

The New Orlando: Orlampa -- The middle of somewhere

It's a new world between Orlando, Tampa

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As his hot-air balloon rises above the bustling interstate below, Kermit Weeks squints to see the morning sun peek over Orlando. Technically, the city is 40 miles away. In reality, it's getting closer all the time.

The entrepreneur welcomes mushrooming development along the Interstate 4 corridor where he built his Fantasy of Flight aviation-themed history attraction just a decade ago.

Surrounded by old orange groves, Weeks, 53, saw a future with the location midway between Orlando and Tampa and planted the sign along the interstate: Future Site of Downtown Orlampa.

The notion of a thriving metro corridor connecting the two cities is no longer just a dream. National experts say so many people have come to live and work and play along the 85-mile stretch of I-4 that it's now considered one of the emerging "mega-regions" in the country.

And more change is on the way as east meets west in the New Orlando.

Weeks, who has plans for more shopping and more theme parks next to his aviation attraction on the 1,800 acres he owns, envisions a day -- as soon as 10 years -- when the now-bustling Exit 44 will be bursting with business.

Others say it could take 20 years to complete the picture: light-rail pushing from the Orlando side to link commuters between both cities, strawberry fields and pastures paved

over with subdivisions and shopping centers, towns and cities and counties melding into one indistinguishable area along I-4.

Polk County alone, which sits squarely between the two largest cities, could gain as many as 240,000 people in the next 25 years, University of Florida researchers say.

That's the equivalent of plopping all of Jersey City, N.J., into the county.

People like living in the middle for a variety of reasons.

Newcomer Hector Velez says it's convenient for work.

Retirees John and Deborah Keller of Colorado say it's finding the perfect house on the perfect lot, away from crowds.

Longtime resident Peggy Parke says it's the rural lifestyle, though she knows that's fast disappearing.



A sign welcoming drivers to "Downtown Orlampa" along I-4 between Tampa and Orlando.

"Tampa to Orlando will be one big metropolitan area," said Parke, a fifth-generation Polk County farmer.

From rural to urban

Driving the transformation from rural to urban is a mix of snowbirds and retiring baby boomers, moving in next door to Hispanic families and young immigrants.

About 46,000 Hispanics lived in Polk in 2000, but by 2030, it's projected that more than 170,000 will. They will join nearly a million in neighboring Orange and Osceola counties and an additional 485,000 in Hillsborough.

For many moving to the region, the draw is a chance to buy a bigger house -- or a house at all -- as prices in Tampa and Orlando soar beyond the reach of many teachers, police officers, social workers, retirees and others in the middle class.

For some, it's one of the rare places a person can still buy a slice of rural life -- acreage to put a horse and barn, something nearly unheard of in most of Orange County.

And for others, the lure is jobs.

Velez, 42, was attracted by work in Tampa and Orlando but found homeownership somewhere in the middle.

The native of Colombia owns his own trucking company with an office in Tampa, making his living moving cars from dealership to dealership across the state. Work takes him from Tampa to Orlando, Sanford to Fort Lauderdale and elsewhere in Florida.

He moved his wife and three children to a new neighborhood in Clermont last year, within walking distance of ball fields, a playground and a middle school.

But the drive was too much, so he spent \$100,000 more -- about \$340,000 -- for the same floor plan in Lakeland a year later. The midway location is perfect, he says.

"I'm getting people who like the idea of being halfway," said Eric Halsey, a sales consultant with Maronda in Lakeland, who nearly sold out the 47-home Spanish Oaks subdivision before construction had even started on many. He sold the Velez family their home. "People who live in Clermont, Davenport, Poinciana, if they have business in Tampa, that location doesn't work for them. To me, that's the biggest draw."

The span between the cities also offers something few places within close commuting distance can: open space. Gloria Spanjers, a real-estate saleswoman with Coldwell Banker in Polk County, is marketing an "equestrian paradise," which plans only 103 homes on 1,800 acres.

John Keller, a retired psychologist, and his wife, Deborah, from Colorado found all they were after in this part of the New Orlando.

They traversed the state looking for a spot to call home, landing first in Venice, then Port St. Lucie. First, they said, it was too many old people, then too many cars on the roads, but finally, they found the perfect quiet spot to retire, north of Polk City: Green Pond Road.

Their lawn still sprouts small shoots in the front yard of their new home where pine saplings will one day tower into a front-yard forest. Out back is open pasture, and then beyond that, behind their lot, flooded forest -- the Green Swamp, protected wetlands. Down

the rural stretch of road, the Van Fleet Trail lures cyclists looking for safe travels through some of Florida's most-fragile habitats.

