

Pearl River County Comprehensive Plan

Executive Summary

Introduction

Pearl River County – one of the fastest growing counties in Mississippi – is at a critical stage of its history. With a rural landscape providing a quality of life and abundant natural resources, its residents are committed to maintaining the character and sense of place that have made this County home to generations and newcomers hoping to benefit from the amenities of country life and small town living.

Even prior to Hurricane Katrina, the County was experiencing rapid development, spurred by inexpensive land, high quality of life, and proximity to major employment centers such as New Orleans, Gulfport and Biloxi. Located adjacent to the communities hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina, Pearl River County has also had a surge in population as Gulf Coast residents relocate. Since Hurricane Katrina, growth rates have increased dramatically, with a 30.5-percent increase in population projected from 2005 to 2010.

Critical land use decisions and development in the near future will shape the visual, physical, economic, and environmental character of the County for decades. This Comprehensive Plan will provide policy and planning guidance on the future physical development of the County, and address a wide range of issues including but not limited to land use, transportation, water and wastewater utilities, economic development, and capital improvements.

Housing

As Pearl River County plans for the future, it is essential to provide and encourage access to safe, quality, affordable housing and to absorb the growing residential population of Pearl River County in a manner that maintains the natural, cultural, and economic resources of the County.

Housing Goal 1: Residents of Pearl River County will maintain the freedom to build homes for themselves and their family.

Implementation Activities

- Develop land use regulations that maintain the rural nature of agricultural and timber lands while allowing the traditional homesteading of those rural lands.
- The County should continue its current practice of granting of building permits and the application of the building code in order to ensure that minimum safety requirements are being met in the permitting and construction of new housing.

Housing Goal 2: Housing development in Pearl River County will be in keeping with and enhance the local rural, small-town character.

Implementation Activities

- Encourage developers to build developments in the conservation subdivision style.
- Consider land use regulations to maintain rural style development and allow small communities to grow in an orderly method.

Housing Goal 3: Pearl River County will have affordable housing choices for residents of all ages and income levels.

Implementation Activities

- Partnerships with both for-profit and non-profit developers provide possible options for meeting future housing development needs.

Housing Goal 4: Housing development will be planned in concert with facilities

and infrastructure planning in order to meet basic services.

Implementation Activities

- Housing development should be focused into communities where public services and amenities are provided in order to focus county resources and conserve the rural lands.

Housing Goal 5: Pearl River County will promote development of residential neighborhoods that offer an inclusive mix of options for housing and transportation preferences.

Implementation Activities

- Encourage developers to build developments in the conservation subdivision style.
- Develop a land use system that maintains the rural nature of agricultural and timber lands while allowing the traditional homesteading of those rural lands.
- Focus the more densely planned housing development into communities where there are appropriate or significant public services and amenities.

To accomplish the above goals, the County should develop and consider adopting land use controls to maintain the rural nature of agricultural and timber lands while allowing the traditional homesteading of those rural lands. Such a system can also force or encourage denser housing developments to be focused into communities where public services and amenities are provided in order to focus county resources and conserve the rural lands.

Transportation

Transportation is a key component of planning for growth in Pearl River County. Transportation systems both accommodate and encourage development, and thereby can help guide development and activity patterns in a way to most effectively meet community needs, while also

conserving the County’s sense of place. The establishment of community-wide goals will allow the County to optimize the use of available resources to effectively meet the needs and wishes of its constituency. The Pearl River County Strategic Plan identifies both short-term and long-term goals to improve the transportation network and increase the quality of life within the County. The transportation goals and their prescribed action items within the Strategic Plan are:

Transportation Goal 1: Improve roads and road maintenance as identified.

Implementation Activities

- Educate the public on the need for better roads.
- Promote a funding mechanism for regular maintenance.
- Encourage cooperative efforts to improve road maintenance that address the needs within the County, not necessarily within supervisor districts.
- Work with the Mississippi Department of Transportation Southern District Commissioner to enhance funding for new projects and maintenance projects.

Transportation Goal 2: Adequate transportation for Pearl River County residents in need of supportive services for transportation to places of employment and to medical services.

Implementation Activities

- Survey other groups who have attempted to do this, especially for those needing access to jobs and health services.
- Approach ministers and groups about possible participation in meeting this goal.
- Investigate financial and legal aspects of such services.

- Solicit donations from private enterprise in the form of funds or vehicles.

Transportation Goal 3: Create a safe and efficient transportation network that addresses congested conditions and minimizes the potential for accidents.

Implementation Activities

- Give priority consideration to those projects which would alleviate existing safety concerns.
- Explore transportation system management (TSM) strategies which serve to enhance the efficiency and safety of the transportation network in order to lessen congestion and improve air quality of the region.
- Investigate transportation demand management (TDM) strategies which are designed to alter travel behavior in order to minimize congestion and provide viable and convenient transportation alternatives to driving alone, especially as the population begins to age.

