



Prepared by 1000 Friends of Florida
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Background

In 2016, smart growth advocacy group 1000 Friends of Florida released the Florida 2070 project. This project established a baseline for land use in Florida, then projected what the state would look like in the year 2070 based on growth trends. In 2023, Sea Level 2040/2070 was developed as part of 2023's *Florida's Rising Seas: Mapping Our Future*. This effort is a GIS-based analysis focusing on the intersection between population growth, development patterns, and sea level rise in Florida. The 2040 and 2070 studies each include a baseline and two future scenarios. The Sprawl Scenario for each assumes that current patterns of development continue, and all high priority but currently unprotected natural lands are open for development. The Conservation Scenarios assume that priority natural lands will not be developed, and that future development will be more compact.

Based on data provided by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida, the population of Levy County is expected to increase by almost 20 percent between now and 2040. By 2070, the county's population is expected to increase by an additional 22 percent to around 60,000 people (Table 1). Under the current development scenario, that could lead to an increase of just over 11,000 acres of additional developed land over the next 15 years. Sea level rise is expected to result in inundation of almost 50,000 acres or 6.83% of the total land area of the county, with most of the inundation occurring in areas that are already protected through public ownership or conservation easements.

This could result in a significant change in Levy County's landscape over the next few decades. However, the studies demonstrate that with certain planning tools in place, there is a potential for Levy County to ensure long-term preservation of environmentally sensitive and agricultural producing lands which could otherwise be susceptible to sprawl over the long term, if not appropriately protected.

Levy County at a Glance

As of the 2020 Census, Levy County's population was 42,915. The median age was 47 years, slightly higher than the state average of 43.

Economics

The median household income in Levy County in 2020 was \$49,933 whereas the median household income in FL was \$73,311.

The employment rate in Levy County in 2022 was 48.3% compared with about 52% throughout the state.

Education

Despite having 19 universities within fifty miles, Levy County residents are less likely to hold a bachelor's degree than in other areas of the state -- just 16% compared to 35% statewide.

Housing

Almost 80% of Levy County residents own their homes compared with an average of 68% in other counties across the state.

As recorded in the 2020 Census, there were over 20,000 housing units and more than 17,000 of those were occupied, predominantly by married couples and families.

Diversity

Levy County is predominantly white, with roughly 23% of the population being minority population (African American or Hispanic).

Leading Economic Sectors

Retail and construction are the leading employment types for Levy residents and the majority of the workforce commutes

Table 1. Population Projections 2040 and 2070

	2019 Population Baseline	BEBR (2023) Population Projection	Total Population Change	Percent Population Change
2040	21,569	21,500	-69	<1%
2070	21,569	28,800	7,231	33.5%

Opportunities to Protect Rural Areas

According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, Levy County increased the amount of land in agricultural production by 6% between 2017 and 2022, which increased the market value of agricultural goods about 18%, but overall farm income decreased. Most farms in the county are less than 50 acres in size, which might present a challenge when considering the potential for protecting large swaths of land unless multiple tracts are combined or there is coordination between owners.

In 2019, approximately 155,435 acres, or 21% of the county's land, was said to be in agricultural production other than timber and 471,978 acres, or 65%, were natural areas or timber. However,

the majority of agricultural and natural lands in Levy County are not protected through conservation easements or fee-simple holdings, meaning they are susceptible to potential development if they are no longer farmed or acquired for protection.

Unlike many communities in Florida where development pressure is decimating natural areas at a rapid pace, Levy County has a unique opportunity to plan for growth within, and adjacent to, its existing urban areas, allowing natural and agricultural areas to remain rural. This approach to growth management not only protects agriculture; it has the potential to protect the historic and urban significance of areas such as Williston and Chiefland, reduce commuting time, decrease emergency response time and is less expensive to build and maintain.

