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Developers see fields of green in I-4 Urban Service Boundary areas

Planners taking a year to study issue

Tampa Bay Business Journal - by [Michael Hinman](#) Staff Writer

TAMPA -- A 13-mile stretch of Interstate 4 is nearly a perfect picture of rural living. There are acres of land serving single houses, a high school known for athletic prowess and strawberry fields forever.

But this isn't the middle of nowhere. Instead, it's a strategic section of highway between Mango Road and the Polk County line that some land developers believe is heavily underutilized.

Maury L. Carter & Associates owns roughly 96 acres along the south side of I-4 just west of McIntosh Road with a desire to someday develop it for commercial uses that could include distribution centers. Much of the land, however, is outside a zone established by the Hillsborough County Commission for urban development, and that government body has been hesitant to let anything develop in designated rural areas despite the massive growth within Plant City corporate limits as well as neighboring Polk County.

The currently established urban service area "has been outdated for many years," said Vin Marchetti, a land use attorney with **Foley & Lardner LP** that represents Maury L. Carter.

"The jurisdictions around us all recognized that already, and they have plans in place," Marchetti said. "I just think the county's lost many years and many opportunities at this point to place employers within the county on I-4."

Time for a change?

The idea behind urban service areas in the early 1990s was to help the government establish areas that necessary infrastructure like roads, water and sewer would be needed while at the same time still making room for rural life outside of areas like Plant City, said Ray Chiaramonte, interim executive director of the **Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization**.

"It's a tool to help the county not only put in infrastructure but to also provide a long-term vision of where we want to grow," Chiaramonte said. "There is a gap in the urban service area between Plant City and Tampa that so far has remained rural."

How long it could remain rural is up in the air.

After Marchetti questioned the continued viability of the current urban area boundaries earlier this year on behalf of client Carter, the county commission asked for a yearlong study to determine what changes, if any, were needed to the boundaries. Changes that could allow Carter to finally start

developing its land.

"Without urban service areas, we would be running all over the place every time some property owner would want to get some higher density somewhere with no plan," Chiaramonte said. "But establishing these areas, we're saying this is where we want growth, and if you build here, we're going to help you and hopefully get you the services you need."

The study is being conducted by both the Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission and Hillsborough County's Planning and Growth Management Department. It's too early to tell if there will be any recommendations that result. Both departments are expected to present results to the county commission next March.

But getting help in the urban service areas is not as easy as it sounds.

While commissioners in the past has been stubborn about protecting rural service areas from commercial intrusion, they've also made it difficult to build on designated urban lands, said some commercial real estate practitioners. Some have stumbled through the rezoning process.

"The government said to the community that they're going to put in some infrastructure and create this urban service area, and inside it, they'll strive to concentrate development where they already have infrastructure and keep everything outside of the rural areas," said Bill Eshenbaugh, president of the **Eshenbaugh Land Co.** "They certainly kept half that promise. They don't give us anything outside the urban service area, but it's hard to get anything inside of it either."

Isolationist theory

The I-4 corridor is a key location for a number of distribution companies as it connects both Interstate 95 on the east side of Florida and Interstate 75 in Tampa. Distribution centers line I-4 on the west of Mango Road, most visibly the **Rooms To Go** center inside the Plant City limits, and across the Polk County line.

CSX Corp. has been working to build a massive distribution hub within a short driving distance from I-4 in Winter Haven.

"When I drive out on I-4 past Plant City, I know when I'm in Polk County because I can see industrial buildings on both sides of the road," Eshenbaugh said.

Hillsborough County has long depended on commuter traffic from other counties to help maintain its economic base as a metropolitan center, but rising fuel costs and other considerations could end up isolating Hillsborough if something isn't done, he said.

"I think you're going to see employment centers start to develop up and down I-75 in Pasco and Hernando counties," Eshenbaugh said. "Prices are lower in Hernando, and there are some reasons to go out there like higher unemployment. Numbers like that might be bad news today but good news if you're going to bring jobs to the market."

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