Community Image

Lake Troy/Millard Development

The rapid pace of land development in Pearl River County in recent years presents both opportunities and challenges to the future of the County. Development brings with it welcome economic growth, but if allowed to expand unregulated can result in the endangerment or even the loss of the very features that make Pearl River County so desirable a place to live: the pine forests, rolling hills, and branching streams that define the area's geography. The conceptual plan for the development of a new community in Millard on the proposed Lake Troy seeks to balance the financial imperatives of successful real-estate development with the responsibilities of environmental stewardship in a sustainable manner.

At Lake Troy, the integration of resource management with strategies to maximize land value and quality of life is a driving factor behind the master plan. In the design of the new Lake Troy community, the elements of the constructed

“natural” environment – in the form of maintained wetlands, conservation zones, recreational trails, drainage swales, and Lake Troy itself – are carefully woven together to create a vibrant, viable community that takes full advantage of its unique setting to create a special place for residents and visitors.

Community Image Goal 1: Design a new community that maintains the balance of Pearl River County's natural environment.

Implementation Activities

- Provide for multiple neighborhoods of different size lots with natural areas between and within the neighborhoods.
- Establish a Wetland Conservation Zone within the lake's projected 100-year flood level to promote the health of the lake.
- Use drainage swales (instead of deep ditches) to direct stormwater away from developed areas into wetlands and the lake.
- Have drainage swales form natural “fingers” of green space that intersect with the developed areas, creating additional scenic views and recreational areas.
- Create an extensive network of pedestrian and bike-only trails through the community's conservation zones. These alternate transportation and recreation paths should be semi-paved with bark, mulch, and boardwalk, and connect neighborhood lots to one another.
- It is suggested that an equestrian park and trails be established in the dam breach area, keeping the area mostly in a forested state. Permanent structures here are highly restricted due to safety concerns in the unlikely event of a dam breach, which makes a passive recreational activity such as horseback riding as ideal use.

Community Image Goal 2: Design Lake Troy community for the enjoyment of more than just the waterfront property owners.

Implementation Activities

- Design the neighborhoods to allow a view of the lake from homes that are not on the shoreline.
- Have drainage swales form natural “fingers” of green space that intersect with the developed areas, creating additional scenic views and recreational areas.
- Provide two public beaches along the western side of Lake Troy.
- Offer boating opportunities on the lake with a public boat launch. The ability to have both motorized and non-motorized vessels in the different areas of the lake will allow recreational opportunities for a variety of lifestyles.
- The Dam Breach Zone should be used as a semi-private Equestrian Park to maximize the available recreational space.

Economic Development

Economic prosperity is a healthy and expanding business community, offering quality employment opportunities and generous wages and benefits, and paying local taxes to support an improving infrastructure, and without lowering the sense of place or quality of life of all citizens of the county. To improve the economic prosperity of the county, the community and its leaders should consider goals that encourage and seek coordination and cooperation between the County, Cities, local and regional organizations, and private sector. To help facilitate this coordination, the following goals and policies provide a guiding framework for the County to align with the efforts of local agencies and businesses as well as surrounding counties:

Economic Goal 1: Create an economic development culture that encourages inclusivity, multi-scale collaboration, and outreach to other entities in the region and the state.

Implementation Activities

- Develop programs that will include all organizations in the county, including public, private and social interest groups.
- Partner with local businesses, industry groups, and neighboring counties in cooperative marketing programs.
- Maintain involvement with state and regional groups to keep abreast of programs, sources of funding, and opportunities to working together to promote the county and the region.
- Identify regional collaboration opportunities with the MS Gulf Coast Alliance, Mississippi South, Inc., and Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District.
- Coordinate with the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) 2007-2012 for joint funding/financing of economic development projects with regional scope.

Economic Goal 2: Promote a network of services that will support the growth and prosperity of Pearl River County’s existing business sector and will attract both entrepreneurs and successful established companies from outside the county.

Implementation Activities

- Develop industrial, technology and business parks in the region.
- Promote quality of life as an amenity to potential workers and business owners.

- Support a strong retail and service sector that will foster downtown, commercial and tourism development.
- Coordinate financial assistance programs and support systems for small business.
- Support local businesses by offering advantages in competitive public contracts for goods and services.
- Partner with the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to publicize and celebrate the opening of new businesses in the county.

Economic Goal 3: Develop the physical infrastructure required to support the growth and vitality of the region's economy.

Implementation Activities

- Improve water, wastewater systems, roads, and road maintenance to accommodate growth.
- Encourage the expansion of broadband communications to all areas in the county.
- Encourage the development of affordable workforce housing.

Economic Goal 4: Develop and support an effective workforce program that will increase workforce job skills and wages to attract employers to the county.

Implementation Activities

- Partner with Pearl River Community College to help design and deliver an effective workforce development program.
- Seek input from the business community on workforce training needs.
- Create a method for providing information about and access to short-term training available in the county.

- Develop a workforce task force to analyze workforce needs and organize workforce development activities.

Economic Goal 5: Expand the community services and amenities that can enhance quality of life and preserve community values in order to attract and retain business investment.

Implementation Activities

- Partner with local and regional community services organizations to identify collaborative opportunities to design new community services and amenities offerings.
- Form a working group of leaders from the local business community who are willing to focus on economic development from a strategic perspective of quality of life and community values.
- Identify the key indicators of current and future quality of life in Pearl River County so that benchmarks can be promoted and progress can be measured.