If natural and agricultural lands are paved rather than protected, the wide range of valuable environmental and economic benefits they provide will be lost. These benefits, known as ecosystem services, include recharging the underground water supply, reducing nutrient pollution in surface waters from stormwater runoff, mitigating flooding by absorbing stormwater, preserving wildlife habitat, enhancing biodiversity, and sequestering carbon. Beyond the environmental benefits, protecting undeveloped land also provides economic benefits, sustaining agriculture and its economic and lifestyle benefits, and expanding outdoor recreational opportunities for residents and tourists alike.

Forested lands, whether natural or for silviculture, are especially valuable for their benefits to water quality and quantity. They naturally purify water and gradually release it into waterways and the atmosphere. They also reduce erosion and sediment in waterways. Losing forested land means losing those benefits.

Based on project analysis, the mid-term planning horizon (2040) does not result in significant amounts of land being lost to development. Instead, the analysis shows that prioritizing infill and utilizing land protection tools such as fee simple acquisition and conservation easements could result in an increase of 126,330 acres of natural land and 33,289 acres of agricultural land being protected. When combined with currently protected lands, this represents just under half the county's total land (Table 2).

Table 2. Land Types 2040

	2019	% of Total Acreage	Trend 2040	% of Total Acreage	Alternative 2040	% of Total Acreage
Developed	87,053	11.95%	98,398	13.50%	95,258	13.07%
Protected Natural Land	174,407	23.93%	133,486	18.32%	300,737	41.27%
Protected Agriculture	1,280	0.18%	1,280	0.18%	34,569	4.74%
Agriculture	154,155	21.15%	146,838	20.15%	115,324	15.83%
Other*	297,571	40.83%	284,663	39.06%	118,778	16.30%
2019 Open Water	14,279	1.96%	14,279	1.96%	14,279	1.96%
Sea Level Inundation: Protected Lands	0	0.00%	40,922	5.62%	49,055	6.73%
Sea Level Inundation: All Other Land Uses	0	0.00%	8,879	1.22%	745	0.10%
Total Acreage	728,745	100.00%	728,745	100.00%	728,745	100.00%
Total Land Acreage	714,466	98.04%	664,665	91.21%	664,666	91.21%
Total Open Water including SLR	14,279	1.96%	64,080	8.79%	64,079	8.79%
Total Sea Level Inundation	0	0.00%	49,801	6.83%	49,800	6.83%

Table 3. Development Densities

2019 Gross Development Density	0.12
Acres Needed to Accommodate 2070 Population	33,143 ac
Additional development at a 20% Higher Gross Development Density (Alternative)	0.14
Acres Needed to Accommodate Projected Population under higher development density	23,841

Table 4- 2070 Land Types

	2019	% of Total Acreage	Sprawl 2070	% of Total Acreage	Conservation 2070	% of Total Acreage
Developed	87,053	11.95%	120,196	16.49%	110,894	15.22%
Protected Natural Land	174,407	23.93%	107,381	14.74%	262,441	36.01%
Protected Agriculture	1,280	0.18%	1,273	0.17%	34,405	4.72%
Agriculture	154,155	21.15%	134,826	18.50%	105,777	14.51%
Other*	297,571	40.83%	275,460	37.80%	125,619	17.24%
2019 Open Water	14,279	1.96%	14,279	1.96%	14,279	1.96%
Sea Level Inundation: Protected Lands	0	0.00%	56,925	7.81%	74,451	10.22%
Sea Level Inundation: All Other Land Uses	0	0.00%	18,405	2.53%	879	0.12%
Total Acreage	728,745	100.00%	728,745	100.00%	728,745	100.00%
Total Land Acreage	714,466	98.04%	639,136	87.70%	639,136	87.70%
Total Open Water	14,279	1.96%	89,609	12.30%	89,609	12.30%

