



Entertainment & Life

Competing visions put northeast Sarasota County at crossroads

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Dueling proposals on table for pastureland between quaint Old Miakka and the ever-expanding Lakewood Ranch

Say you're taking a Sunday drive in the country, cruising east from the city of Sarasota out to the very end of Fruitville Road. Once there, you have two choices.

Turn north and you'll soon arrive in Manatee County, where the powerful gravitational force of Lakewood Ranch propels its 21st-century subdivisions ever eastward along State Road 70 toward Myakka City.

Turn south and you're in Old Miakka, a loose arrangement of close-knit neighbors whose lives revolve around the kinds of farming-related pursuits most

Americans abandoned decades ago.

Right now this empty spot on an aerial map — some 6,000 acres of pastureland north of Fruitville where it meets up with Verna Road — is poised at a crossroads between these two possible scenarios. Competing applications to change Sarasota County's comprehensive plan, its official rulebook for population growth, have been filed concerning the fate of this grassy northeast corner of the county.

Both seek to settle an urgent argument that has been simmering for nearly 20 years.

And the two individuals behind these requests are the same ones who've been doing most of the arguing.

Hamlet vs. heritage

The first "comp plan" amendment, submitted by the development firm NeuMorris LLC, would accelerate the county's gallop toward the future.

It calls for increasing the allowed density of 665 houses on a 3,328-acre parcel to a maximum of 2,662 single-family homes — a 300% difference, but actually a doubling of what the developer could seek under the comp plan as it stands. As a designated "hamlet" under the Sarasota 2050 land use policy, the area is eligible for one home per acre after green space has been set aside. This amendment would raise that number to two.

The second proposal, even more radically, asks the county to consider a strategic retreat to the past.

Unlike most comp plan amendments, which developers use as a tool to maximize their investments in land by pushing for its "highest and best use," this one comes from Becky Ayech, longtime resident, environmental activist and president of the Miakka Community Club. Instead of paying the customary \$5,000 fee to pursue the proposed change, Ayech gathered more than 60 signatures (you need 20) to file a publicly initiated amendment.

The club's grassroots application asks the county to reverse the hamlet designation and travel back in time to before Sarasota 2050 was adopted,

preserving that 6,000-acre expanse north of Fruitville as part of a “rural heritage” area that also includes Old Miakka. This would freeze its maximum residential density at one home per five acres, and rule out any commercial uses except for agricultural ones, like beekeeping or plant nurseries.

“I have to find a way to protect my neighborhood. I am sick and tired of having to fight to live the life, and the life is rural,” says Ayech, perched in a wooden desk at the Old Miakka School House, built in 1914. “There are some people who come out here and move away — but if you last for five years, you never leave. And we die here. These are not investment portfolios; these are our homes.”

Ayech’s opposite number in this turf battle is landowner Rodney Krebs, who has been on a dogged quest to develop his acreage near Old Miakka since the talks around Sarasota 2050 got serious in 2001. The community first caught wind of Krebs’ latest proposal, spearheaded by Donald Neu’s planning firm, at its annual fall hootenanny to raise funds for the historic school.

“When Rod Krebs came up with his latest proposal to get two units per acre and everybody heard about it, the first thing they did was went nuts,” Ayech says. Her neighbors, she adds, are weary of fighting against urban sprawl at public hearings, and losing.

“You go down; you say all your stuff — and I know how the process works, and I put in evidence and I’m on the mark — but you get three minutes” because of regulations that define the hearing as a court-like, or “quasi-judicial” process, she explains. “You’re trying to convey your life in three minutes, and you just can’t.

“So I said, you know what? I’ll just write a comprehensive plan amendment! Because you can talk to the commissioners all the time. It’s legislative; you can talk to the commissioners from the beginning to the end.”

A futuristic plan

Krebs, a Stanford University graduate who wears the faded jeans of a cattle rancher, has been involved in Sarasota County real estate since 1971. Years ago he tried to develop some of the land north of Fruitville Road into five-acre parcels known as ranchettes — as Ayech and the Old Miakka residents still wish he would do — but in 2002 Sarasota County commissioners denied his petition

because they wanted the land reserved for a hamlet under the not-yet-implemented 2050 plan.

Krebs sued the county and won. But in 2004 an appeals court ruled that the county had a right to insist on the hamlet concept for “a legitimate public purpose.” A year later, the lower court reversed its decision and dismissed the case. And not long after that, the Great Recession imposed its own barriers against large-scale developments under the 2050 plan.

Not until recently did those grand ambitions begin stirring back to life — the North Fruitville Hamlet among them.

Krebs declined an interview, and a friend describes him as a private person. But a video taken at Krebs’ and Neu’s December conference with county planning staffers, and [posted online by Citizens for Sarasota County](#), provides some insight into the developers’ “futuristic” plans for the proposed hamlet.

