

Developing a Shared Vision for Community Quality of Life in Leon County, Florida:  
*A white paper prepared by Thomas L. Singleton Consulting, Inc*

Leon County, Florida (population 283,369 in 2012) is a county shaped by **economic, social, and environmental forces**, both locally and regionally:

- It is the seat of the state's capital, the City of Tallahassee (population 181,376 in 2012), the home of two state universities and a community college (combined total of 66, 963 students: FSU 41,087 students spring 2012; FAMU 10,786 students fall 2013, and; TCC 15,090 students spring 2012), and the center of state employment;
- It is one of four counties that make up the Capital Economic Development Region;<sup>1</sup> and;
- It is one of three counties located in the St. Marks river basin.<sup>2</sup>

These forces constantly evolve and interact to produce the county's distinct identity and quality of life. Considered individually and collectively, their many different combinations are what make the county unique. These are powerful forces buffeting the county—with the state government, the universities and community college (literally cities operating within Tallahassee), the City government, and the City utility, often working at cross purposes and vowing for supremacy over each other and Leon County.

The conditions and opportunities in Leon County can also be greatly influenced by changing demographics, including:

- The return of aging graduates of the universities and community college ("Baby Boomers," ages 49-67), returning to the county to retire because of the climate, natural beauty, youthful vitality, and health care the county has to offer, and;
- Members of generations X and Y ("Gen X," ages 30-48 and "Gen Y," aka "Millennials," ages 11-29), who have traditionally left the county following graduation for job opportunities offered elsewhere, and Generation Z (ages 1-10), who will start entering college in the next decade—all three generations of which could be attracted to stay in the area, if offered the right job opportunities and lifestyle.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon, Jefferson, Wakulla, and Gadsden counties cooperate on economic development activities in the Capital Region.

<sup>2</sup> The St. Marks river basin includes Leon and Wakulla counties in Florida and part of Thomas County in Georgia. The St. Marks river is approximately 35 miles long and drains an area of 1,072 square miles. Almost one third of the water in the watershed comes from Georgia. This highlights the high flow and prolific nature of the Floridan aquifer. It also indicates the susceptibility of water quality in the watershed to land and water use practices outside of Florida. Groundwater in the watershed generally flows from recharge areas in South Georgia, Leon County, and the Woodville Karst Plain to discharge points at major springs (including Wakulla springs, one of the largest springs in Florida and the primary source of the Wakulla river, the largest tributary to the St. Marks river), river channels, and the Gulf of Mexico. On a local scale, movement of groundwater is more complex and is affected by the presence of conduits, fractured zones, and other zones of permeability within the rock. Such features provide a direct hydrologic connection from recharge areas in Leon County to Wakulla springs in Wakulla County, including urban stormwater from Tallahassee flowing into Munson sink, the spray field in Leon County, and areas with septic tanks in Leon and Wakulla counties. Through these and other connections, water quality in Wakulla County is affected by land and water use practices in Leon County.

To fully capitalize on these and other opportunities requires a level of cooperation between the County, Tallahassee, FSU, FAMU, TCC, and the neighboring counties that does not exist today. Together these entities have the financial and management capacities to make Tallahassee, Leon County, and the Capital Region one of the most successful and desirable communities and regions—*economically, socially, and environmentally*—in the country. Individually and working at cross purposes, not one of these entities is able to realize its true potential.

Working together, Leon County, Tallahassee, FSU, FAMU, TCC, and the neighboring counties can become the principal architects of their own futures. Within the framework of a shared vision, they can articulate what is unique about themselves and where they live. They can define what quality of life means to them, agree on the attributes they want to preserve, decide how to manage the resources that sustain them, and identify the economic, social, and environmental resources required.

A shared vision—a sense of where we are going together—is essential if we are to sustain for ourselves and future generations the kind of community that has long attracted settlers and visitors to Leon County. ***The shared vision must be protecting and enhancing community quality of life.*** Quality of life is the sum of the diverse characteristics that make a place desirable to live, and it is largely determined at the community level.

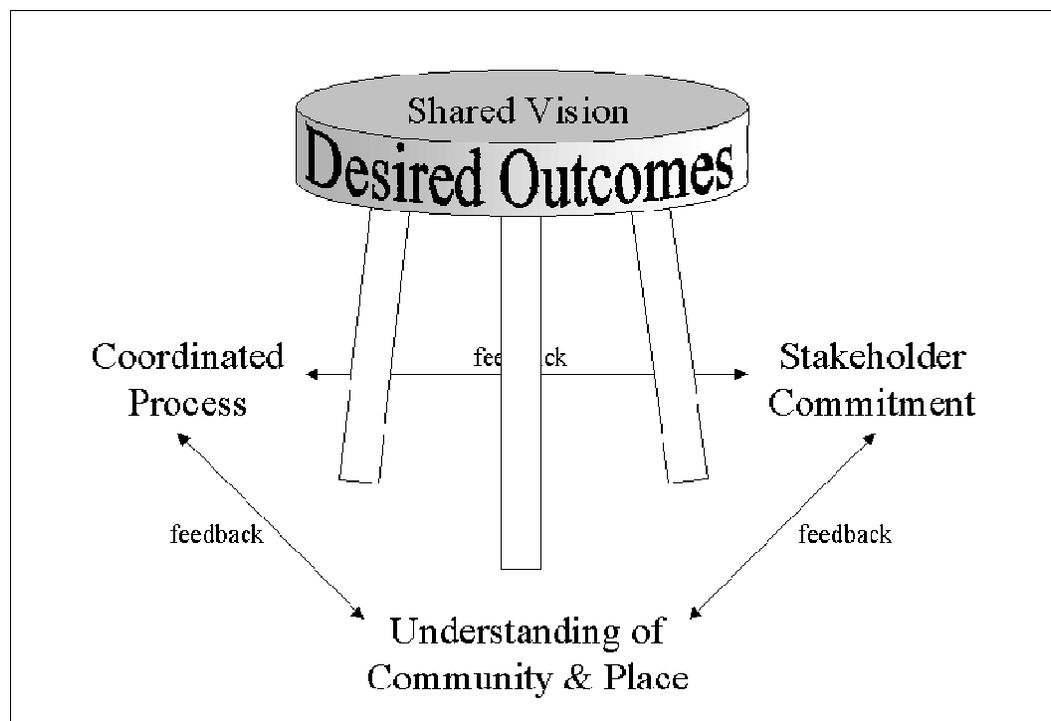
Contributing to the achievement of community quality of life and meeting the essential needs of communities must become the objective of government at all levels in Leon County. Sharing a vision that is driven by the core values of the community will give new meaning to the work of government. It will also enhance government's accountability by providing a basis for measuring the relative success or failure of all its activities in each community.

