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*The Florida Atlantic University/Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems was created 27 years ago by the Florida Legislature. During its tenure it has made major contributions to the issues associated with rapid urbanization in south Florida, an area of intense urban growth located in the midst of an ecosystem of international significance. Maintaining political support, both in the community and within two universities, has been crucial to sustaining the activities of the center. Balancing the interests and needs of multiple constituencies has been a key challenge. However, engaging critical—often controversial—public policy issues has played a central role in maintaining a high level of support for the center over the years.*

## **Mission: Ongoing**

Now in its 27th year, the Florida Atlantic University/Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems (FAU/FIU Joint Center)—created by the Florida Legislature and Board of Regents—retains its original focus. Its mission is to work with policy-makers and the public in their pursuit of options for managing growth while preserving natural systems, promoting a strong economy, and planning livable communities.

Much has changed since the center was created in 1972. Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties alone grew from 2.49 million people in 1972 to about 4.5 million in 1997, with at least two million more on their way by 2020. Over the years, the Joint Center has broadened its scope of work to keep up with the issues associated with Florida's steady rate of urbanization and change.

The center's activities have become more comprehensive as it continues to explore the complexities of balancing economic needs—housing, transportation, schools, and jobs—with ecological needs—clean air, clean water, and natural systems, including agriculture, wetlands, and environmentally important uplands. Yet the mission has remained essentially the same. The center continues to operate under the belief that the future of Florida depends on supporting growth and economic development in the right places at the right times, while minimizing their impacts on critical resources and special areas.

Urban and environmental problems, such as poverty, traffic congestion, and water pollution, do not respect political boundaries—they require regional solutions to satisfy diverse interests. Thus, efforts still focus on assisting policy-makers and facilitating cooperation and consensus among the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

### **Mission: Not Impossible**

The mission has remained relatively stable because it was deliberately designed to respond to key legislative leaders, then-Governor Reubin Askew, and local governments. At that time, Florida had a university system that seemed unable or unwilling to respond to calls for help in dealing with complex public policy challenges. After interacting with the many stakeholders involved, the center's founding director was convinced that a unique center, whose territory included all of the southeast Florida region, was critical to addressing problems associated with a sustained period of major growth pressures.

With two universities in the region, the radical idea of a Joint Center was conceived, and both university presidents evidenced a willingness to support such a distinct departure from past practice. The center's mission was broadly drawn, a key factor in its ongoing stability. The terms "environmental" and "urban" were both included in the center's title; its director and key legislative supporters recognized that environmental and urban problems could not be dealt with in isolation—indeed, they are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, there was a recognition that no one launching this adventure was smart enough to anticipate just how the issues arising out of managing fast growth in an environmentally sensitive region would evolve over time.

"Environmental" came first in the title because the environmental movement nationally (and in Florida) had gained greatly in strength and attracted support more easily than dealing with urban problems, especially in the touchy area of land use. Urban development patterns were not yet viewed as critical to protecting important environmental systems. In this case, the heart of the ecosystem was the Everglades, unique not only to Florida, but also to the nation and the world. In short, the term "joint" could be seen as having both institutional (the two state universities in South Florida) and functional (the intertwining of urban and environmental problems) components.

### **Impacts And Outcomes**

Because the center responds to calls for assistance quickly—and these requests make up the bulk of its applied research and public service work—it has a favorable image within both university communities and their constituents in the surrounding service areas. The impact on finding solutions to such issues as strengthening local governance systems, seeking stronger and more equitable tax and revenue systems, and supporting the development, implementation, and modification of the state's growth management system is hard to overestimate. The center has had a major effect on the shaping of efforts to, as its founding director has often put it, "grow smart instead of dumb," long before the term "smart growth" became the concept that seems destined for the new millennium.

The center has had a significant impact on the two universities that support its operations in a variety of ways. Because it reaches out to faculty for help in achieving its public service and applied research missions, personnel from both universities often interact with each other in ways that would not ordinarily occur. In addition, the Joint Center has from time to time given seed grants to faculty members on a competitive basis aimed at furthering the mission of the center and the applied research interests of faculty recipients.

