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Embrace Lake Wales Envisioned: A Model for the Nation

By Anne Neal Petri and Lucy Lawliss



Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. created the first zoning and building codes for the City of Lake Wales in 1930, after designing the city's street landscaping plan. Olmsted is famous as the world's premier landscape architect of his generation.

Editor's Note: This guest Commentary, offered by two distinguished scholars of the works of the father and son who shared the honored name of Frederick Law Olmsted, is the first of a series of guest editorials that will address the effort known as *Lake Wales Envisioned*.

A century ago, Lake Wales was in the news: The most famous landscape architect in America, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., was transforming one of Florida's highest points into Bok Tower Gardens, today a National Historic Landmark. As part of the firm's work in the area, they also consulted with the City of Lake Wales to shape a city in a garden. This month, city leaders are expected to review and vote on a revived Olmsted plan, *Lake Wales Envisioned*, to show how—in Florida and elsewhere—thoughtful zoning and planning that overlays an Olmsted-inspired approach can produce a thriving community that prioritizes mental and physical well-being and sustainable ecological health for all.

Current and future residents will not only find beautiful green infrastructure such as a system of parks, trails and greenways but also healthy economic development fostered by equitable design ideals that ensure residents-of all backgrounds and income levels- access to a walkable urban core, affordable housing and a variety of outdoor recreational and inspirational experiences.

In the 1920s, Olmsted, Jr., son of famed Central Park designer, collaborated with philanthropist Edward Bok and local leaders to upgrade city plans to create a community that would enhance public and civic well-being through the restorative qualities of thoughtful landscape and urban design.

Bok and Olmsted, whose picture graces a mural in downtown Lake Wales, understood the important role a thoughtfully designed environment plays in creating livable communities. This month, Lake Wales has the opportunity to reinvigorate these plans by Olmsted and anonymously funded by Edward Bok between 1925-1931 and extend this



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natural vision into the community which adjoins Bok's magical nature sanctuary.

Lake Wales Envisioned will make official the city's embrace of its Olmsted inheritance by adopting the key principles of Olmsted's design: create an environment that builds a community where neighbors meet and share ideas, a landscape scenery that protects and promotes beauty along with mental and physical well-being and a park system of natural and designed landscapes that connect people to nature and each other. All these principles—and more—have been "Envisioned" in this new plan. *Lake Wales Envisioned* looks to a future where housing development of all types share complete streets—sidewalks, bike lanes, lighting, etc.—with commercial and learning nodes that are interspersed and easily accessed without a car. It offers a community where green infrastructure—parks, natural areas and greenways—can also serve as natural solutions to storm water management to create the healthiest and most sustainable environment.

The Olmsted Network has long partnered with Lake Wales Heritage and Bok Tower Gardens to promote the Olmsted legacy for future generations, and we were delighted to highlight this visionary plan during a recent national webinar, *Conversations with Olmsted: Stewarding Olmsted Parks & Places* (see below). Planning that prioritizes community, brings us together and promotes human and ecological health is the Olmsted way, and it is needed—now more than ever before!



CELEBRATING PARKS FOR ALL PEOPLE



Watch the full webinar **Conversations with Olmsted: Stewarding Olmsted Parks & Places** on YouTube.



10/12/2023

1000 Friends of Florida Endorses the Lake Wales Envisioned Plan

By Paul Owens
President, 1000 Friends of Florida

Editor's Note: This guest Commentary is the second of a series of guest editorials that will address the effort known as *Lake Wales Envisioned*.



Paul Owens has a Bachelor of Arts in History with honors from Swarthmore College and a Master of Arts in Journalism from Stanford University. His numerous awards include First Prize in Editorial Writing from the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors in 2016, First Prize from the Florida Bar Media Awards in 2013 for editorials on judicial independence, and First Prize in Editorial Writing from the Florida Society of Professional Journalists in 2012. - From <https://1000fof.org/about/staff/>

Since our founding in 1986, 1000 Friends of Florida has advocated citizen-driven planning to protect our state's environment and quality of life amid its rapid growth. That explains why we enthusiastically endorsed the *Lake Wales Envisioned* process from its launch last winter. And it's why we're now calling on city leaders to approve the bold, visionary plan that has resulted.

