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HUTCHINSON ISLAND

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EVALUATION AS A POTENTIAL AREA OF CRITICAL STATE CONCERN

MARTIN & ST. LUCIE COUNTIES

FLORIDA

MARCH 1974

DIVISION OF STATE PLANNING
660 APALACHEE PARKWAY — TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32304

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MARTIN AND ST. LUCIE COUNTIES, FLORIDA

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HUTCHINSON ISLAND: EVALUATION AS A POTENTIAL AREA OF CRITICAL STATE CONCERN

I. Introduction

Based upon concerns expressed to the Division of State Planning and other state agencies by local citizens groups and public officials, the Bureau of Land Planning initiated a study of Hutchinson Island in Martin and St. Lucie Counties to evaluate its potential as an area of critical state concern.[1] The study included an enumeration and analysis of the natural and environmental resources and public investments on the island, a survey of existing land uses and development pressures and an evaluation of the authority of other state and local agencies to deal with existing and incipient land use and development density conflicts.

The specific concerns cited by interested private citizens and public officials, include the following:

1. the need to protect the natural and environmental resources and functions of the area from the adverse impacts of development;
2. the need to allow reasonable development and residential density on Hutchinson Island in order to deal realistically with population pressures and market values;
3. the need to protect existing and required future public investments in facilities and services especially in transportation, water and sewer systems and public safety, from the effects of rapid or uncoordinated development of excessively intensive land use;

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[1]See Section 380.05, Florida Statutes.

4. the need to protect the Island's residents and resources from the threat of hurricane flooding, since nearly all the developable land on Hutchinson Island is in a hurricane flood zone;
5. the need to coordinate existing local efforts to meet the foregoing problems in a manner which reflects the Island's physical structure and needs as well as its political boundaries.

Conclusions

The preliminary study indicates that local efforts are underway to alleviate the concerns cited above. Both St. Lucie and Martin Counties have recently approved comprehensive plans for Hutchinson Island and are currently preparing and adopting ordinances to implement the plans. The plans and ordinances evidence some degree of awareness of natural and environmental resources, but lack coordination, especially in permitted densities and the provision of public services.

To facilitate coordination, the two Counties and their major municipalities are presently considering establishment of an area council of governments (COG). The formation of the Council will provide a significant step toward resolution of the conflicts which have limited resource protection in the past.

Effective implementation of the approved comprehensive plans in a coordinated manner, along with enforcement of existing state environmental and resource protection laws and regulations, would appear to provide protection for most of the major resources of state concern.

The plans and the formation of the COG if implemented, should allow early and adequate consideration to be given to public investments for the provision of needed facilities and services. Many local officials are aware of the most critical service needs and are planning to concentrate on meeting them at the first opportunity. In Martin County, in fact, planned development levels are

being conditioned on the provision of transportation facilities. Both of the Counties are beginning to give attention to water and sewer and public safety systems. A coordinated approach to provision of these services through the COG, will provide opportunities for more immediate action, increased efficiency and lower costs.

While almost all of the developable portions of Hutchinson Island are flood hazard areas, the local approach to flood protection has been cautious, due to high land costs. Local efforts are being made to deal with the flood hazard, and together with recent amendments to the federal flood insurance law, should provide for adequate flood protection.

By using the recently adopted plans as a base and working through the proposed council of governments, conflicts regarding density, services and growth can be resolved by the local governments to permit reasonable development and natural resources to co-exist on the Island. Assistance in achieving these ends is available, if desired, from the Florida Department of Community Affairs and the South Florida Regional Planning Council.