Because the center has been successful in filling a perceived void within the state university system, it has also had a significant and positive response from the two universities' key constituents in the public and private sectors. Moreover, through generous fellowships and assistantships for graduate students, it is viewed favorably by students and faculty alike. The Joint Center's success is widely recognized and documented through an annual report and other special reports on major public service and applied research projects. Largely through its founding director, John M. DeGrove, the Joint Center has extended its impact throughout the nation and internationally.

### **Politics Equals Funding, and Funding Is Key to Success**

The most important lesson learned is that sufficient, stable funding is crucial. Sufficient state funding for a core staff who can respond in a timely fashion to the needs of local governments and regional and state agencies in its service area has been a hallmark of the Joint Center's success. Annual funding for the center and its activities comes from three areas: state funds appropriated by the Florida Legislature; contract and grant funds; and donations to support public programs. The majority of the state funds pay for full-time positions for both professional and support staff. This type of funding also pays for fellowships awarded to students in the fields of public administration and urban and regional planning.

Approximately 12 percent of these funds cover general expenditures and 4 percent pay for upgrading equipment used in conducting research. Contract and grant funds pay for grant line positions and for student assistants assigned to projects. Grant funds also cover the costs of contractual services. Approximately 18 percent of grant funding covers grant expenditures, and 5 percent is used to upgrade computer programs. Finally, an average of 5 percent of the grant funding goes to the university's Division of Sponsored Research to pay for overhead costs. Donations to the Joint Center to enhance its public image are used to support the Distinguished Speaker Series and similar programs.

That the center has maintained and even enhanced its state funding is remarkable, considering that it has not shied away from controversial issues when responding to local government requests for assistance. These issues cover the whole environmental/urban spectrum. Some local political leaders have voiced strong objections to several center recommendations on such issues as "strong" versus "weak" governance systems; single member versus at-large districts for school boards, counties, or cities; whether and how to limit sprawl to prevent the needless destruction of natural systems and create and maintain healthy urban systems; and a whole range of fiscal issues.

Further, the state legislature, and especially some key committee staff members, have objected to state funding for the center, and even pushed for its elimination. The key to maintaining state funding in the face of cutbacks and opposition lies in the fact that, throughout its history, the center has gained the support of key legislators and the governor's office, including the governor. The founding director has been highly successful in maintaining close ties with every governor and key legislator since the center's creation. Indeed, some of these relationships predate the center's establishment and have been sustained over the entire 27-year period of the founding director's tenure.

The future will be a special challenge with both houses of the Florida Legislature and the governor's office, which are occupied by Republicans, contain some who embrace an ultraconservative agenda of drastic cutbacks in government activities. The good news is that the center's new director has important support from key Republican legislators, and the governor has displayed in his early actions a moderate/conservative approach that has not played to the agenda of the ultraconservatives. On the home front, the center has very strong support from the FAU top administration, including the president. Moreover, the new director is determined to strengthen the center's FIU branch so as to assure stronger support from its other university partner.

While tackling controversial public policy issues is bound to offend important political actors, the center is part of the political process, both within the university and in the community at large. Maintaining support at key points in the relevant political systems is a crucial task. Achieving support also focuses on the major components of the two universities: the administration, faculty, and students. During the past 27 years, the attitude toward the center has ranged from indifference, to envy, to support, and even to efforts to abolish it. Here again the key is to build support at critical points within the two universities so that assaults on its funding or its very existence are cut short before any damage is done.

The center's research staff is made up largely of people with master's degrees who hold nontenure-earning faculty positions. This means that, while the center does much to support academic programs, its core staff does not get caught up in the tenure-earning race, with all of the university politics involved. Thus, we can and do respond promptly to calls for help, making the center much more relevant to local governments and others, who in turn form an important core of support locally and in the state capital.

### **Achieving Goals**

Strategies for achieving the mission include applied research, public service and outreach, technical assistance, and academic support. Florida's commitment to managing growth through comprehensive planning, environmental protection, and intergovernmental coordination drives the applied research agenda of the center. Research products directly benefit the public agencies and private sector companies that request them and also lead to publications, conferences, and other forms of public outreach and information dissemination. Although the primary focus is the region, the Joint Center also serves the executive and legislative branches of state government.

