



West Palm Beach-Boca Raton, FL MSA

Regulatory Order/Family: Reform/Growth Management

Summary

The West Palm Beach MSA shares important features of all Florida metropolitan areas thanks to the state's strong growth management laws. It is totally planned and zoned, and zoning is rarely used to exclude high-density development from entire jurisdictions. Most new development occurs in unincorporated portions of Palm Beach County, where nearly half of residents currently live. Growth management is universal as well via controls on infrastructure access; developers must pay to grow or else seek out a location where there is slack capacity.¹ Palm Beach County also uses an urban service boundary coupled with a tiering system to contain growth. When combined with the natural containment imposed by the Atlantic Ocean and the Everglades and substantial state land ownership, these policies have helped increase density in the metro area as it nearly doubled in population between 1980 and 2000. Its density remains low, 31st out of the 50 largest metros; the prospects for continued improvements in compactness will depend in part upon the powerful County's willingness to discourage low density growth.

Governance Framework and Growth Trends

The West Palm Beach-Boca Raton MSA had 1.1 million residents in 2000, up 267,000 (31 percent) from 1990. In the two decades between 1980 and 2000, it almost doubled in population. Nearly half the population lives in unincorporated parts of the MSA's single county, Palm Beach; four cities (West Palm Beach, Boca Raton, Boynton Beach, and Delray Beach) have between 60,000 and 85,000 residents. Another 11 cities had between 10,000 and 50,000 residents in 2000.

Like the neighboring Miami metropolitan area to the south, the population of West Palm Beach grew faster than its developed land area between 1982 and 1997: 66 percent versus 45 percent. Its density was quite low at the beginning of the period, however, at just 2.9 persons per urbanized acre, ranking 45th among the 50 largest metropolitan areas. By 1997, it had climbed to 31st with 3.4 persons per urbanized acre. Like Miami, West Palm Beach is bounded on the west by the Everglades and on the east by the Pacific Ocean. Twenty percent of its land area is owned by the state of Florida and another 15 percent by the federal government. This containment by public lands and natural features undoubtedly encouraged the region's density to increase in the 1980s and 1990s, but public policy played a role as well.

Regulatory Environment

Palm Beach County and 10 of the 15 cities with over 10,000 residents responded to our survey; West Palm Beach, the largest city, did not respond. Even so, the respondents account for 81 percent of the population and 93 percent of the land area in the county.

¹ James C. Nicholas and Ruth L. Steiner, "Growth Management and Smart Growth in Florida." *Wake Forest Law Review* 35,3 (Fall) (2000): 645-670.



The West Palm Beach MSA is entirely zoned. One or two cities have low-density-only zoning; an estimated 10 percent of the cities would bar our hypothetical apartment development. About two thirds of the cities have a zoning category allowing at least 15 dwellings per acre, but the county's highest-density residential zone allows between 8 and 15 dwellings per acre. In all, then, zoning is slightly less permissive in West Palm Beach than in most of the other Florida metro areas, with a little more exclusionary zoning and a little less permissive zoning at the high-density end.

Like all of Florida, the West Palm Beach metro area operates under state growth management rules that require comprehensive planning and mandate concurrency between development and infrastructure. Consequently, all the jurisdictions have plans, almost all have an APFO, and 90 percent have impact fees of some kind. Since 1999, Palm Beach County has operated under a tiering program that establishes an urban service area boundary, within which there are urban and suburban tiers and outside of which there are four other tiers. Two of these, exurban and rural, allow large lot residential development; the other two, agricultural and glades, are intended to protect resource lands and environmentally sensitive lands mostly in the western part of the county.² Permit caps are not used in Florida, and only one or two jurisdictions have imposed moratoria. Finally, about 35 percent of the jurisdictions with three quarters of the residents are estimated to use an incentive based affordable housing program of some kind.

² See: Planning, Zoning and Building Department "Managed Growth Tier System Objectives & Policies," Palm Beach County, undated. Available at <http://www.pbcgov.com/pzb/planning/mgplanning/overview.htm>.