Recommendations

The study indicates that although some of the concerns related to Hutchinson Island may not be fully resolved for a year or more, efforts are presently being made by the Counties and municipalities and by the state agencies involved, to meet the Island's concerns in the shortest practical time. On the basis of these findings, the Bureau of Land Planning recommends that:

1. Hutchinson Island not be recommended as an area of critical state concern at this time; however, the situation should be closely monitored to assess the relative impacts of the local efforts. Should these efforts prove ineffective, consideration will again be given to a critical area recommendation;

2. the Division of State Planning and other interested state agencies should strongly support the planning and implementation efforts of the local jurisdictions especially with regard to the council of governments; and regional resource questions should be addressed through that body whenever possible;

3. the Division of State Planning should strongly support state acquisition of environmentally endangered lands on Hutchinson Island, especially in those areas where the physical structure of the land will make local regulation difficult, if not impossible.

The sections which follow detail the significant findings of the preliminary report.

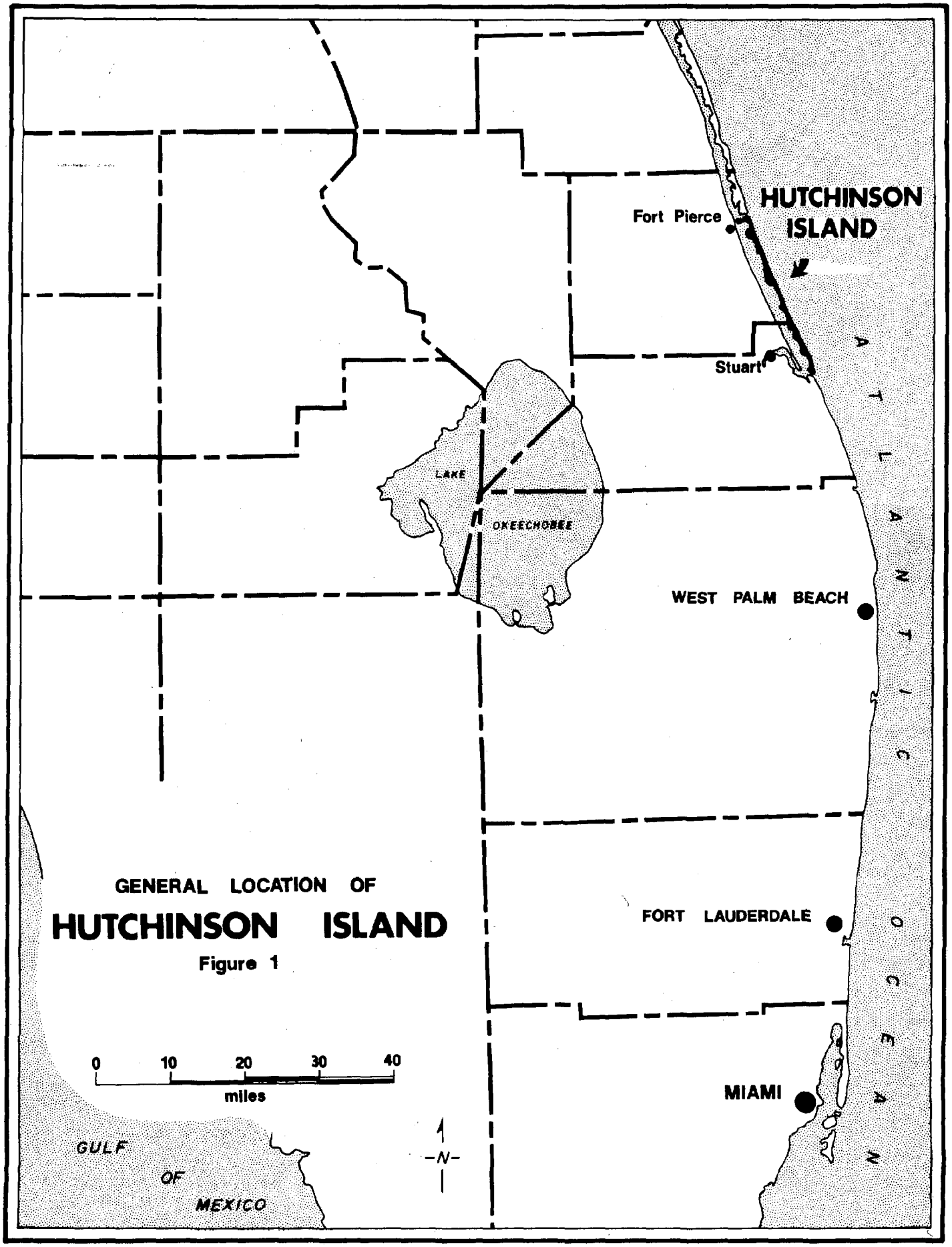
II. DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