Whether analyzing state legislation or growth management techniques, convening a workshop for local officials on various governance issues, such as redistricting options and charter amendments, the center's main emphasis is on applied research. As a research organization, it brings together multidisciplinary teams to study public policy issues. Its unique institutional arrangement allows research staff to collaborate with other faculty from both FAU and FIU. Interdisciplinary research is thus facilitated, since the center serves as a bridge among disciplines in the two universities.

Moreover, special outside expertise may be enlisted, depending upon the requirements and scope of a particular project. Environmental conditions, urban growth, government structure and finance, and intergovernmental coordination are examples of

issues addressed by our research. Policy analysis, public opinion surveys, and economic impact analysis are among the various types of research methods used. The Joint Center concentrates its applied research in the following areas to cover the scope of local and state concerns associated with growth and urbanization.

- *Urban Planning and Community Development.* The Joint Center assists communities with comprehensive planning issues associated with growth, development, and redevelopment. Some examples of work in this area include development of a local ordinance to accommodate compact, mixed-use development near transit stations; production of comprehensive land use, transportation, environmental, and housing guidelines for new community development and reduction of urban sprawl in Florida; analysis of housing opportunities in entitlement jurisdictions; and evaluation of financial impediments to redevelopment in South Florida's older urban areas.

- *State and Regional Approaches to Growth Management.* Environmental and urban issues often transcend the jurisdiction of local governments and require regional or statewide solutions. These issues can include water management, urban sprawl, and affordable housing. The Joint Center investigates and evaluates how states and regions can improve quality of life through policy, planning, and intergovernmental programs. In addition, the center offers technical advice to other states and regions and transfers the lessons learned from Florida's experience with growth management. Projects include case studies of countywide planning systems; evaluation of regional approaches to providing water and sewer services; and recommendations for improving compatibility between state and local policies on development of public educational facilities.

- *Local Governance and Service Delivery.* The Joint Center assists government agencies with the complexities of governing and serving growing and changing populations, particularly within metropolitan areas. These governance and service delivery issues range from government reform, to analysis of proposed annexations, to development of innovative options to finance public facilities concurrently with growth. Examples include analysis of municipal incorporation options; development of interim service fees to finance urban service demands in rapidly growing communities; and presentation of redistricting options for local elections.

- *Natural Resource and Special Area Protection.* Growth and urbanization can bring economic prosperity to an area but, unless managed properly, can also damage or eliminate critical resources or other areas valued by the public. The Joint Center has conducted numerous studies examining strategies for protecting land and water resources and special areas (such as coastal zones) from the negative impacts of growth. Projects include a Land Management Guide for public lands; an environmental awareness program and a strategy for protecting environmentally sensitive lands for the Army Environmental Policy Institute; state planning and policy recommendations for protecting beaches and dunes during post-storm redevelopment; an inventory of technical and financial assistance needs associated with urban waterfront revitalization; and a model for evaluating the secondary and cumulative environmental impacts of state and federal transportation projects.

- *Serving the Public.* In its public service and outreach role, the Joint Center provides a variety of educational opportunities and experiences, such as workshops, policy conferences, and the Distinguished Speaker Series. We are dedicated to sharing our expertise and resources with local and state officials, professionals, interest groups, and the public through the media, forums, *Environmental and Urban Issues*, a quarterly journal presenting the latest innovations and events in growth management from around the nation and the world, with a special emphasis on Florida, and available at no charge; an annual Distinguished Speakers Series featuring experts in growth management, urban policy, and environmental issues; an annual Growth Management Conference on current topics related to growth and development in South Florida; a specialized growth management library; workshops and public policy conferences on special topics, such as school crowding, community-oriented policing, annexation, and beachfront redevelopment; and technical assistance to public officials, agencies, task forces, and special committees on issues related to urban and environmental policy. In addition, the Joint Center works with the Florida Institute of Government at FAU to conduct American Assemblies and workshops addressing a wide range of topics and audiences. The American Assembly process is an effective method for bringing a diverse group of interests to consensus on public policy matters.

