



the John Scott Dailey
**FLORIDA
INSTITUTE OF
GOVERNMENT**
at the University of South Florida

**We specialize in realizing and
implementing big ideas in
the public sector.**

Hernando County Stakeholder Interview Summary Report

April 2025

Prepared for:
Hernando County

Prepared by:
Florida Institute of Government
University of South Florida

Background

Hernando County has engaged the University of South Florida (USF) Florida Institute of Government (FIOG) to complete a comprehensive Strategic Planning Process for the County. As part of this process, USF FIOG conducted 18 interviews with key stakeholders provided to the USF FIOG by County Staff. The FIOG advised the County to include key individuals, businesses, and organization stakeholders that would have insights into issues facing the County or into the views and opinions of segments of the members of the Community. Interviews were conducted between January-March 2025 by Angela Crist, USF FIOG Director. Interviews were one-on-one, virtual, and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Below is a summary of the interviews grouped by question.

List of questions participants were asked:

- 1) What are the county's greatest strengths or assets for future success? Please list the five (5) most important county strengths for success:
- 2) What three words describe the county to you?
- 3) What are the major liabilities (weaknesses) that limit future growth and success for the county? Please list the five (5) most significant county liabilities:
- 4) What are the major opportunities facing the county that can have a major impact on future success? Please list five (5) opportunities (5 years out) for Hernando County:
- 5) Do you believe that 5 years into the future that there could be any major threats that could prevent the county from flourishing? If so, please list five (5) threats (5 years out) for future sustainability
- 6) What do you see as the primary issue(s) facing the county? Why? How would you resolve it?
- 7) What outcomes would you like to see from the strategic planning process?
- 8) Other comments

WHAT ARE THE COUNTY'S GREATEST STRENGTHS OR ASSETS FOR FUTURE SUCCESS? PLEASE LIST THE FIVE (5) MOST IMPORTANT COUNTY STRENGTHS FOR SUCCESS:

Summary:

The strengths below highlight the county's potential for growth and development, leveraging its natural beauty, strategic location, strong community, and effective leadership. Key strengths (themes) identified include community and leadership, natural environment, location and accessibility, economic opportunities, affordable living, and education/workforce development. The topics below are listed in order of how frequently they came up during interviews.

Affordable Living

- *Affordable Living:* Reasonable cost of living and availability of real estate.

Community and Leadership

- *Small Town Feel:* The county retains a hometown feel with a sense of safety and community.
- *Leadership:* Effective leadership and application of tax dollars to improve government areas.
- *Community Engagement:* Engaged community leaders and a vocal, kind, and loving community.

Economic Opportunities

- *Tourism:* Tourism is a strong sector, with the county being safe from bad weather.
- *Business Development:* Opportunities for businesses to partner and work together.

Education and Workforce Development

- *New College:* Helps retain people within the county.
- *Job Creation:* Industrial Park and manufacturing opportunities provide jobs that do not require a college degree.

Location and Accessibility

- *Proximity to Urban Areas:* Close to Orlando and Tampa, making it easier to attract new hires and businesses.
- *Access to the Gulf:* Coastal areas like Hernando Beach and natural springs are significant assets.
- *Transportation:* Good road network and airport facilities.

Natural Environment

- *Nature Coast:* Offers a lot with its natural beauty and biodiversity.
- *Springs and Rivers:* Need protection and are valued by the community.
- *Agricultural Land:* Large amounts of conservation and agricultural land support biodiversity.

WHAT THREE WORDS DESCRIBE THE COUNTY TO YOU?

Summary:

When asked what three words best describe the county to you during the interview, the following responses were given. The descriptive words are listed by topic

Growth and Development

growing, growth, fast growing, overdeveloped, unfettered development, enhancements, transition, opportunity, visionary

Community and Lifestyle

community, community-focused, community-based, family, Mayberry, friendly, peaceful, suburban, bedroom

Safety and Security

safe, resilient, strong, dependable, consistent

Environment and Nature

natural environment, nature, springs, biologically diverse, coastal, scenic, rural

Governance and Leadership

Fair, determined, logical, organized, unified, conservative, resistant, pragmatic, hopeful, optimistic

Challenges and Issues

Behind, challenged, comfortable

Affordability and Economy

Affordable, network, centralized, fresh



WHAT ARE THE MAJOR LIABILITIES (WEAKNESSES) THAT LIMIT FUTURE GROWTH AND SUCCESS FOR THE COUNTY? PLEASE LIST THE FIVE (5) MOST SIGNIFICANT COUNTY LIABILITIES:

Summary:

These topics reflect the major opportunities and challenges facing Hernando County. The topics below are listed in order of how frequently they came up during interviews. Key topics and themes identified as liabilities for the future were infrastructure, housing, mental health services, environmental concerns, economic development, financial sustainability and community engagement, as well as growth management.

