

Growth

This issue needs to be attacked on two fronts. In the video I highlight each, but below, I will delve a little deeper. Just to review for those who haven't watched the video, the two areas are: unregulated building within the county and the lack of schools being built within the school district. Before I continue, I know that I am running for school board and not county commissioner or state office and that this topic seems unconnected to my desired role. However, I would argue that these two are closely linked and that as an elected official, I believe it would be my responsibility to work collaboratively with local and state officials to see that these items are addressed. Furthermore, I believe that part of my responsibility as an educator is to make people aware of the interconnectedness of issues, especially when both items are on the ballot at the same time. One last note about this last topic- the school board is a nonpartisan race that its opened countywide (some of my opponents do not run their campaigns like this), while the county commissioner races are party affiliated and unless you are registered as a Republican, you will not get an opportunity to vote on that office this go around; unless you use the write in candidate in November. If this is confusing, please feel free to reach out to me at james4district1@gmail.com for more information.

I want to start with the county's overall growth because it truly is the root of many of the issues plaguing the district. Let me begin by saying, that we, I, want to attract more residents and corporations to this area. More tax revenue is great for the community. The diversity that comes with development is good for our community as well as for its schools. However, unregulated building, or more correctly, poorly planned development causes so many issues. And as I eluded, I believe it is the county's explosion in growth which has caused many of the problems within the school system. For the sake of time, I will list the effects now, but I will only be developing the first three for this entry; many of these other concerns are widely known, and I don't believe I should take up your valuable time rehashing old news: 1. Concentrated growth snarls traffic and increases demand on infrastructure; 2. County commissioners are incentivized to accept building permits, even if the market is saturated; 3. The State releases capital funding for schools based on actual "heads in beds" and not projections or preconstruction estimates; 4. There is a surplus of vacant homes, not new homes on the market; 5. Our area lacks affordable housing; and 6. Building permits are rising, but the number of companies insuring these homes is dwindling.

So let me go into a little more detail on these first 3 items. For anyone who lives near, or commutes through SR56 and SR54, you know too well what concentrated growth looks like. For any of you who has lived in the area for more than two decades, you might see similarities to this area's growth and that of Brandon, FL. Both were typical suburban/rural areas with sprawling patches of vacant land, cow pastures, etc. Now both are pretty much parking lots during rush hour traffic. SR54, between Little Road and US41 and SR 56, between I-75 and Morris Bridge, have seen the concentrated growth, which is crushing our commutes, our school district and overwhelming our emergency services. I want to focus on the concentration for a moment by providing an alternative past for a moment. Before I do, some quick facts. Wesley Chapel and the Lutz/Land O' Lakes areas are two of the fastest growing areas in our county; yes, Zephyrhills is showing tremendous growth, but 15 years ago it wasn't. Second fact, many of the schools within these areas are nearing capacity; in fact, Wiregrass Ranch High School had to go on double sessions at one point because schools weren't be built fast enough. Now for the alternative reality.... Imagine if the county had split the growth between SR 54 and SR52. What

if the Cypress Creek complex had been built first... with the homes on Old Pasco Road (currently adjacent to the school) and instead of mega communities along Sunlake or on Curley Road had been developed between Bellamy Blvd. and San Antonio? And in subsequent years, the building alternated between 54/56 and 52? I know hindsight is 20/20, but we had to know that focusing on the southern, central section of the county was going to create chaos. According to Vision 54-56, linked [here](#), “ It is forecasted that Pasco County’s population will grow by nearly 452,000 residents by 2040, with approximately 30% of this growth expected to occur within the corridor study area, an increase of nearly 135,000 residents. The population growth from 2010 to 2040 represents an increase of 98% for the county and 142% for the corridor (SR 54/56) study area.” So, the county has been telling us that this is where we are going to build, and this is what we expect to happen! One last point about concentrated growth, because we have been lax on the building infrastructure, we have an unending system of road closures, widening, etc. which bring their own impacts, but it is also responsible these issues: student-teacher ratio, class sizes, overcrowded schools, bus delays and understaffed schools, just to name a few that I won’t be fully addressing in this piece.