“I’ve been doing this 47 years now,” Krebs says in the video. “I’m still having fun.”

Neu begins the meeting by questioning the rationale behind hamlets, which were conceived as smaller and less dense versions of village developments, with very limited commercial space.

“To tell you the truth, to look at that on paper, I always thought: Somebody’s going to fly over this thing 50 years from now and say, ‘What the heck were these guys doing?’” Neu tells the staff. “But the hamlet regulations have been tweaked as we go along.”

Neu describes a community that not only connects to county water and sewer utilities, but incorporates solar power and “automated retail” — presumably kiosks or vending machines that require no on-site employees. These ideas, Neu suggests, are an improvement over previous plans for the property.

“Our original one was more rustic and rural,” he says. “We think we can do something innovative, and I believe that’s what the policy makers are looking for in this area.”

The North Fruitville Hamlet application contends that a more populous development is necessary to justify the expense of public water and sewer

service. The county would pay the upfront costs for infrastructure that would move fluids so many miles east and then west again, and the hamlet's developers would pay the county back, with interest, as homes are sold.

"The original estimate was \$17.5 million," Krebs says in the video, "and you need some units to spread that out, or it basically makes the land worthless."

Of course, other costs can complicate this equation — transportation expenses among them. The county's plan calls for Fruitville to remain a two-lane road at its eastern end, and the hamlet proposal does not ask for this to change. But a preliminary traffic study filed with the application projects an increase of evening car trips if this amendment is adopted, from 626 a day if the existing ranchette zoning remains in place, to 2,372.

While few specific promises can be made at this point, the NeuMorris application package hints that the buildout of this hamlet will become more feasible through reliance on technologies not yet available.

"This project has 60% of open space, preservation of critical environmental features, utilization of advanced energy conservation construction, centralized water and sewer versus degrading water quality facilities of septic systems, and a master road system plan with reasonable alternatives that will minimize future traffic impacts," the project description concludes. "In addition, this allows for solar arrays, automated retail and autonomous vehicles, which are better alternatives to five-acre ranchettes."

A sense of place

Ayech scoffs at the idea that developing a double-density hamlet would offer much in the way of habitat preservation.

"This property has been pastureland since 1971," she points out. "I really don't know what significant environmental features are going to be on the land, except for things that cows don't like to eat."

One central argument of her comp plan amendment is that in this region of the county, dispersed septic systems are actually more practical than sewer connections. While Krebs described his acreage at the December meeting as "high and dry," Ayech counters that the region's elevation is deceptive because its

soil composition and high water table create problems with flooding and nutrient runoff. As a result, she claims, most of the open space required in a hamlet will need to be in the form of retention ponds.

Her application also makes a bid for the inherent value of protecting a way of life in this corner of the county that has vanished elsewhere. Carving out rural heritage space that goes all the way north to the county line and as far west as possible, she argues, would not only fend off urban sprawl, traffic jams and light pollution. It would enhance the region's diversity.

This is a claim staked out in a 38-page document called the "Old Miakka Neighborhood Plan." It was crafted after a series of meetings in 2006, to help the community navigate its unique role in the Sarasota 2050 process.

"There is a strong sense of place here, a rural identity linking humans and land," the document says. "Old Miakka prides itself on its historically relevant rural heritage. The residents are particularly troubled that new developments entering the neighborhood will not harmonize with the natural, agricultural, and rural surroundings."

The document fixes boundaries at the county line to the north and east, Myakka River State Park to the south, and Dog Kennel Road to the west.

"We came up with the plan we gave to to the commissioners," Ayech says. "They all accepted it — but they didn't adopt it. We all went away thinking that acceptance and adoption were the same, and they're not. And I didn't find out about that until Lakepark Estates."

Lakepark Estates, a 400-home community just west of the Krebs tract, won approval as a hamlet in December 2014 but has not yet been developed. The parcel is not included in the North Fruitville Hamlet service area on a map provided by NeuMorris.

A public workshop on the Old Miakka initiative is set for 7 p.m. Monday at the Old Miakka Methodist Church. The next stop for both amendments will be the county Planning Commission.

Ayech expects Krebs to attend her workshop, as she did his. Over the years, she says, "We've gotten along fine. We just agree to disagree."

At the Old Miakka hootenanny, Ayech says, she told Krebs about her recent serious health ordeal.

“He said, ‘I’m glad you lived,’” she recalls. “And I said, ‘Of course — because who can aggravate you as well as I do?’”



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Poll: Fruitville Road growth

Which vision would you support for the acreage north of Fruitville Road in northeast Sarasota County?

- A "hamlet" with increased density, connected to sewer and water services
- A preservation of the existing zoning that allows for one home on five acres, as part of a rural heritage area

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