- *Supporting Academia.* While the main emphasis is on applied research and service, the center also serves an academic support function. From time to time it has given seed grants to faculty members for applied research projects, and it also awards fellowships in Environmental Growth Management every year to qualified students entering either the public administration or urban and regional planning graduate programs. Moreover, several research staff members serve as adjunct faculty for undergraduate and graduate programs, and the library is available for use by interested students, researchers, and faculty.

### ***The Organization***

The Joint Center itself has grown from an original core staff of a director, two associate directors, and two support staff to 20 full and parttime researchers and administrative staff. The main office at FAU is located at the Reubin O'D. Askew University Tower in downtown Fort Lauderdale, and an office is also maintained at FAU's Boca Raton campus. The FIU branch of the Joint Center is now located in downtown Miami, housed with that university's new Metropolitan Center. Our home pages on the Internet are located at [www.fau.edu/jointcenter](http://www.fau.edu/jointcenter) and [www.fiu.edu/~jcenter](http://www.fiu.edu/~jcenter)

A variety of people are attracted to the Joint Center. Some come to work on short-term, specific research tasks, while others (namely, research assistants and associates) work on numerous projects—or perhaps one major project—over a period of several years. The common bond for these planners, economists, political scientists, attorneys, public policy analysts, and others is an interest in honing professional skills while conducting worthwhile research on environmental and urban topics. This shared interest helps integrate the center's multidisciplinary research teams. Researchers are active in public service organizations and professional associations, teach graduate and undergraduate courses at both FAU and FIU, and publish articles in academic and professional journals.

## **An Eye on The Future**

The vision for the center involves two goals: securing a modest increase in state funding, and improving the interaction between the two sponsoring universities to strengthen the “joint” in the Joint Center. In furtherance of the second objective, the entire staff of the center’s two branches, together with personnel from the Institute of Government, gathers every few years for a two-day goal-setting retreat. With the assistance of a trained facilitator, these meetings help staff focus on such topics as the future research agenda, public outreach and information dissemination, marketing strategies to expand the client base, computer needs, and personnel issues. Such sessions, however, constitute but a small part of the entire effort needed to maintain a productive relationship between the two universities.

Had the center not been established in 1972 as a catalyst for approaching environmental and urban problems from a regional perspective, the ability to bring the public and private sectors together to think and act regionally would not have been as effective as it has been. The need for regional solutions to regional problems has never been so great—and so increasingly recognized. But without a proactive regional catalyst such as the Joint Center, it is a tough sell for local governments, state agencies, and the private sector accustomed to planning and acting in isolation from each other.

## **Final Observations**

The FAU/FIU Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems has survived and in many ways thrived because it has addressed critical public policy issues resulting from heavy growth pressures in a region that lies within a sensitive and significant ecosystem. Although proud of its many accomplishments over the past 27 years, the center is not ready to declare its mission complete. New growth will bring new changes and new challenges. The center will continue to support revitalization of South Florida’s urban centers and coastal communities, timely and sustainable development of new communities, protection and restoration of the state’s environmental resources, and development of practices to govern and serve dynamic urban areas.

FIU will continue its special focus on needs associated with Miami-Dade County’s growth as a global metropolis and work towards a promising new partnership with the College of Urban and Public Affairs and the Florida Institute of Government at FIU. At FAU, the center will concentrate on issues associated with development and redevelopment and continue close collaboration with the Florida Institute of Government at FAU, the College of Architecture, Urban and Public Affairs, SeaTech, the university’s new, world-class ocean-engineering research and education facility, and the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium.

Anyone setting up an applied research/public service center involving two or more universities takes on a major added challenge—how to involve key actors in each of the universities so as to keep them all supportive of the joint operation. There is no question that operating the center jointly between the two state universities in southeast Florida has been of benefit in helping resolve issues common to the entire region. It is equally true that maintaining support from the administration, faculty, and students of both universities requires sustained effort, and even then there are stresses and strains needing attention and, from time to time, major fence mending.

The experiences of these past years have taught us that growing smart is hard work. Fortunately, the dedication and talent of the Joint Center staff—past, present, and future—and the support from sponsoring universities have enabled it to meet this challenge and will allow it to meet those of the next century. The challenge for the center's future is twofold: to maintain internal and external support, and to strengthen even further the center's capacity to be a catalyst for the South Florida region and a model for regions elsewhere.