Secondly, county commissioners are rewarded for expanding the number of beds in our county; population increases help them earn more money. Increases in building permits, equates to more money in their pockets. With this election cycle, we are possibly electing new members who will want to benefit from this same incentive. So, we can expect a higher number of permits to be pushed, no matter the results; incumbents on their way out, will want one last score, while new members will want their own piece of the pot. It is a lose-lose proposition for the residents. Just ask the residents of Dade City who have at least 3 new developments being [jammed into their community](#) where infrastructure has not been laid. Those of you living in north, central Pasco, along 52 and 41, how long will the road expansion take to get right? Keep in mind the intersection at 56/54 and I-75 is still be fixed. And most of the corners there are already built up. What is going to happen when development starts hitting east of your intersection? When more traffic pours out of the Ridge Road expansion... another school opens it doors, or another mega community gets planned? Again, I will state, I am not anti-growth. But, when growth is concentrated, or specific commissioners continue to support growth in a specific area, this problem will not correct itself.

Third, permits and projected units have little to do with the building of new schools. The state of Florida has utilized a concordance where infrastructure and new building should be completed within 3 years of each other. In 2005, the Florida legislature passed a [concurrency](#) plan. Once again, infrastructure concurrency is on a 3 year cycle, whereas schools are on a five- or ten- year [cycle](#); “ The County will, in conjunction with the District School Board of Pasco County, develop and implement a process for concurrency review of residential development to determine if school facilities will be available, pursuant to the five (5) and ten (10) year planning periods, at the adopted Level of Service for students generated by new residential development.” However, two loopholes exist in this plan: 1. Schools are not considered infrastructure and 2. Schools construction is based on actual residents, not projections. So, the 1000 homesites projected for Dade City, which might have 800 school- aged children inhabiting them in 5 years, won’t have a new school to attend until the year the student enrolls in school. And I know I am stating the obvious, but if we are building the schools after the students arrive, we’ve waited too long! And we need to multiple this figure by the number of new builds happening in the county, not just in one area; recall that approximately 30 students equates to 1 new classroom teacher. My current high school has a faculty over 80 and a student population over 1700. So, for every 6

complexes being built, we need 1 new high school, 1 new middle school and possibly 2 new elementary schools! Have you driven down 56 between the mall and 301 lately? I have counted no fewer than 5 communities. Apart from Kirkland Ranch, which is not a local school because it is a magnet program that draws only a portion of its population from the surrounding area, there are no new schools being built to withstand that explosion that is going to happen. The ABC News link posted above states, "Pasco County Schools added more than 3,200 students, now at almost 82,000... The director of planning and the assistant superintendent for support services told ABC Action News that 4.2% is the highest growth they've seen in years." Conservative estimates from the early 2000s suggested that Pasco County would have an annual growth below 3%, with an estimated population of [635,684](#) in 2030. According to preliminary census data, Pasco eclipsed 561,000 in 2020 and neared [600,000](#) in 2022. Current forecasts suggest that we will hit the 2030 projection in 5 years, not 8!

So, issue number 2, which I have already begun to address is the lack of growth of our schools. In the past 5 years, Superintendent Browning has stated that he has set a goal that the district would open a new school every year for the next 10 years: in 2020, Cypress Creek, 2021 Starkey K-8, 2022 Kirkland Ranch, 2023- [School LL](#) (off of 52, in Angeline). So, the board has lived up to that promise thus far. But there is a caveat- Starkey K-8 is already [too small](#). And this is not a new issue. In an article from [2019](#), the Tampa Bay Times reported that many of our schools are over capacity. Wiregrass Ranch High School was on double sessions less than a decade after being built. Why? As I have already pointed out, the state's formula for new construction cycle at best every 5 years and more realistically ever 10. We must fix this! As I have also previously covered in this post, we are exceeding the projected population growth and 6 schools in the coming years will be inadequate. Expansions to Gulf High and Zephyrhills (already completed) will help relieve some of this, but the simple fact is we are building too slow. Before moving on to the next point, I would also like to point out that several of the candidates for school board have mentioned closing schools with lower attendance. What they are not discussing is that many of these are in areas that will be impacted by proposed growth and/or redistricting. Most notably, Lacoochee Elementary with an enrollment of around 300 students. However, in the most recent school grades report, it ranked in top 1/3 of all of the county's elementary schools, earning 373 points. This is another piece of evidence for smaller class sizes and community-based schools (a topic of a later post).

