

October 16, 2001

Mr. Robert J. Rohrlack, Jr., CED  
Alliance for Economic Development  
P.O. Box 2342  
Gainesville, FL 32602

RE: Lockwood Greene Report- Competitive Assessment of the Gainesville Region

Dear Mr. Rohrlack:

This letter is to respond to several comments that are made in the Lockwood Greene Report Entitled Competitive Assessment of the Gainesville Region dated April 2001. The enclosed Exhibit A identifies specific comments contained in the Lockwood Greene Report that the Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization (MTPO) has decided to address in this response. With respect to transportation, this Report does not do a good job of describing existing conditions in the Gainesville Metropolitan Area. In addition, there are several comments that are incorrect and show a lack of understanding about transportation plans and programs that are being developed and implemented in this area.

As you may know, the MTPO is composed of the Mayor and four City of Gainesville Commissioners, the five Alachua County Commissioners and non-voting representatives of the University of Florida and the Florida Department of Transportation. Staff services to the MTPO are provided by the North Central Florida Regional Planning Council. The MTPO administers the continuing, comprehensive and cooperative urban transportation planning program for the Gainesville Metropolitan Area. This planning program is required in order to receive Federal funds for transportation projects.

At its October 11 meeting, the MTPO discussed the Lockwood Green Report response. During this discussion, the MTPO approved motions to:

- “1. authorize the Chair to forward the MTPO response to the Lockwood Greene Report to the Alliance for Economic Development;
2. request that the Alliance for Economic Development post this response on its internet site;

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3. *send copies of the response and the Livable Community Reinvestment Plan brochure to those who received a copy, or executive summary, of the Lockwood Greene Study; and*
4. *forward a copy of the response letter to the Alachua County Library if the Study has already been provided to the library."*

In addition to this enclosed written response, an electronic copy of the Lockwood Green Report-MTPO Response is also provided.

If you have any questions, or would like additional information, please feel free to contact Mr. Marlie Sanderson, MTPO Director of Transportation Planning, at extension 103.

Sincerely,

John Barrow, Chair  
Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization

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## EXHIBIT A

### Comment #1 (page 36)-

***“Interviewees identify traffic congestion as a real problem in the region. This was corroborated by Lockwood Greene’s own driving experience in the area. A traffic problem exists (especially in the City of Gainesville) that if not addressed could adversely affect the Region’s ability to attract and retain employers.”***

This is a comment that Lockwood Greene could make about many, if not all, of the metropolitan areas within the United States. It sounds like a comment that could automatically go in all of the Competitive Assessments that Lockwood Greene prepares without taking the time to collect and analyze local transportation information.

Each year, MTPO staff prepare a “level of service” report that analyzes and describes traffic congestion conditions on all of the arterial and collector roads in the Gainesville Metropolitan Area. Level of service is defined in the Florida Department of Transportation’s Level of Service (LOS) Handbook as:

*“A qualitative assessment of a road’s operating conditions; an average driver’s perception of the quality of traffic flow he or she is in. A LOS is represented by one of the letters A through F, A for the freest flow and F for the least free flow.”*



E. University is operating at level of service “A.”

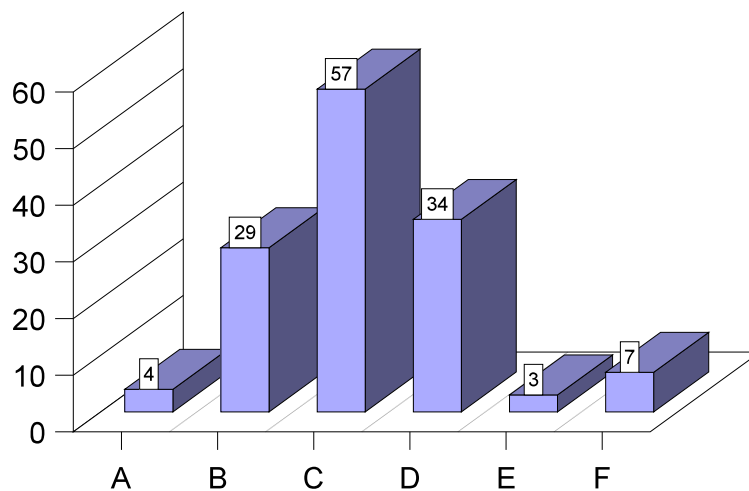


NW 34<sup>th</sup> Street is operating at level of service “F.”

According to the latest report, existing level of service on the 134 roads analyzed in the Gainesville Metropolitan Area is shown in the graph below. Unfortunately, we are not aware of any state or national level of service information that would allow us to compare traffic congestion in the Gainesville Metropolitan Area with other metropolitan areas in Florida and the United States. However, we suspect that, if there were such information, it would show that many, if not all, metropolitan areas experience traffic congestion, and that, traffic congestion in the Gainesville area is about same as other metropolitan areas of comparable size and character.