Physical Description

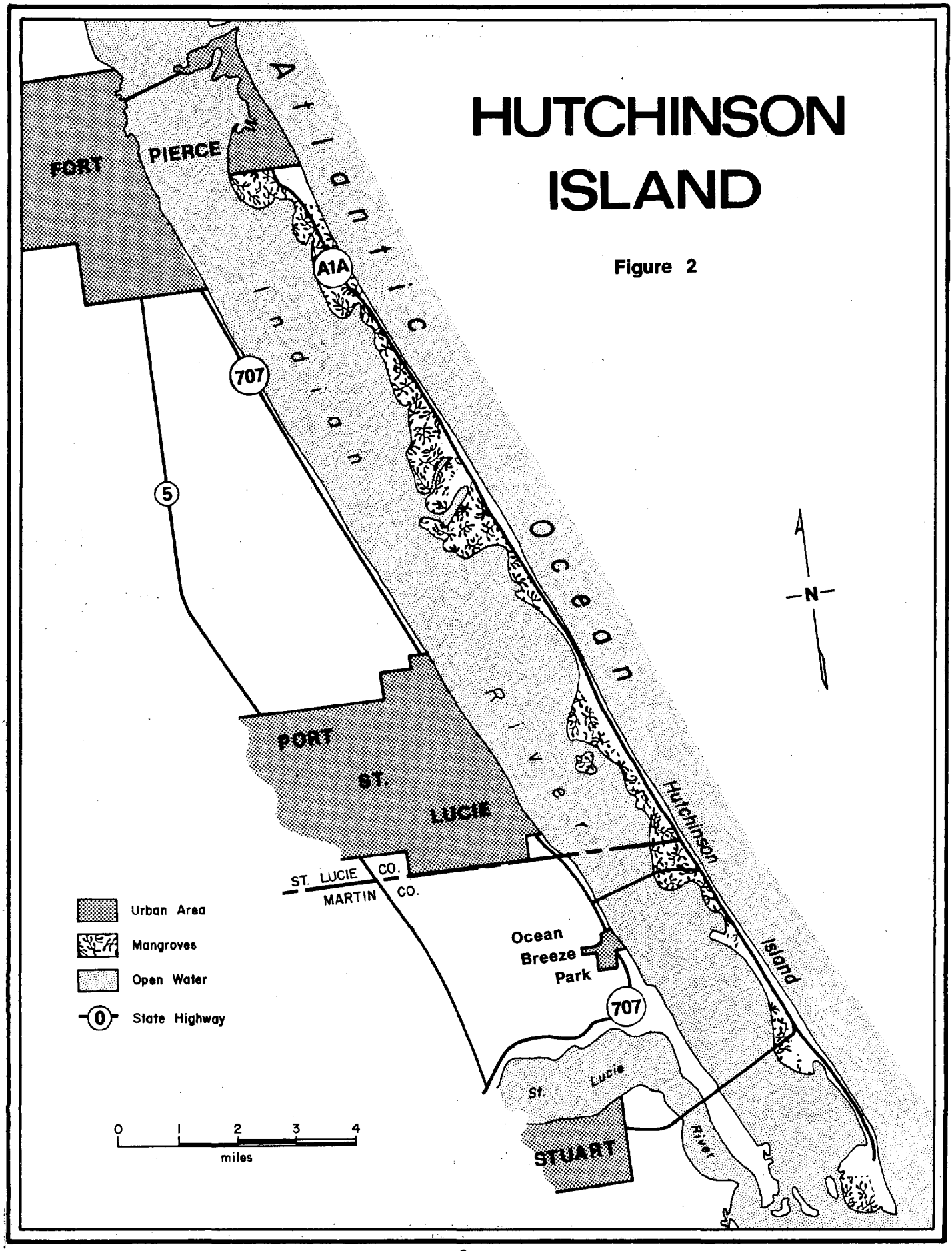
Physically, Hutchinson Island is a 23 mile long barrier island lying approximately Northwest to Southeast and bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Indian River (Intracoastal Waterway) on the west with the Fort Pierce Inlet on the north and the St. Lucie Inlet on the south. The most southern 7 miles lie in Martin County and the northern 16 miles in St. Lucie. The island is over a mile wide at several points but narrows to 250 to 350 yards wide for one stretch. It is connected to the mainland by 3 bridges. One bridge comes from Stuart and is 3½ miles north of the southern tip of the island. The second is connected with Jensen Beach and is 6½ miles north of the southern tip of the island. (See **Figures 1 and 2**).

