be considered.

Vocational and technical training must focus on the skills needed for the future. Educators should be encouraged and empowered to cultivate community and regional resources that can provide guidance on the specific skills needed for the local jobs expected to become available in the future. The school system will need to expand its focus on subjects, such as computer technology, foreign languages, math and science, to prepare students for these technical positions.

Growth management should take into account the impact on the schools so that high academic standards and excellent facilities are maintained.

## **Quality of Life**

### **Background**

Economic development, infrastructure, schools, recreation and governmental services all contribute to achieving a high quality of life. Continually, residents cite the high quality of life as the main reason they choose to reside in Gilchrist County. They place a great value on their quality of life and want to protect it. They believe the community provides a safe and supportive environment to raise families; that it fosters good values and work ethics. Numerous members of the public expressed the view that they do not want the culture to change. They seek to preserve the traditional "small town" values of their rural community.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee agrees with the 2020 Vision Statement that the County should seek to maintain the agricultural character and culture that is our heritage. To do this, growth and resources must be carefully managed. The Committee recognizes that while change is inevitable, well-planned growth can be beneficial for the County's citizenry.

## **Monitoring**

### **Background**

The 1999 Vision Committee provided for regular monitoring and assessment of progress toward the Vision Statement goals. However, no formal structure to accomplish this task was ever established.

### **Recommendation**

The 2008 Vision Committee believes a group, composed of some committee members and County officials and administrators should produce a progress report on achieving the 2030 Vision, no less frequently than annually, that is made available to the public on the County's website. The Committee also believes that it would be prudent for the County Commission to review both this 2030 Vision report and the Annual Monitoring Report, each year, at one of its regularly scheduled meetings in order to maintain focus on these goals.