

Don't let rural land question slide

OUR VIEW

These are mind-boggling times to be a public servant. Regular channels of communication are clogged; phones ring in empty offices; face-to-face conversations and meetings are off the calendar.

So we have seen on the local level some mixed signals, misunderstandings and failures to touch base and take temperatures. The Sarasota County school district's recent floating of possible options for post-coronavirus operations — which surprised teachers, parents, principals and even board members — is just one example of well-intentioned folks talking past each other in public.

At a time like this, it's even more important for government watchdogs to be alert for intentions less benign. Letting important issues slip off the agenda and under the table can cause damage that will be tough to unravel years from now.

One maneuver that might fall into this category is the indefinite postponement of a scheduled June 18 hearing on a citizenled initiative to amend Sarasota County's comprehensive plan. Unlike typical developers' petitions to allow higher housing density on their parcels, this one would actually decrease the density by means of a "rural heritage" designation.

The affected properties comprise some 6,000 acres north of Fruitville Road in northeastern Sarasota County, where new Lakewood Ranch subdivisions are already oozing down below the Manatee County line. Homeowners in nearby Old Miakka are asking commissioners to reverse a "hamlet" designation under the Sarasota 2050 land-use agreement — setting the area's maximum residential density at one home per five acres and disallowing businesses except for agricultural ones, like beekeeping or plant nurseries.

The “rural heritage” concept is in direct contradiction to — and a defense against — a competing move to intensify residential growth in the contested sector. The existing comp plan calls for one home per acre after green space has been set aside, and property owners seek to double that, which would have the effect of a Lakewood Ranch-like transformation on what is now pastureland.

Last September, the commission voted 3-2 to give the proposal life support by requiring a staff analysis. “This is about people trying to protect a lifestyle that is pretty much not replaceable,” Commissioner Nancy Detert said then.

We believe this is what distinguishes Old Miakka’s quest to define and perpetuate itself from most growth-and-development conflicts that flourish perennially in Florida. There simply is no other part of the county like this one, where residents can live off the land in community with others, preserving a small-scale agricultural habitat that has all but disappeared elsewhere. When it goes, it’s gone.

Sarasota County’s commitment to setting aside natural open spaces is commendable. And its ability to contain the kind of sprawl that appears to satisfy most new Floridians’ ideas of life in paradise is severely limited by state law.

A decision on whether our East County needs a rural heritage designation, in addition to subdivisions, green spaces and the larger ranches that remain, affects everyone who lives here — not just Old Miakka residents and property owners. This is not a squabble; this is an existential question.

We hope to see it back on the county’s agenda soon.

The Herald-Tribune Editorial Board