Environmental Features and Concerns

Hutchinson Island is an environmentally sensitive area. On the Atlantic side of the Island are the fragile coastal dunes and Class III waters. On the



GENERAL LOCATION OF
HUTCHINSON ISLAND
Figure 1


HUTCHINSON ISLAND
Figure 2
Atlantic Ocean
Indian River
PORT PIERCE
PORT ST. LUCIE
A1A
707
5
N
Hutchinson Island
ST. LUCIE CO.
MARTIN CO.
Ocean Breeze Park
St. Lucie River
STUART
Urban Area
Mangroves
Open Water
State Highway
0 1 2 3 4
miles

Indian River side are extensive mangrove areas, aquatic preserves, marine grass beds and Class II (shellfish) waters. It should be noted that shellfish taking in the Hutchinson Island area is prohibited by the State Division of Health but that the antidegradation clause of the Federal Water Quality Act requires standards maintenance in any area once designated for shellfishing. The entire Island is in a hurricane flood zone; the land surface ranges from mean sea level to about 12 feet above mean sea level, but is generally lower than 10 feet above m.s.l. Several species of environmentally threatened marine birds, reptiles and mammals inhabit the island and surrounding water.

Existing Land Uses

The northern 2 miles of the Island are a part of the City of Fort Pierce and are generally urbanized. The area contains mostly low density residential and commercial uses. South of the Fort Pierce city limits there is little development beyond a few scattered tourist commercial uses until nearly the island midpoint where Florida Power and Light has a nuclear electrical generating plant on approximately one square mile. Two relatively large (100-200 du) commerical and residential developments lie 3-5 miles south of the Florida Power and Light plant and close to the Martin County border. Some of the existing and authorized development in St. Lucie County includes high rise buildings. Four to seven such structures ranging up to 2 stories may be constructed on the island within 18 months. The St. Lucie County portion of the Island has a current density of less than 1 du/gross acre and a currently approved density of 4.2 du/gross acres. Variances and exceptions are being made almost monthly however, which will greatly increase this density.

From the Martin County line southward, there are mixed residential and commercial uses. Currently, only about 150 du's are occupied but about 600 more are under construction (including 100 hotel units). This would produce

an existing density of less than .5 du/gross acre.

Additionally, U. S. Route A1A runs the entire length of the Island on the west side, and connects with 3 bridges (2 in Martin County and 1 in St. Lucie County).

There are approximately 1500 acres of marginally developable land on the Martin County portion of the Island and something less than twice that in St. Lucie. Development pressures are enormous, however, with land costs now at almost $35,000 per acre. There are two proposed Developments of Regional Impact in the Martin County portion of the Island and one on St. Lucie's portion, totaling almost 4,200 dwelling units.

