

Gardens debate: Will 'Seven50' effort smarten urban growth or cut local control?

by Tony Doris
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PALM BEACH GARDENS — Seven50 is billed by regional planners as an initiative to help seven Southeast Florida counties work from a common baseline of knowledge and values in girding for climate change and population growth of the next 50 years.

But others see it not as a thoughtful and voluntary approach for cities and towns but a troubling step toward a regional takeover of local decision-making.

A debate Tuesday sponsored by the PGA Corridor Association gave both sides a chance to spar and either shatter conspiracy theories or stand up for private property rights, depending on one's stance. James Burling, the nonprofit Pacific Legal Foundation's director of litigation, faced off against Richard Grosso, a professor of land use, environmental and Florida constitutional law at Nova Southeastern University.

"It's about a region that looks at itself and says, 'we are a region'" and not unconnected governments, Grosso said. Seven50 attempts to decompartmentalize local decisions by sharing knowledge, analyzing information and coming up with "a shared set of facts" and broad objectives to deal with a rising sea level, traffic, a stressed drinking water supply and other impacts of population growth squeezing onto a finite peninsula, he said.

But Burling noted that the program began with grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The voluntary initiative only will lead to putting local growth management decisions “in the hands of regional bureaucrats,” he said.

He objected to its goal of increasing urban densities — “stack and pack,” he called the approach — while restricting suburban backyard lifestyles. The Seven50 recommendations would lead to “walkable communities I’d rather walk away from than live in,” he said.

Burling said his concerns about government overreach were not a conspiracy theory but a fear of “misguided planners” and based on similar issues that arose in his home state, California. In response to a Grosso comment that the plan isn’t weird, new or Utopian, he derided Seven50 literature that said walkable communities would result in less obesity.

“They talk about ‘the creative class’” that the Seven50 recommendations will help flourish, Burling said. “That’s wonderful — I want to have jugglers and creative people all around me but I’m skeptical,” he said, drawing laughs from some of the approximately 200 business people and community leaders in the audience.

“It’s not the 50’s, it’s not the post-war era,” Grosso countered. Crowding and climate change create economic, scientific and social realities that will require more densely built urban areas and restricting sprawl to spare natural resources, he said.

“These are realities,” Grosso said. “We can’t pretend that when we run out of half-acre properties, we’ll just make some more.”