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ABRUPT FIRING SOLVES NOTHING

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It would be difficult to argue that Lake County's long-range planning is stellar.

Just look at the traffic congestion, overcrowded schools, subdivision tracts and mish-mash of retail development that increasingly encroaches on environmentally protected areas. It is clear that long-range planning in Lake County is more illusion than reality.

The blame can be variously assigned to the growth-at-all-costs County Commission, on inadequate staffing levels and turnover in the county planning staff, bad management by the growth development director, or lack of leadership by county managers.

Something has clearly been amiss for a long time, and it shows on the streets of Lake County.

Last week the blame fell on Lake County Growth Management Director Sharon Farrell, who was abruptly axed with only a vague explanation offered to taxpayers.

County Manager Bill Neron, who hinted the change was in the works for a long time, said he wanted to alter the "focus" of the department and find someone to manage it more effectively. What that means is anybody's guess, and Mr. Neron, who has run the county for the past year, had given no hint earlier that he was unhappy with Mrs. Farrell.

Certainly, top county administrators such as Mrs. Farrell serve at the county manager's pleasure, and Mr. Neron is free to do what he likes. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether Mrs. Farrell's dismissal was even his idea. And the nature of the abrupt departure, the lack of any clear reason for her dismissal, and the absence of any candidate to replace her all are clear indications the move is unlikely to improve long-range planning soon.

It would be a shame if she turns out to be a political scapegoat.

Lake County never has taken long-range planning seriously. Although the planning staff numbers near 100 employees, there are only three long-range planners for the county, and frequently the commission has overruled or ignored the staff on crucial decisions.

Indeed, while Mr. Neron had not shown any obvious displeasure with Mrs. Farrell, County Commissioner Debbie Stivender -- who generally sees the planning department as a roadblock to development -- has made little secret of her longtime wish to get rid of the growth management director, whose views on planning are less permissive than her own.

If Mr. Neron was simply caving in to pressure from Mrs. Stivender, that reflects poorly on him as an administrator and leader.

If Mr. Neron had been planning to replace Mrs. Farrell, he should have had a replacement in mind so that such a critical position does not go unfilled for any length of time. But Mr. Neron says he doesn't have anyone in mind. Deputy county manager Gregg Welstead will handle the duties while a search is launched for a permanent replacement for the \$85,000 a year job.

That process could take months, and it's simply not good planning, particularly when serious growth-management issues face the county. A proposal that would permit more intense development, for example, could open the door to even more intrusive development of environmentally sensitive areas like the Green Swamp and the Wekiva River.

Fortunately, the proposal abruptly was pulled from the County Commission agenda last week.

While developers are salivating over the idea, Mrs. Farrell and the county planning staff, along with most environmentalists, opposed the notion because it could encourage even more urban sprawl.

Now that Mrs. Farrell is out of the picture, however, will the big-money development interests resume their push to pave over the county's most fragile areas?

There is no question something is seriously wrong with Lake County's ability to plan for the future.

Whether Mrs. Farrell's firing solves the problem remains to be seen.