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The growth story gets a new twist

Just about two decades ago, I heard tell of a woman in Old Miakka named Becky Ayech, who had some contrarian opinions about the monumental long-range planning process our county had just undertaken, known as Sarasota 2050.

I called her up and we arranged to meet at the northern entrance of Myakka River State Park. We sat on the grass and gazed at pine trees and pondered the fate of East County – those palmetto-studded rural expanses that had been protected from development by something called the Urban Service Boundary, but would not be for very much longer.

Toward the end of our talk, Ayech drilled to the heart of what she called “the major flaw” in the 2050 concept, which aimed to redefine these open agricultural lands as green preserves punctuated by clustered villages and hamlets, mirroring some hazy ideal of a bucolic English countryside.

“Sarasota,” she told me, “is a place where people move at least every five years. If you have people who are only going to live someplace for two to five years, you’ll never create a village. I know what they’re trying to capture, but it’s not a question that goes to the heart of what Sarasota is like. If it did, we wouldn’t see so many houses for sale all over town.”

Early last year I met up with Ayech again, this time at the beloved country schoolhouse in Old Miakka. She was still fighting to maintain Old Miakka’s hold on its small piece of permanence that is the exception to Sarasota’s – and most of Florida’s – rule of constant churn. And she had come up with what seemed a brilliant maneuver: to propose an amendment to the county’s comprehensive plan, just as developers do when the rules get in their way.

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Becky Ayech, Old Miakka resident

She pretty much knew how this ploy would end, as it did last month with a unanimous thumbs-down from the county’s Planning Board, with umbrage attached. While the rural heritage proposal will still get a hearing from the full county commission this fall, it’s safe to assume our elected officials have already gathered their nails for its coffin.

But something happened during Ayech’s shrewd reboot of the planning process: The concept of rural heritage, the notion that a way of life is worth preserving, has escaped the shackles of the three-minute public-comment sound bite and become a part of our community discourse.

It surfaced swiftly at a recent Tiger Bay Club debate between candidates for the commission seat representing East County. “Keep the country country,” Democratic challenger Mark Pienkos said, is “not a cry just simply for the folks out in the eastern portion of our county. It should be a cry for all of us.”

The telling pivot from Republican incumbent Mike Moran was to paint Pienkos as one of those interlopers who swan into Florida and try to show us how to run things. Moran said it was akin to him traveling up to Pienkos’ former home and “lecturing the folks of Wisconsin on how to milk cows.”

Funny how quickly a genuine discussion in Florida about urban sprawl can disintegrate into a specious, no-win conflict over who was here first.

But the question of what is truly worth preserving as we accommodate new residents should remain on the table between now and Nov. 3 – for all local candidates, and most especially for those who aspire to a seat in Tallahassee, where Florida’s real growth decisions are made.

Barbara Peters Smith is the Herald-Tribune’s opinions editor.