## ROADWAY LEVEL OF SERVICE

Gainesville Metropolitan Area





**Comment #2 (page 36)-**

***“Specifically, interviewees comment that the road infrastructure has not kept up with the population and growth in Gainesville and the surrounding area. Several employers state that road congestion is a significant problem for them, affecting their ability to receive their inputs, resources, supplies and produce/provide their goods and services to their customers and clients. Traffic congestion is also interfering with workers’ commutes, and appears to be the worst on weekdays when people are going to and from work and school.”***

The Lockwood Greene statement that *“the road infrastructure has not kept up with the population and growth in Gainesville and the surrounding area”* may be true. Traffic congestion levels within the community have been increasing over time.

Locally elected officials, who make up the voting member of the Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization (MTPO), have decided that this community is not going to address its traffic congestion problems solely by building new roads and widening existing roads. This is for two reasons.

One is that there aren’t enough transportation revenues currently available to build enough roads to significantly reduce traffic congestion within the community. The second reason is the negative impact that building new roads and widening existing ones can have on existing neighborhoods and the “livability” of the community. Many areas in South Florida have addressed traffic congestion primarily through road construction. However, these communities have found that they have not been able to build their way out of traffic congestion. This community has decided to try and avoid the mistakes of South Florida.

The MTPO has decided not to focus on one means of transportation (building new roads and widening existing roads), but rather, develop a more balanced transportation system. As a result, the MTPO has adopted a long range transportation plan to expand transportation choices. This plan allocates future transportation revenues to enhance all types of transportation within the community, including public transportation (buses), bicycle and pedestrian facilities, in addition to constructing new roads. By expanding transportation choices, the MTPO hopes to reduce the number of trips that are made by single occupant vehicles.

**Comment #3 (page 36)-**

***“A number of “traffic calming” methods have been suggested by local residents as a means to improve local traffic flow. These include greater use of alternative forms of transportation (i.e., bikeways along the local roads), reducing the number of lanes on major arterials, and blocking off streets and creating a pedestrian mall, etc.”***

***“These types of measures are not business/industry friendly because they impede traffic flow all the more, and are definitely not effective ways to promote economic development in a community or region like Gainesville/ Alachua County. Moreover, some of these suggested improvements, such as the creation of a pedestrian mall, have not been successful in many parts of the country. Streets in many downtowns that were once closed to accommodate pedestrian malls are now open, and, as a result, businesses are enjoying better visibility, increased customer traffic, and improved sales.”***

The Lockwood Greene Report implies that plans are being made to block off streets and create a pedestrian mall in Gainesville. This is not correct. This Report may be confusing pedestrian malls with the Main Street project in Fiscal Year 2003. This project will reduce Main Street from four travel lanes to two travel lanes by adding back on-street parking in the outer lanes and widening sidewalks for pedestrians.

The Main Street project is expected to help create a more walkable environment in Gainesville through a combination of techniques that emphasize a pedestrian-friendly downtown. This includes lowering speeds on downtown streets; widening sidewalks;



constructing convenient, safe and easy street crossings; and restoring on-street parking that provides a buffer between traffic and pedestrians walking on downtown sidewalks.

Pedestrians feel safer when parked cars are between them and moving traffic.

As noted earlier, the Lockwood Greene Report states “*These types of measurers are not business/industry friendly because they impede traffic flow all the more, and are definitely not effective ways to promote economic development in a community or region like Gainesville/ Alachua County.*” However, other communities have found that reducing the number of travel lanes on busy downtown streets have stimulated new business in the downtown area. This issue is discussed in the following excerpt from DISCOVER Volume 22 Number 6 (June 2001) entitled “Calming the Traffic Beast - How cars and pedestrians can live together in peace,” by Curtis Rist.

*...The benefits of traffic calming can be dramatic. In the early 1990s, Lake Worth, Florida, had more in common with a ghost town than with its trendy neighbor West Palm Beach. The problem was bad traffic flow. Traveling down the pair of three-lane roadways that served as the town’s main drags, drivers routinely ignored the 25-mile-per-hour speed limit and raced through at 50. Narrow sidewalks made walking perilous, and the number of boarded-up businesses were proof that few people wanted to stop and shop. “Our approach had always been to build wider, faster roads to serve the drivers,” says Rick Chesser, a Florida Department of Transportation official.*

*To solve the problem, planners reduced roadways by one lane each, making extra space available for parking and wider sidewalks. After the work was completed in 1998, accidents decreased by almost 50 percent. An unexpected plus was an instant economic boom as new shops and outdoor cafés opened to take advantage of the pedestrian-friendly sidewalks.*