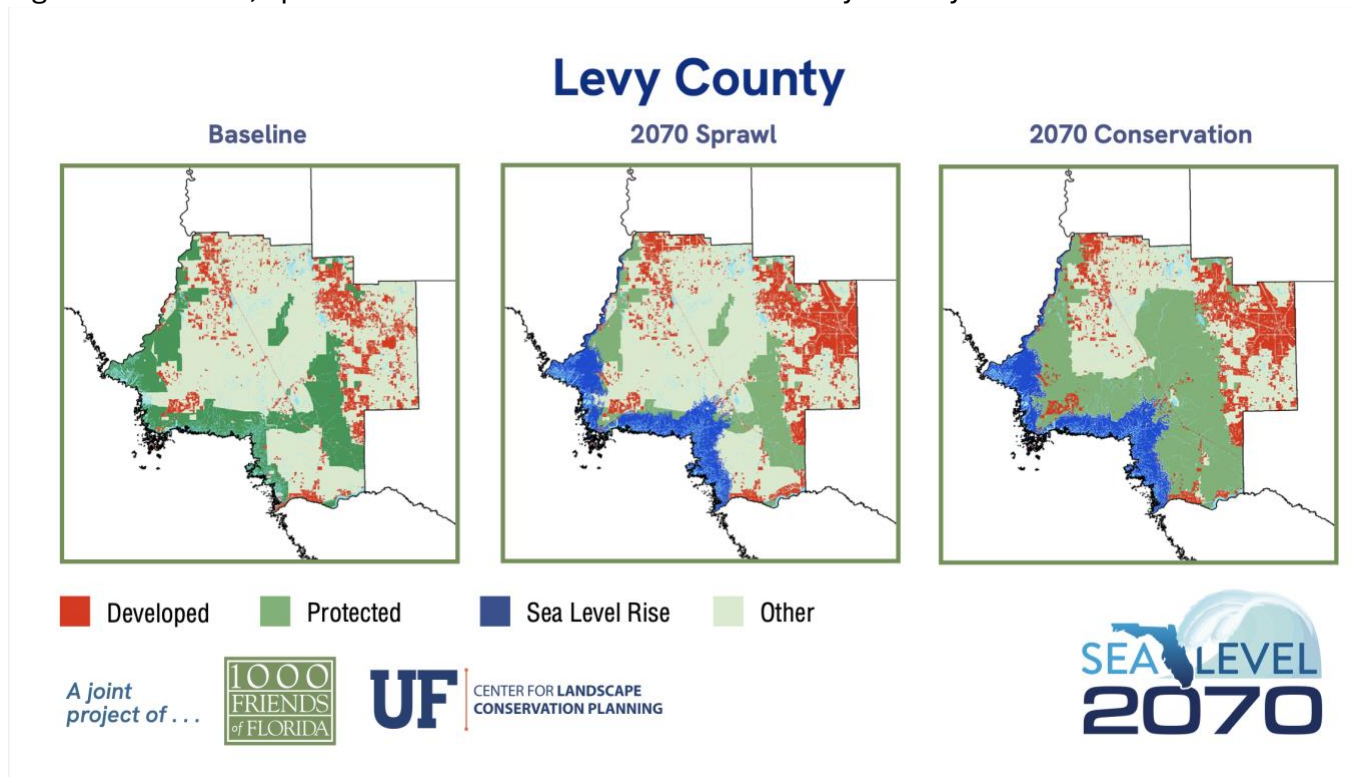
	2019	% of Total Acreage	Sprawl 2070	% of Total Acreage	Conservation 2070	% of Total Acreage
including SLR						
Total Sea Level Inundation	0	0.00%	75,330	10.34%	75,330	10.34%

Sea-level Rise

The impact of sea level rise in Levy County will be mainly observed on lands that are already protected, and generally located in southwestern coastal areas of the county. By 2070, approximately 10% of the county’s total land mass is expected to be inundated. Since about 24% (175,687) of land is currently protected, this equates to a loss of almost half of today’s protected land area (Figure 1).

Recognizing that coastal areas are highly desired for new development, Levy County’s existing coastal communities have the potential to grow faster than other areas of the county. Understanding the risks and considering enhanced development standards for this area will be essential to protect both the built infrastructure and the natural functions of these areas.

Figure 1. Baseline, sprawl and conservation scenarios for Levy County in 2070.