But to be successful, the shared vision must include strategies for overcoming the decreasing revenues and increasing costs that are the new normal for local government and the state. Commitments made for services during more affluent times are more difficult to support today and conditions are further aggravated by a growing list of critical infrastructure needs, including:

- The need to replace aging infrastructure, including transportation, energy, and water infrastructure;
- The need for additional infrastructure related to increasing impacts to land and water resources. The impacts may include: the over-drafting of groundwater sources that limit future water supplies; impaired water quality that threatens the use of water for consumption and recreational use; increased flooding and property losses that discourage development; and the loss of valuable ecosystem services that cost-effectively capture, store, and cleanse water for human and natural system use, and provide flood protection;
- The need to redesign infrastructure to be more resilient and adaptive to climatic extremes, including the increased frequency and intensity of flooding and drought, and;
- The need to reduce the ever-increasing costs associated with long-term maintenance and operations, and energy use.

Communities will be hard pressed financially to meet these needs. To be successful they will have to build management capacity for change, adapt existing management approaches, and prioritize and evaluate all management efforts going forward. This will require significant coordination among a diverse group of public and private, local, state, and federal stakeholders—defined here simply as those who effect change as well as those who are affected by it. To engage these stakeholders in planning, learning, and acting requires a common sense of community, effective formal and informal collaboration, and the sharing of responsibility.

Leon County and its partners can use a community-based model for collaborative decision making and action to integrate their wide range of diverse activities and needs into a unified plan for community quality of life (see **Figure 1**). The model is based on three elements: affected stakeholders in a community, knowledge of community and place, and a coordinated planning and management process. These elements, working in combination, lead to successful community decision making involving many different kinds of problems and issues. Like the supporting legs of a stool, the elements create a solid foundation for achieving a shared vision of community quality of life.



**Figure 1.** A community-based model for collaborative decision making and action (Source: Singleton, 2000)

The three elements of the model and the relationships between them are as follows:

- The **affected stakeholders** are the people who live, work, and are affected by decisions and activities in a watershed. They have knowledge of their community and the unique place within which they live. They are the people whose interests must be represented in planning the future of their community and the people whose actions are critical to achieving a shared vision of community quality of life.
- The affected stakeholders work cooperatively to develop and expand their **knowledge of community and place** in the context of political and natural hydrologic boundaries such as watersheds, river basins, and aquifers. They bring together all the existing pieces of information on their watershed, assessing its physical form and its social, cultural, political, and economic components.
- The affected stakeholders use their knowledge of community and place to carry out a **coordinated planning and management process**. The process provides a structure, schedule, and procedures for making decisions and coordinating diverse activities across multiple, overlapping political and watershed scales.

The model is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It does not tell communities what they should do or exactly how they should do it. Rather, it enables them to build a shared understanding of their problems, create lasting processes for making decisions collectively, and participate actively in those processes. It helps communities clarify the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, coordinate their independent activities, and establish mechanisms for resolving conflicts when needed. Finally, it helps stakeholders identify the most important tradeoffs and choose between alternative solutions. Those choices incorporate the relevant economic, social, and environmental components of their community.

The steps for developing and implementing a shared vision for community quality of life, using the collaborative decision-making model previously discussed, are as follows:

1. Meet one-on-one with key stakeholders to build support, seek guidance, and secure commitment for developing a shared vision for community quality of life;
2. Identify the critical issues, decisions, and actions needed;
3. Identify the information needed for decision making and action;
4. Formulate a strategy for developing knowledge needed to better understand the issues, make decisions, and take action;
5. Compile information and knowledge into shared databases and websites (internet and intranet) that can be accessed for easy decision making and public education;
6. Develop consensus on a conceptual framework for public and private decision making, set in the context of related quality-of-life decisions;
7. Clarify the decision-making and implementation roles of the public (local, regional, state, and federal government) and private sector, and establish a mechanism for making and supporting decisions at each level;
8. Establish a work plan for decision making and action with available information, and;
9. Establish a program that will implement the institutional changes and staff development needed.

Innovations and change of the sort described in this white paper do not just happen. Developing a shared vision for community quality of life is a paradigm shift that will require rethinking everything a community does. It is very much about changing social behavior. And to do that, people have to see what's in it for them. Everyone thinks about their community differently and it is important to understand and respect those differences as a community begins the difficult task of developing a shared vision for community quality of life.