Community Engagement and Leadership

- Need for long-term sustainability in leadership
- Better collaboration between school district and county
- Community involvement in growth decisions

Environmental Concerns

- Protecting springs and waterways
- Nutrient loading in the basin
- Lack of funds for environmentally sensitive lands

Housing, Homelessness, and Mental Health Services

- Not enough affordable housing
- High costs of housing which is leading to homelessness
- Need for workforce housing
- Developers facing setbacks due to infrastructure issues
- Lack of mental health services for children
- General lack of mental health services

Infrastructure, Growth Management and Economic Development

- Growing pains with new housing developments
- Roads falling behind
- Need for new schools to support new developments
- Electrical inspections causing safety issues
- Water quality and pollution concerns
- Lack of enforcement on county ordinances
- Diversification of the economy
- Limited recreational options
- Need for strategic investment in infrastructure
- Need for higher paying jobs
- Limited support for economic development
- Need for a better mix of developments (commercial, industrial, agricultural)
- Unbridled growth without considering community impact
- Need to limit growth to preserve quality of life

Taxation, Revenue, and Investments

- Need to raise revenue without impacting fixed-income residents
- Concerns about tax base and affordability

- Political obstruction in investing money for progress

Transportation

- East/west roads behind in design, permitting, and construction
- Need for better transportation infrastructure

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE COUNTY THAT CAN HAVE A MAJOR IMPACT ON FUTURE SUCCESS? PLEASE LIST FIVE (5) OPPORTUNITIES (5 YEARS OUT) FOR HERNANDO COUNTY:

Summary:

The survey responses highlight several key opportunities for Hernando County's future success. Infrastructure development is a major focus, with mentions of airport growth, road expansion, and storm hardening projects. Economic development is also emphasized, including promoting industrial properties, incentivizing infill development, and attracting high-paying jobs. Housing and community services are crucial, with a need for affordable housing and wrap-around services. Environmental conservation efforts are important, such as preserving nature and enforcing protection zones. Additionally, improving education and schools, expanding healthcare services, and enhancing transportation infrastructure are vital for the county's growth. Community engagement, disaster management, and recreational opportunities are also noted as significant areas for development.

These topics reflect the major opportunities and challenges facing Hernando County, as identified by the interview respondents. The topics below are listed in order of how frequently they came up during interviews.

Key topics and themes identified as opportunities for the future were:

Community Engagement, Leadership, Education and Schools

- Improving school capacity
- Collaborating between the school district and county
- Investing in education and workforce solutions
- Long-term sustainability in leadership
- Community involvement in growth decisions
- Better collaboration between county departments

Environmental Conservation, Disaster and Emergency Management

- Preserving nature and parks
- Enforcing springs protection zones
- Conserving environmentally sensitive lands
- Implementing fertilizer bans
- Investing in emergency management tools and resources
- Developing disaster mitigation strategies

Housing, Community Services, and Healthcare Services

- Addressing affordable housing
- Providing income-based housing
- Investing in housing policies and funding

- Developing wrap-around services
- Expanding healthcare facilities
- Attracting healthcare workers
- Partnering for better healthcare services

Infrastructure Development and Economic Development

- Growth at the airport
- Expansion of roads and highways
- Strategic planning for new roadways
- Storm hardening projects
- Investing in utilities and infrastructure
- Promoting industrial properties
- Incentivizing infill development
- Creating business incubators
- Expanding industrial land
- Attracting high-paying jobs

Recreational Opportunities

- Developing parks and recreational facilities
- Promoting sports tourism

Transportation

- Improving east/west roadways
- Enhancing transportation infrastructure

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT 5 YEARS INTO THE FUTURE THAT THERE COULD BE ANY MAJOR THREATS THAT COULD PREVENT THE COUNTY FROM FLOURISHING? IF SO PLEASE LIST FIVE (5) THREATS (5 YEARS OUT) FOR FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY

Summary:

People were asked about the threats that could prevent Hernando County from flourishing in the next five years. The topics below are listed in order of how frequently they came up during interviews. Natural disasters such as hurricanes, sea level rise, and increased flooding are significant concerns as well as political and legislative issues including changes in governance and executive orders impacting residents. Economic concerns like property insurance, taxes, and economic downturns in the housing market are highlighted. Additionally, infrastructure and development challenges, such as overpopulation growth and unplanned development, stress the county's resources. Other threats that were noted were environmental problems, including threats to wildlife and natural habitats, and pollution. Social issues, including drugs and crime rates, and education challenges like overcrowding at schools, were also noted. Lastly, technological threats such as cybersecurity incidents were identified as potential risks.

Community, Social Issues, Education and Schools

- Drugs and crime rates
- Culture shock for new residents
- Lack of resources for rehab and mental illness

- Overcrowding at schools
- Lack of adequate services reaching all citizens

Natural Disasters and Environmental Threats

- Hurricanes
- Sea level rise
- Increased flooding
- Climate change impacts
- Threats to wildlife and natural habitats
- Pollution and nutrient loading
- Development impacting conservation lands

Political and Legislative Issues

- Political environment and climate
- Legislative changes affecting local governance
- Executive orders impacting residents

Technological Threats

- Cybersecurity incidents
- IT infrastructure vulnerabilities

WHAT OUTCOMES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE FROM THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS?

