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Mapping the future

OUR OPINION: Region's leaders ignore path to a sustainable South Florida at our peril

By Miami Herald Editorial
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In the next 50 years some 3 million people will move to Southeast Florida, joining the 6 million already here. So what will the region look like in 2060?

Will there be a 24/7 traffic jam on I-95? Will coastal cities see a big decline in tourism because their beaches disappeared under water from the rising sea level? Will one of the region's economic drivers — agriculture — shrink as open land is converted to more suburbs to accommodate population growth?

Not if a forward-thinking consortium of public officials, urban planners and civic and business leaders called Seven/50 has anything to say about it. The consortium started asking the relevant questions three years ago to determine how best to guide the region's growth through 2060.

Seven/50 stands for seven counties — Monroe, Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach, Martin, Indian River and St. Lucie — making up a super region. Guided by the South Florida and Treasure Coast regional planning councils and with a $3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the group developed an intriguing blueprint to shape the region's future, moving it toward economic prosperity while maintaining residents' quality of life.

The blueprint (at www.seven50report.org) pushes for coordination among leaders in the seven counties to build more mass-transit corridors, redevelop livable in-fill communities around urban transit hubs that encourage walking and cycling and improving high-tech infrastructure networks to lure growth of healthcare, biomedical and other industries. And the blueprint tackles the threat of rising sea levels from climate change head-on, calling for more-specific mapping of potential inundation of coastal cities to help them prepare by expanding beaches, building higher seawalls, developing up instead of out and designing engineering projects to keep seawater out of sewage systems and drinking-water supplies.

The blueprint is big on regional cooperation instead of competition between counties.

Using Tri-Rail as an example, the plan would use the FEC rail line to create a commuter service along the coast. There is also an agreement with Florida East Coast Industries, which owns the FEC tracks between Miami and Jacksonville, to explore installing an upgrade of the region's fiber-optic network along the rail right-of-way to attract those high-tech businesses.

This cooperation would include creating a regional business coalition to promote the region, much like the Beacon Council now promotes Miami-Dade, and expand the regional economy beyond its three powerhouses: tourism, real-estate development and agriculture. Such a coalition could bring new lobbying clout in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C., for this region. Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach formed just such a network last year — there is more strength in numbers, after all. The three counties represent some 5 million voters. Imagine the increased lobbying power if the whole region joined forces.

With that in mind, it's a shame that the Indian River and St. Lucie county commissions opted out of the Seven/50 plan at the noisy behest of tea-party activists who think it is a federal conspiracy to take over local control. Fortunately, cities and school boards in the two counties are still on board with the Seven/50 blueprint, which offers a great vision for the region's future. Now comes the hard part, of course, making the vision a reality.