To achieve the goals above, it is recommended that the County implement the following next steps:

Dedicated staff time – Select and train a full time staff member focused on local program management and regional/ state coordination. This is key to ensuring the consistency of resources and effort needed for success.

Economic Development Task Force – Promote an Economic Development Task Force comprised of business leaders across key business sectors. The Task Force will add diverse perspectives and strategic experiences that can effectively guide staff efforts and provide wise counsel to the Board of Supervisors.

Once the staff resource and Task Force are in place, it is recommended that the Board of Supervisors develop an annual work plan with quarterly milestones. The staff member will be responsible

for execution of work plan tasks and reporting to the Task Force and Board of Supervisors.

Land Use

Existing Land Use

Critical land use decisions and development in the near future will shape the visual, physical, economic, and environmental character of the County for decades. The land use component of this plan aims to help the County adapt to current and projected growth rates and to guide the next twenty to twenty-five years of growth. Strategically allocating resources and coordinating new development will enhance the economic, natural and cultural resources of Pearl River County.

This plan is a living document that will continue to evolve and will depend on community input as Pearl River County moves forward with responsible growth management.

Pearl River County's approximate 810 square miles are characterized by different types of land uses. The majority of the County is covered by forest or used for agricultural purposes, totaling more than 87 percent of the land area.

More than a quarter of the County's residents (or 13,136 individuals) are found in its two cities: Picayune and Poplarville. The high density residential areas, those regions with more than one unit per acre are found in Picayune, Carrier, Poplarville, Nicholson and the Southeast. The Northeast, Steep hollow, and Pine Grove neighborhoods are characterized as low-density. Low-density residential zones are areas with less than one unit per acre. Rural residents, living in areas with less than 10 contiguous single-family residential lots, are found throughout the County. However, Amackertown, Crossroads and the other northwestern areas of the county are nearly exclusively rural in their residential character, whereas the southcentral region of the county is much more heavily populated. Housing developments of all types account for nearly 8.5 percent of the total land area.

The land devoted to recreational open space or parks is a relatively small amount (0.12 percent of total land acreage) and is found almost exclusively within the city limits of Picayune and Poplarville. The Pearl River, Wolf River, Hobolochitto Creek, as well as the lakes, rivers and tributaries that dot the county, make up less than 1 percent of the county's total area.

Pearl River County's infrastructure is 0.70 percent of the total acreage. The commercial, industrial and institutional areas, which include any non-residential development, make up just over 1 percent of the county's total land area.

Pearl River County is extensively undeveloped. Nearly three-quarters of the county is open space, forest land or part of the waterway system. In fact, there is more land devoted to agriculture alone than to all types of residential neighborhoods and support services (roadways, schools, retail establishments, workplaces, etc.). The county's open space and sparse development is the foundation for the area's rural character.

Growth

The majority of development has occurred within and around the two cities of Picayune and Poplarville. Just seven communities, including the cities, Nicholson, Salem, Caesar, McNeill and Whitesand, contain more than a third of the County's development projects.

The substantial growth in population forecast for the next twenty years is linked to substantial development of the land in Pearl River County. It is estimated that by 2025 almost 30,000 acres will be developed to accommodate this growth.

As the population of Pearl River County grows, residential development will account for the majority of new land development in the next 20 years. By 2025 it is predicted that almost 22,000 acres of land that are now undeveloped will be used for new housing. This new development constitutes an approximately 50% increase in the housing stock of the county and will lead to the creation of new neighborhoods and residential

communities. This is a sizeable change that will have a major impact on the land use and natural resources of the county.

The amount of land devoted to commercial and industrial development in Pearl River County is expected to more than double within the next 20 years. A substantial portion of the projected development is anticipated to occur in office and industrial parks that are linked to the County's economic development planning efforts.

Land Use Goal 1: Promote new development along the transportation corridors that are best suited to sustain growth.

Implementation Activities

- Focus development towards the Highway 11, Interstate 59 and Highway 43 corridors.
- Coordinate the timing of future development with the improvement of east-west transportation routes for the communities of Millard, Anchor Lake and McNeill.

Land Use Goal 2: Maintain the character and visual integrity of the County.

Implementation Activities

- Promote a land use system that maintains the County's rural and small-town character.
- Consider a form-based land development code instead of a traditional zoning code to offer more owner flexibility and maintain a balance between the rural and small-town characteristics of the County.
- Promote Walkability Zones in or near existing areas of development and in new planned downtowns.

Land Use Goal 3: Conserve natural resources.

Implementation Activities

- Establish conservation zones to protect the Pearl River, Wolf River and Hoblochitto Creek and the wetlands that form part of these watersheds.
- Consider a form-based development code that integrates environmental conservation instead of a traditional zoning code.
- Encourage the use of sustainable building design and low impact development.

Land Use Goal 4: Avoid overregulation of land uses.

Implementation Activities

- Consider a form-based land development code instead of a traditional zoning code to avoid sprawl and maintain the traditional rural and small town character of the County.