

# Preparing for the next decade

By: Mike Clark | Florida Times Union  
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Thursday's Editorial: Florida must prepare for more growth by 2030.

The year 2030, slightly more than a decade from now, is just around the corner for the state of Florida.

Addressing challenges on a statewide level requires immediate action, an action plan.

That's what the Florida Chamber Foundation has done with its report titled "Florida: 2030."

The challenges at first glance appear overwhelming. Florida will be disrupted and transformed by 2030.

- The population will continue to grow with about 5 million new residents.
- Retiring boomers will come to Florida as their elders did. About 1 in 4 Floridians will be 65 or older.
- Non-ethnic Whites will become a minority by 2030. And nearly 1 in 5 Floridians will be foreign-born.
- People will pack the cities. Rural areas will account for 86 percent of Florida's land area but just 10 percent of its population.
- Florida has five of the top 25 fastest-growing metro areas: Fort Walton Beach, the Villages, Orlando, Cape Coral and Naples. In Northeast Florida, St. Johns County and Nocatee continue to rank among fast-growing areas.
- Millennials will take over as the dominant age group but they will be dealing with massive amounts of student loan debt, outpacing credit card and auto loan debt.

Are we ready for 2030? Floridians apparently don't know.

At 83 town hall meetings involving over 10,000 Floridians in all 67 counties, 87 percent of respondents said they were optimistic about Florida's future but most said their own communities weren't "positioned for global competitiveness, prosperity and vibrant and sustainable communities."

That's an odd answer since usually people are more optimistic closer to home. For instance, people-re-elect their member of Congress while disliking Congress as a whole.

So far as challenges, the most critical challenge identified by Floridians involves affordable housing. So let's throw up our arms in disgust, since Florida has long had an identified revenue stream to deal with it but the Legislature continues to seep much of it into the general fund.

The Sadowski Fund uses a portion of documentary stamp revenue paid at home sales for affordable housing. It's shared on a per capita basis in Florida counties. The structure of the fund is brilliant; as home sale values increase, so does the doc stamp revenue for affordable housing.

So it's no surprise that another weakness is "responsiveness of government."

So what's the key to Florida's future? It's simple. A well-trained and growing work force.

The economic battleground of the 21st century involves competition for talented workers. That starts with an outstanding K-12 public school system and continues through college.

Florida's university system has perhaps the best value in the nation with affordable tuition paired with quality institutions.

What happens if Florida's work force isn't prepared for the challenges of 2030?

“We would struggle to gain a foothold in emerging industries and our economy would miss out on next-generation opportunities and only remain focused on services and trade jobs,” according to the Chamber Foundation report.

That would create a vicious cycle in which demands increase but the ability to meet them would decline.

The Chamber report, as detailed as it is, needs to be paired with a report titled “Trouble in Paradise” by a coalition of Florida environmental groups.

The report calls for acquiring and protecting land to protect drinking water, fisheries and recreation.

The challenges posed by sea level rise and storm surge contain billion-dollar price tags. Just look at Hurricane Michael has done to the Panhandle.

The best way to deal with storm surge and sea level rise is by using wetlands, Mother Nature.

“A protected flood plan contains no property to be damaged and acts as a permanent safety valve for flooding, reducing destruction of developed areas downstream,” according to the report.

Resilience is the key. Prevention is cheaper than repair damage.

Florida’s precious underground water supply, the Floridan Aquifer, is going to be stressed as millions of new residents pack into coastal communities. The springs that need the Aquifer must be protected.

“Now more than ever, Florida needs strong, bold and decisive leaders,” the environmental report concludes.

“Leaders with vision and dedication. Leaders with the best interests of Florida at heart. Our quality of life and Florida’s very economy depends on it.”

Once Florida’s beauty is gone, we won’t know it anymore.

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