Florida's Wildlife Corridor

Florida has become recognized as a leader in land conservation funding. In recent years, state leaders have committed more than \$2B to land acquisition and management for the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

The Corridor is an 18-million-acre network of connected natural lands that runs from the Everglades to the panhandle, providing habitat for more than 130 imperiled species and recreational opportunities for Floridians and tourists. About one half of the Corridor is already protected through public ownership or conservation easements, but there are about 224,896 acres of undeveloped, unprotected land in Levy County that are identified in the Corridor and potentially eligible to participate in Florida's land conservation programs through fee-simple acquisition or easement. Though some funds are planned to be available in perpetuity, the majority of the \$2 billion in allocations are not recurring, creating some urgency for landowners to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in the effort.

Wildlife viewing and fishing as part of FL and local economy

Levy County is uniquely situated to expand its outdoor recreational opportunities while still preserving the character and natural setting that make it special to those who live here. As of 2017, outdoor recreation contributed about \$25 billion to Florida's economy, as well as more than 200,000 jobs. Passive opportunities, such as wildlife viewing, contributed more than 20% of those funds.

Recreational boating and fishing as well as equestrian amenities appear to be sectors that could be enhanced to diversify Levy County's economy.

Growing from within

By embracing policies in response to growth that encourage more compact development in urban areas, rather than low-density, automobile-dependent development in rural areas, leaders in Levy County can provide constituents an array of benefits. Denser neighborhoods oriented toward people rather than cars will attract and support more businesses, creating new opportunities for residents living in municipalities to walk or bike to work, shopping and restaurants, encouraging healthier lifestyles and reducing daily transportation expenses. Lessening dependence on car travel will reduce local air and water pollution. Compact development will generate the revenues to enhance and expand other public services. It will increase the efficiency of those services, and slow their cost increases, helping to keep a lid on local taxes.

Community Feedback- survey

To invite locally generated ideas for policies that would promote sustainable growth in Levy County, 1000 Friends of Florida invited residents and workshop attendees to participate in a

survey to understand perspectives related to population and economic growth within the county. Among survey responses, most people indicated that access to large conservation areas, diversity of natural outdoor activities and the agricultural landscape were attributes that let them “live the good life” in Levy County. There seemed to be a general acknowledgement that there is room for development, while still protecting agricultural and natural areas in the future.

The respondents to our survey expressed a deep appreciation of the county’s natural landscape. Most respondents said that fishing, hiking and wildlife viewing were their top outdoor activities and almost everyone agreed that the outdoor industry is extremely important. About half of respondents cited horseback riding as a primary activity.

Local residents are concerned about the rapid development of existing urban centers and their impact on environmentally sensitive lands, as well as the loss of the small town feel of areas like Williston and Chiefland.

Policy Recommendations To promote an economically prosperous future for Levy County that capitalizes on its considerable environmental assets while preserving its quality of life and rural character, we offer the following policy recommendations:

- Establish locally financed land conservation programs to leverage federal, state and private funds to preserve natural and agricultural lands from development and protect critical lands buffering water bodies. In lieu of a local funding program, a focused effort should be placed on connecting landowners with land trusts and other organizations to assist in maximizing opportunities to participate in state funded conservation programs.
- Discourage development in areas without adequate water and sewer infrastructure. Policies that allow for the proliferation of septic systems not only encourage sprawl but have the potential to lead to long-term water quality issues and are more costly in the long run. Septic-to-sewer conversions are increasingly being implemented to counteract the effects of under-treated wastewater in urban and suburban areas across the state. Such projects are costly and often difficult to implement. Being proactive about wastewater collection and treatment reduces costs and protects water quality.
- With the vulnerability of the region to sea level rise, flooding and other climate- change impacts, make adaptation strategies a regular consideration in any changes to land development regulations. Land development regulations should reflect best practices related to building in the coastal environment. Establish an affordable housing policy to provide for Levy County’s workforce.
- Allow for higher densities in existing urban areas to accommodate increased population and alleviate development pressure in rural areas.
- Participate in Florida’s Main Street program, a technical assistance program that focuses on revitalizing historic downtowns and encouraging economic development alongside historic preservation.
- Invest in public spaces to provide a sense of place and opportunities for passive recreation such as wildlife viewing, photography and paddling.