

EDITORIAL: Bad growth rush? Not yet

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Floridians should thank Tom Pelham for trying to save growth management.

Mr. Pelham is secretary of the Department of Community Affairs, the state's land-planning agency. On Friday, he held an Internet forum for more than 1,100 parties and discussed his interpretation of Senate Bill 360, which abolished the two key portions of the Growth Management Act that the Legislature passed in 1985. To developers hoping to cash in quickly on bad projects, Mr. Pelham said, in essence, "Not so fast."

Supporters believe that the new law automatically eliminates traffic concurrency, which requires adequate roads to be in place concurrent with development. According to Mr. Pelham, however, the law allows local governments to keep concurrency. In fact, he said, concurrency can't go away unless local governments change their growth plans, which takes at least six months and can drag out for years.

To spur redevelopment, the law took aim at the biggest counties and densest cities. But Mr. Pelham clarified that it doesn't affect every city in a qualifying county. Cities with fewer than 5,000 residents don't qualify. That eliminates half of Palm Beach County's 38 municipalities, including the oceanfront trailer park town of Briny Breezes. Among the remaining 19, only Palm Beach Gardens doesn't appear to meet the density requirement. On the Treasure Coast, Stuart, Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie qualify. While eight counties and 200 of Florida's roughly 450 cities are expected to be eligible, an official list won't be published until July.

But in Mr. Pelham's view, the new law could have little or no effect on even the eligible cities. Revised transportation plans due in two years can be built around concurrency. That pleases Palm Beach County officials who worried that, without the law's leverage, developers no longer would have to pay for roads.

Despite Mr. Pelham's narrow reading, the bill remains bad for Florida. Without a state backup, developers can spend heavily to lobby local politicians to get what they want. A real-life example: When Palm Beach County commissioners had a chance to draft realistic standards for undeveloped citrus groves, they caved and allowed suburban sprawl. State oversight stopped them. Three commissioners who supported that plan - Tony Masilotti, Warren Newell and Mary McCarty - are in prison on corruption charges.

If some cities cave and others resist, the bill will result in chaos. Cities opposed to the ambitious growth plans of a neighbor would have no way to avoid traffic gridlock. For developers, it could mean different standards in every city.

Mr. Pelham could have imposed SB 360 on local governments. Instead, he gave local politicians a chance to draft meaningful growth controls. That will mean meeting the Legislature's goal of steering growth into dense areas and ending suburban sprawl. If local governments blow this chance, SB 360 will deliver just the opposite.