Summary: These findings highlight the community's desire for **balanced growth, environmental preservation, efficient governance, and collaborative and transparent approach** to governance with residents. The topics below are listed in order of how frequently they came up during interviews. A few specific areas of focus were specifically mentioned, including developing Hernando Beach and relocating the fairgrounds.

Community Engagement and Education:

- Enhance public involvement and ensure elected officials are responsive to community goals.
- Educate the community on the balance between low taxes and investment.
- Address housing needs, zoning incentives, and mixed-income neighborhoods.

Economic Growth and Business Development:

- Encourage business growth and support new businesses.
- Improve infrastructure to attract diverse businesses, not just restaurants and stores.
- Raise impact fees to fund infrastructure and parks.

Environmental and Community Preservation:

- Maintain the natural environment and rustic nature of the community.
- Implement sustainable growth practices and protect environmentally sensitive lands.
- Control the pace of development and work with water management authorities.

Funding and Economic Development:

- Define funding plans for initiatives and prioritize economic development.
- Improve the tax base and dedicate revenue streams for economic development.
- Develop a better-educated workforce and retirees.

Government Efficiency and Transparency:

- Improve the efficiency of regulatory processes and hiring practices.
- Ensure proactive addressing of issues and commitment to continuous improvement.
- Increase outreach to residents and use their feedback in decision-making.
- Transparent and actionable deliverables with consensus among elected officials.

Long-term Planning and Resilience:

- Develop a three-year plan with specific goals, objectives, and metrics.
- Align strategic plans with quality of life, low taxes, and budget considerations.
- Comply with building codes and FEMA requirements for flood insurance.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE PRIMARY ISSUE(S) FACING THE COUNTY? WHY? HOW WOULD YOU RESOLVE IT?

Summary:

These responses highlight a strong desire for strategic planning, infrastructure improvement, environmental protection, and community engagement to address the county's issues effectively. Key areas issues identified include strategic planning, infrastructure, environmental protection, economic development, and community engagement. Issues and proposed resolutions are grouped by topic and listed below.

Attainable Housing and Housing Developments

Resolution: Improve wrap-around services such as hospitals, schools, infrastructure, transportation, parks, and recreation. Implement strategic planning before further development.

Resolution: Invest in educational opportunities and stipulate costs for new developments. Explore initiatives like Tampa HOPE with wrap-around services.

Economic Development

Resolution: Attract businesses that pay higher wages and invest in housing and economic development to balance the tax base.

Environmental Protection

Resolution: Restart the county's environmentally sensitive land program, adhere to the comprehensive plan, and implement restrictions on fertilizer use and lawn watering.

Government Efficiency

Resolution: Engage the public to ensure tax dollars are spent wisely and explore ways to improve efficiency.

Growth, Infrastructure, Overdevelopment, Population Growth, Infrastructure Investment

Resolution: Address infrastructure issues (schools, roadways, water, sewer, public safety) through taxes and impact fees. Control the rate of growth and invest in infrastructure.

Resolution: Change building and zoning regulations, increase impact fees, and fund environmental land purchases to protect natural resources.

Resolution: Develop a comprehensive plan to manage population growth over the next few years.

Resolution: Develop a plan to invest in growth while budgeting for increased costs. Consider revenue sources like impact fees and bonds.

Services for Children in Crisis

Resolution: Develop legislation to support appropriations requests and create private partnerships with local hospitals.

Transportation

Resolution: Create a Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for roads similar to the water and sewer district plan. Utilize bonds to fund road construction.

OTHER COMMENTS

Summary:

Participants were given the opportunity to provide any other comments they had. Comments were a mix of praise, constructive criticism, and suggestions for improvement across various aspects of county governance and community services. Comments below are sorted by topic/theme.

Strategic Planning:

Importance of implementing strategic plans rather than letting them sit unused.

County Staff:

High praise for the county staff's availability, follow-up, and dedication to serving the community.

Behavior at Meetings:

Need for more positive language and behavior at Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) meetings.

Environmental Cooperation:

Appreciation for the cooperative relationship with the Sierra Club and the desire to continue preserving the rural nature of the community.

Parks and Recreation:

Good facilities but underfunded and understaffed. Need better planning and maintenance.

Healthcare:

Addressing primary care and preventative medicine to reduce reliance on emergency rooms.

County Administration:

Recognition of the county administrator's efforts and the need for resident participation in governance.

Leadership and Unity:

Importance of unified leadership with residents' best interests in mind.

Safety and Governance:

Generally safe county with well-run officials, though some listen more than others.

Economic Development:

Impact of investments like TGH on the community and the need for government expansion to handle these investments.

Future Vision:

Aspiration for economic development and higher-paying jobs, not just residential growth.

Elected Officials:

Expectation for vigorous debates but unified efforts for the county's health, including partnerships with the school district and Brooksville.

County Administrator:

Positive feedback for Jeff, the county administrator, and the need for investment in the future despite tough decisions on funding.

Decision-Making:

Commissioners should base decisions on science and expert opinions.