### **ERE Yarmouth and Real Estate Research Corporation**

Additional information concerning whether measures to make downtown centers more walkable is or is not business/industry friendly can be found in an article entitled “*The Economic Benefits of Walkable Communities*” published by the Local Government Commission- Center for Livable Communities. According to a 1998 analysis by the ERE Yarmouth and Real Estate Research Corporation,

*“real estate values over the next 25 years will rise fastest in “smart communities” that incorporate traditional characteristics of successful cities including a mix of residential and commercial districts and a pedestrian-friendly configuration.”*

## **Lodi and Mountain View, California and West Palm Beach, Florida**

In addition, this article also identifies three cities that have experienced clear economic benefits to increasing the “walkability” of downtown areas- Lodi and Mountain View, California and West Palm Beach, Florida.

### **Lodi, California**

Lodi, California completed a \$4.5 million pedestrian-oriented project in 1997. As a result of these pedestrian modifications and other economic development incentives, 60 new businesses have located in the downtown area, the vacancy rate has dropped from 18 percent to 6 percent, and there has been a 30 percent increase in downtown sales tax revenues.

### **West Palm Beach, Florida**

Recently, the City of West Palm Beach, Florida made a number of traffic calming modifications to its downtown. As a result, the percent of building space occupied increased from 30 percent in 1993 to more than 80 percent in 1998. Also during this same period, commercial rents increased from \$6 per square foot to \$30 per square foot.

### **Summary Comments**

Creating a more walkable environment on Main Street is expected to have a positive impact on businesses in the downtown area. During public meetings when the Main Street project was being discussed, the Gainesville Downtown Owners and Tenants Association, as well as a number of individual businesses located in the downtown area, supported the Main Street project.

***“First fix the streets, then the people and business will follow.”***

*Dan Burden, Walkable Communities, Inc.*

**Comment #4 (page 36, 37)-**

***“Lockwood Greene recommends that the most effective way Gainesville/ Alachua County can address and improve roads and traffic is to have a comprehensive Transportation Improvement Plan prepared, adopted and then followed. This should be a plan that has buy-in and support from employers, residents and stakeholders in the Region. It also should be a plan that addresses short, near and long-term projects and activities, plus one that can be revisited and revised as need dictates in the future.”***

This comment reinforces our observation earlier that Lockwood Greene seems to have prepared this report with little time invested in collecting information within the Gainesville community about local transportation conditions, plans and programs. This Report recommends that the community *“have a comprehensive Transportation Improvement Plan prepared, adopted and then followed.”* This is already being done. Each year, the MTPO adopts a Five-Year Transportation Improvement Program for transportation projects that are funded. This program is prepared with the community having ample opportunity to provide input into specific projects included in this document.

In addition, the Lockwood Greene Report also discusses the need for a plan *“that addresses long-term projects and activities that can be revisited and revised as need dictates in the future.”* Again, this is already being done. In December, the MTPO adopted its 20-year long range transportation plan with significant public involvement in developing this plan. This plan identifies needed transportation projects through the Year 2020. In addition, a major plan update is conducted every five years.



Public involvement at Oak Hall School for the long range transportation plan. Photo courtesy of Renaissance Planning Group.

**Comment #5 (page 37)-**

***“Trucks add to the severe traffic congestion on the local roadway system since Gainesville does not have a truck by-pass around the city as many other communities have. Given this, Lockwood Greene recommends that a by-pass be planned for and constructed around Gainesville in the future to alleviate truck-related traffic problems in the area.”***

The Lockwood Greene Report is incorrect when it states that “*Gainesville does not have a truck by-pass around the city as many other communities have.*” There is an adopted truck route system around the City of Gainesville. This system is signed and marked by the Florida Department of Transportation and includes the following roads:

- NW 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue from Interstate 75 east to Waldo Road;
- Interstate 75 from NW 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue south to State Road 26;
- State Road 26 east to W. 34<sup>th</sup> Street;
- W. 34<sup>th</sup> Street south to Williston Road; and
- Williston Road east and north to Waldo Road.



Truck route sign on Interstate 75 in Gainesville.

The Lockwood Greene Report may not be referring to this type of truck route system when they discuss a “truck by-pass.” They may be referring to a “beltway” system of roads around Gainesville, similar to Interstate 285 in Atlanta. If so, they are correct. Gainesville does not have a “beltway.” A beltway system of roads was proposed by the Florida Department of Transportation in 1987. After considering this project, the MTPo decided not to proceed with the beltway in 1989 because of concerns that building a ring of new roads around Gainesville would contribute to urban sprawl.