Not too far away, the state plans a state park on 5,000 acres bought with Polk County from ranchers for \$53 million, an expensive move but one that will ensure some additional green space in the Orlando-to-Tampa corridor.

The Kellers rarely go to Tampa, a trip they loathe. But Orlando? They go routinely, about twice weekly to places such as Costco and outlet malls.

It's all part of the downside now of living just outside the reach of the two big cities' services. For TV, they opt for satellite. Otherwise, they would find themselves watching Tampa news stations despite little interest in the Gulf Coast. Orlando stations start coverage farther east, around Davenport. Cell-phone service fails at their home.

But the trade-off: On a midmorning Friday, nary a car passes in front of the home. A flock of white birds forages in the pastureland. Around them, the state-protected wetlands keep development from coming. People living down the road come calling.

"They will stop and say, 'Hi; I'm your neighbor,' even though they live miles away," Deborah Keller said.

The trade-offs? Worth it, they say.

How fast?

How long it will take for the I-4 corridor to be built out with development remains a guess. Some say it's happening so fast

that 15 or 20 years isn't unreasonable. Others say 30 years is more realistic based on experiences in areas such as that between Austin and San Antonio, Texas.

The Lakeland-Winter Haven-Orlando areas were among the fastest in the nation at turning land from rural to urban during the 1980s and '90s, increasing urbanized land by 92 percent, according to The Brookings Institution, which based its research on the Department of Agriculture's National Resources Inventory, which attempts to measure the actual uses of land every few years.

Those estimates are too rough to give a detailed projection for the future, but models of the PennDesign Central Florida Alternatives Future study by the University of Pennsylvania Urban Design Studio show Polk County developing about 335 more square miles -- slightly larger in size than all of Seminole County -- by 2050.

The group is studying the I-4 corridor now and plans to release results in January. The findings could be a launch point for crucial discussions on how to shape the midsection of the state.

For so-called "mega-regions" such as Daytona-Orlando-Tampa in Florida, the Texas Triangle of Houston-Dallas-Austin or the Southern California corridor, decisions on the environment, transportation and the economy overlap governmental boundaries as never before.

Forecasting into the year 2050, national researchers paint a bleak picture if growth isn't managed: more clogged highways, loss of open space and aging infrastructure.

Local experts agree. Already they fear people seeking a slower life finding themselves in

commuter congestion. Or suburbanites flocking outward but having nowhere to play soccer.

Cities such as Plant City, Lake Alfred, Auburndale, Polk City or even counties, in this case Polk and Hillsborough, can't be left alone to plan the region if it is to become its best, they say.

"What we need to do is talk to each other in this corridor," said Bob Hunter of the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council. "We have to ask ourselves with this corridor opportunity, will each decision today help our quality of life. Period."

New homes arrive

Peggy Parke looks across her property line and sees the transformation of the New Orlando: dozens of new homes sprouting like the rows of her strawberries.

For decades, no one else lived near Parke, co-owner of Parkesdale Farms and a fifth-generation farmer whose family members were citrus pioneers in Hillsborough County.

She lives just outside Plant City, where the area's 8,000 acres of strawberries account for a \$200 million-a-year industry long synonymous with the once-rural town.

With her own children taking over the farm behind her, she vows her family won't sell to developers. But she knows they are likely the anomaly.

"It's going to be industry, industry, a farm, industry, industry, a farm. People are going to say, 'How do they do that?' " said Parke of the future of the I-4 corridor and

her family farm still wedged in.

Eddie Harvey's drawl gives away his prideful status as a Florida Cracker.

He has lived in the Lake Alfred area since 1961, and his office is aptly named "Last Stage Out of Town."

The film-equipment-leasing company on State Road 559 is off the interstate far enough that motorists wouldn't see it if they just took the exit for a turnaround or to fill up with gas at the sole service station. Middle-of-nowhere kind of place, it seemed.

Not anymore.

The road now stays busy with construction traffic, one truck whizzing by after the next. One after another, the loud trucks rumble their loads by the window. They continue nonstop, all day.

The New Orlando, many old-timers say, brings everything they hate: too many people, too much noise, not enough resources.

"I look forward to the day I can move out of here," said Harvey, expressing a common sentiment of longtime residents.

Across the highway from his office, the state-protected Hilochee Wildlife Management Area gives a glimpse of what the whole area once looked like: Open fields lure doves, yellow flowers splay like a bouquet on a nearby forest floor as Spanish moss hangs from towering trees, and the tell-tale track of a wild turkey gives away the bird's path.

What will it be like in 20 years?

"I hope I'm not here to see it," Harvey said above the roar of another construction truck.