The Lake Wales Ridge is one of Florida's distinctive plant and wildlife habitats, with species, including endangered ones, unique to this region, as well as wildlife refuges and state forests. But it's not just the environment that's distinctive.

The City of Lake Wales itself has a historic downtown and heritage dating back to the famous Olmsted brothers. It's one of Florida's unique and special communities. But this region will face increasing development pressure as Florida's population keeps growing, and sea level rise gradually forces our state's residents, who have been concentrated on the coasts, to move inland. This is confirmed in a pair of reports we released this year with the University of Florida, Sea Level 2040 and Sea Level 2070.

This looming population shift is coming along with another significant challenge confronting the region, the existential crisis facing the citrus industry.

How the signature city on the Lake Wales Ridge responds to increasing growth pressures and profound economic changes will have a large and lasting impact on the environment, quality of life and prosperity in this distinctive region far into the future. It could set a precedent on properly planning for growth, not only for the Lake Wales Ridge, but for other environmentally sensitive areas in Florida.

Doing it right in Lake Wales would provide an example that would resonate up and down the Florida Peninsula. But without a bold, visionary plan, Lake Wales risks becoming one more community whose character and quality of life fall victim to urban sprawl, an environmentally and fiscally irresponsible development pattern.

Lake Wales Envisioned offers such a plan, the product of extensive community engagement guided by experts on transportation, economics, conservation and land development, and spearheaded by a nationally renowned planning firm, Dover, Kohl and Partners.

The plan's combination of preserving and connecting green spaces while promoting the development of traditional walkable and affordable neighborhoods would enhance Lake Wales' environment and quality of life as well as its economy, because top employers and top talent would be attracted by these amenities.

Achieving this vision will require leaders from local governments, businesses, nonprofits and other civic players to come together to agree on necessary improvements to the city's comprehensive plan and land development regulations to promote traditional neighborhoods, affordable housing, historic preservation and pedestrian friendly tree-lined streets.

It will likewise require effective collaboration to identify, connect and protect high-priority green spaces. While these goals won't be realized without determined and sustained efforts, the benefits will endure for generations to come.

1000 Friends of Florida looks forward with great anticipation to the future that Lake Wales will chart in this special part of Florida. That future truly begins with the City Commission's approval of the *Lake Wales Envisioned* plan.

Paul Owens is the President of 1000 Friends of Florida, a nonprofit advocate for planning to promote environmentally and fiscally sustainable communities.





10/14/2023

Public Health a Winner in Lake Wales Envisioned Plan

By John Simmerman
Active Towns Initiative



John Simmerman is a health promotion professional with over 30 years of experience, concentrating on how the built environment influences human behavior related to active living and active mobility.



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Public health will be a big winner if the Lake Wales City Commission adopts the *Lake Wales Envisioned* plan. It is a comprehensive, community-led vision for the next 10, 25, and 50 years that Olmsted would be proud of.

As a health promotion professional with over 30 years of global experience focusing on the intersection of our built environment and well-being, I am particularly impressed with the commitment to preserving critical open spaces through strategic land conservation efforts, creating easy access to parks and trails, and designing for natural daily activity for all ages and abilities.

These activities include the ability to walk or cycle to meaningful destinations like work, school, shopping, and dining, or just heading out on the town with family and friends.

When it comes to creating a culture of activity within a community, details like a healthy urban tree canopy, slow, safe streets, and wide well-managed pathways and trails matter a great deal.

In my research on communities that do this well, the ones I call Active Towns, I've found that efforts like *Lake Wales Envisioned* can make an enormous difference. This is because low to moderate levels of physical exertion become part of the DNA of the place and establish it as a desired, healthful, and vibrant location and destination for current and future generations.

The *Lake Wales Envisioned* plan is a positive next step in the right direction for a more prosperous future.

John D. Simmerman, MS, is the founder of Active Towns.