Finally, new schools are not being built to relief the issues at our current schools. Yes, overcrowding is an issue. But as I addressed in a previous post, in many cases students are not being exposed to the curriculum that will better prepare them for the future. In that post, I mentioned programs like the Auto Service program being moved from Zephyrhills to Wiregrass and the Cosmetology class being moved from Pasco High to Kirkland Ranch. It is not that these other schools won't benefit from them at their schools, it is that you are moving programs away from the areas where these students would most benefit. As I mentioned in the Busing post, many of the families impacted by the cuts, have limited involvement at these schools outside of their transportation availability. What we are asking now, is that these same families send their children even further away, to schools in many cases that make it even more impossible to participate in extra-curricular activities. Another thing to consider is that the district is building magnet hubs and state of the art centers in locations where the building boom already happened. With the exception of the Cypress Creek complex, many of these schools are built as a reaction to overcrowding and are drawing from areas outside of their neighborhood (again an argument I will be posting about at a later time). And as previously pointed out, some, like Wiregrass Ranch,

open at capacity with no way to expand with the growth that is already happening. For example, Fivay is located in area of West Pasco that hasn't seen huge growth. In contrast, Mitchell High, built to relieve overcrowding at Gulf and River Ridge is busting at the seams, and more building is occurring at its doorstep.

And this is an easy piece to write because most of us are aware that building new schools is an issue. What is difficult, is to identify solutions and I hope that these suggestions will get us moving in the right direction. First, we must end the loophole that allows monies and planning for new schools to lag behind actual construction. It seems odd to me that builders and real estate personnel would not support this idea. To me, it makes sense that a state of the art, brand new, community- inclusive concept school would be a selling point. If I were to move into an area and I saw that a majority of the schools my child would be attending are overcrowded, with student-teacher ratios closer to 25-1 than 18-1, I would keep looking. Developers know the number of home sites. They know projected clientele for which a housing development is geared. Why should we not add the schools to the mix? Secondly, we need to be building where the development is going to occur. For example, Pasco High School serves roughly, everything from 1-75 and 52 east to the county line and north to the other county line. Have you looked at the amount of land that is available there? Not to mention, PHS is already over 1700 students, it has little room to take in the numbers projected to be built in the communities identified earlier. In West Pasco, Fivay High School serves an equally large population and there is a large development planned that would increase its enrollment. And we still have yet to address the massive communities across from Mitchell and Sunlake. There are no other high schools being built, or planned, in these areas. There is in a 6-12 school being built between near 41, which will ease overcrowding at both Fivay and Land o' Lakes, but it isn't slated to open for another year; it also may not big enough to accommodate the growth that is coming to the Ridge Road extension. This brings me to solution number three- we must become intentional, not reactionary (also a topic being addressed in later posts). Every study that explores the growth of Pasco County has identified south central Pasco as the location of most growth. And this has been the indication for many years, yet it hasn't been until recent, that we have built new secondary schools in this area. And once again, Sunlake, Wiregrass Ranch, Cypress Creek (which is out of this zone- geographically) were built in the last 15 years. And at the same time, schools like Gulf High, Zephyrhills and to some extent Pasco High were not updated, making expansion impossible. We must incentivize the building of new schools like we incentivize commissioners to accept building permits. This requires that the school board work with the county commissioners and local groups to plan this growth strategically. Partnerships must be strengthened and formed to make sure that we are all moving in the same direction.

Finally, I cannot end this piece without addressing another issue related to the growth of this county and district- affordable housing. In my last post, I talked about teacher recruitment and retention. Neither of these are possible if employees cannot find suitable housing. And this doesn't even take into consideration access to affordable housing for our families. According to [US News](#), nearly 30% of families in Pasco County spend over 30% of their income on housing; that's nearly 7% above the state average. Additionally, a worker must work over 54 hours a week to get "affordable housing, which is nearly 14 more hours above the national average. And as we have mentioned, Pasco County employees have amongst the lowest earnings of any districts in are immediate area. So, we are trying to recruit faculty and staff into an area where homes are out of reach and that would require this same staff to live in areas that cause them to fight the

congestion that is being caused by the poor planning addressed in this piece. More needs to be done in this area. And I am saddened that I have not spent enough time talking about this issue. In conclusion, the hyperfocus on south central Pasco's growth and the lack of intentional planning, or to be honest the abundance of reactionary planning, has led to the issues of overcrowded schools, teacher shortages, student-teacher ratios that exceed the state's recommendations

As always, this is just my take on an issue that effects our schools. I encourage you to comment and /or reach out to me for more discussion. I hope that I can earn your support and that you will remember to vote on August 23rd. I will be again in the coming days on my next topic- Recent Legislation and their impact on schools.