Public Facilities

Existing public facilities on the island are minimal. Existing transportation facilities are adequate for current population but demands will probably exceed capacity very quickly as development proceeds. Water and sewage facilities are not adequate and will continue to fall further behind due to rapid development and changes in treatment standards. Public safety facilities are virtually non-existent on the island and services and response times are extremely poor, especially in the central part of the Island, away from the bridges. Emergency vehicle response times to the center of Hutchinson Island are averaging well over 20 minutes, far beyond insurable response times.

III. MAJOR SITUATIONAL FACTORS

Socio-Economic Factors

While Martin and St. Lucie Counties lagged somewhat behind the Gold Coast area in population growth between 1950 and 1970, they have recently begun to increase rapidly. St. Lucie County has had a growth rate of over 10% per year since 1970, Martin's growth has been slightly less. Most of this growth has occurred outside the already urbanized areas of the counties producing greater

development pressures on areas such as Hutchinson Island.

The growth rate is based heavily on in-migration and the largest in-migrant group in the population is the affluent retirees. The rapid changes in growth rate and population mix are very conducive to the growth of the beach front condominium market. Condominiums in Florida have tended to be dense, small unit-high service developments. Hutchinson Island's exclusivity and high land costs make it a "perfect location" in the condominium market. Combined with tourist and commercial service and other secondary development patterns, condominiums have greatly increased development pressures on the Island.

Planning

Both Counties are simultaneously in the process of finalizing comprehensive plans for Hutchinson Island. Martin County's land use plan was approved by the County Commission in December; implementing zoning and other ordinances are now in development. St. Lucie County's plan was accepted by the County Commission on January 22, 1974 and ordinances are now under consideration.

The two plans were prepared at about the same time, but independently. Although there are similarities in approach and content in the plans, the lack of coordination between them is evident.

Both plans identify and discuss the environmental constraints of development on the Island. In each of the plans the major growth constraint is the current inadequacy of transportation facilities. Both plans would protect most of the mangroves, dunes, and marine grass beds from the direct effects of development, but indirect effects such as runoff, noise, and the destruction of wildlife, lack serious consideration.

Both plans recognize the inadequacies of public health and safety facilities and services. The plans are, however, predicated most heavily on the expansion of transportation facilities, particularly bridges, and minimally on the other

public services.

St. Lucie's plan would impose a cap of an average 5.5-6 du's per gross acre and Martin's a cap of 1.5 to 7.5 du's per net acre, or developable acre. The gross vs. developable acre difference is quite significant. First, in Martin County there is a low level of existing urbanization and the difference between gross and developable acres is about 12.5%. In St. Lucie County, the northern end of the Island is already urbanized and the percentage of developable land is somewhat lower. This, along with the large Florida Power and Light holdings would indicate a much more intensive residential use for St. Lucie County's portion of Hutchinson Island than for Martin's, perhaps as high as 10-12 du's per developable acre.

Regulation

Existing zoning regulations in both Counties provide little direct protection for the environmental resources and, especially in St. Lucie, little development regulation. The new ordinances now pending action, however, would appear to be relatively more responsive to these problems. Both Counties do have fairly stringent flood protection building codes or policies for island development. Recently enacted federal flood insurance law amendments will provide additional protection by July 1, 1975.

At the state level, both the mean high water line on the west coast and beach setback lines on the east coast have been established. Both lines, however, are photographically established and have not yet been surveyed.

Additionally, certain small areas particularly the narrowest necks of land on the Island have been or are about to be nominated as environmentally endangered lands in the hope of state acquisition. These narrow areas coincide with the lowest dunes, indicating points where the Island could potentially be breached by storm surges. Because of their physical limitations, these areas

may prove to be difficult for the counties to adequately regulate without involving inverse condemnation.

Institutional

The two counties have espoused differing development philosophies for several years, St. Lucie supporting a high growth position and Martin a controlled growth position. These differences of position have helped to deter coordination between the two counties and between counties and municipalities on common problems such as Hutchinson Island.

Recently, a new factor has emerged which can bring about resolution of many of the local conflicts regarding Hutchinson Island. Mr. Timor Powers, a member of the Martin County Commission, with the support of other interested local officials, has proposed the formation of an area council of governments (COG). The COG would be composed of members from Martin and St. Lucie Counties and the cities of Fort Pierce, Stuart and Port St. Lucie. It would serve as a mechanism for coordination and conflict resolution in the area.

When preliminary approval is received from all the participating governmental units, an informal meeting will be held, probably in early March, 1974. In April, the formal organizing meeting is expected to be held and if successful, ratification and full operation may be anticipated by June or July.

IV. PROBLEM RESOLUTION ALTERNATIVES

The following section provides a summary list of the concerns of the Division of State Planning regarding Hutchinson Island along with a brief discussion of the authorities and resources available for their resolution.

Concern: Can reasonable development be promoted or allowed on Hutchinson Island and still protect the natural resources of the Island area from degradation or destruction?

Response: The plans and ordinances for development of the Island appear to take significantly more cognizance of most environmental resource needs, than similar development control programs in many other parts of the State. These local efforts could be doubly effective if adequately coordinated through the COG. High density development, however, can still present a problem. The dunes and submerged lands of the Island are subject to state development controls and certain other endangered lands have been or are being proposed for state acquisition. While the secondary environmental effects of development are not as well accounted in the County plans as direct effects, these effects fall largely within the existing regulatory jurisdiction of the state Department of Pollution Control, and the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund.

Concern: How can investments in public facilities, and the operating efficiency and delivery of facilities and services best be protected in the development of the Island?

Response: Both Counties are proposing to base their development patterns heavily on provision of transportation facilities. The Martin County plan, in fact, makes use of development phases tied to the provision of adequate bridge lanes. Other public facilities and services, however, have not, at this time, been phased with development in either County. This problem is critical with regard to water and sewer and public safety services on the Island and will be especially severe in high density areas. This is a particular concern of some of the initiators of the proposed Council of Governments, however, and is expected to be one of the first issues to come before that body. Some groundwork has been done locally, especially with regard to waste disposal and public safety facilities and services.

Concern: To what degree does development of the Island (which is in a hurricane flood zone) at the proposed densities, present a threat to public safety?

Response: Prior to setback line establishment, certain small areas of the primary dunes in both counties have sustained development damage. Further, in a few areas on the Island, the height of the dunes is lower than the established storm flood level indicating points where the Island could be severed by storm surges. These areas have been or are being proposed for acquisition under the Environmentally Endangered Lands Program. Low density development of these narrow areas would be allowed by the proposed plans and ordinances subject to stringent building codes. While both Counties have low dune areas, the problem is particularly critical in St. Lucie County because St. Lucie has authorized more high rise and greater density development. Population limits based on the evacuation capabilities of the bridges were addressed in both plans, but the Martin County Commission reduced this protection slightly in modifying their plan. In dealing with their high rise development, St. Lucie County imposes building code restrictions on the high rises so that no residential units are built below the hurricane flood level. It is assumed that the flood hazard question will also be posed to the COG. By mid 1975, the federal flood insurance program provides for mandatory local compliance with its requirements.

Concern: Can the plans and development controls of both Counties be coordinated to achieve compatibility, balance the various claims of the two Counties, and provide solutions to the problems cited above?

Response: The Department of Community Affairs, Division of Technical Assistance, is attempting to encourage this coordination through the U.S. HUD 701 planning program. The South Florida Regional Planning Council is willing to provide any assistance which they can. Most important, however, are the local efforts involved in the formation of the Council of Governments, which provides the greatest protection available for the resolution of the conflicts and concerns of Hutchinson Island.

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