

Sarasota County to consider 10,000-acre Hi Hat Ranch development plan

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SARASOTA COUNTY – The Hi Hat Ranch in east Sarasota County has been a fixture for so long that it’s easy to assume its rustic, wide open spaces will be around forever.

Think again.

Jim Turner, one of the 10,000-acre, family-owned ranch’s heirs, will ask the Sarasota County Planning Commission on Thursday to OK a blueprint that will outline the vision for the property that stretches north from Clark Road all the way to Fruitville Road.

That vision replaces the rural landscape with a cluster of villages, retail shops and new schools.

It calls for over 13,000 homes and 450,000 square feet for area businesses – enough to accommodate about 30,000 new residents decades from now.



In 2018, the Sarasota County Commission granted Turner his request to change development rules specific to the vast swath of undeveloped land. The change allowed for a two-step approval process that he said would better plan for the future community, expected to take 30 to 40 years to build.

The first step in that process involves the planning board's vetting Thursday two of Turner's proposals. Sarasota County commissioners will take up the issue at a later date.

More: [Read the entire proposal here](#)

Turner will ask planning commissioners to recommend a comprehensive plan amendment outlining how and where growth occurs on over 1,259 acres on the northeastern portion of the property.

This change calls for increased density and fewer greenways set aside for wildlife habitat – something critics of the plan fear will fundamentally change the rural character of eastern Sarasota County.



The 1,200 acres, along with the remaining 6,000 acres of pasture land north of Fruitville Road are “all that are left of the open space in northeastern Sarasota County,” said Becky Ayeach, a longtime resident of the area and president of the Miakka Community Club.

The Miakka Community Club is the group behind the citizen-led petition that sought to preclude more intense development on the 6,000 acres north of Fruitville Road. That plan was thwarted by county commissioners last year.

Turner is also asking the planning commission to OK a master plan that will guide development on Hi Hat Ranch – development that includes vague plans for a new high school and K-8 school, a fire station, regional sports complex and two major road extensions.

If these proposals are approved by county commissioners, Turner or a future developer will have to file a separate request to rezone portions of the property in two to five increments. Nothing can be developed until the rezone request is approved.

“When the family will decide for the second step with the rezone remains to be seen,” Turner said.

‘A lesson to remember’

The 1,200-acre northeastern portion of the property is near other approved developments such as Hidden Creek, Windward at Lakewood Ranch and Lakepark Estates, as well as two gated and deed-restricted gold course communities (Oak Ford and The Founders Club).

Turner is asking the county to change the land designation from “hamlet” to “village.”

A “hamlet” designation is among the smaller development patterns permitted under the 2050 growth management plan for eastern Sarasota County and among the most distant from the county’s coastal urban core. The development standards typically consist of rural homes clustered around a church or neighborhood store. It’s also surrounded by large expanses of protected open space (60%).



Standards in the 2050 plan for a “village” call for preservation of 50% of the property and would increase the minimum and maximum density. The maximum density allowed would be five to six dwelling units per acre. Turner also vows to set aside at least 15% of the housing stock as more affordable housing.

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Rather than solely having the low residential development in the “hamlet” area, the amendment will redistribute the total units throughout the proposed larger village area, the county says.

The additional village land use area would potentially allow the county to eventually build a high school and a regional sports complex.

As part of this proposal, Turner is also asking the county to move a section of Countryside Line farther east. This would create a demarcation line east of which the county would maintain a rural land use character.

County staff has determined that the allowable intensity on the 1,200 acres will increase.

However, Turner argues that the proposed changes will not increase the entitlement of allowed housing.

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“All this change does is give us the ability to have more room to spread those units out to give us more planning flexibility to accommodate” requests from the county to build certain amenities such as schools.

“There are lots of benefits to having a bigger palette to paint on,” Turner said. “It not only allows us to provide the high school site, regional park and those kinds of things – it enables us to step down density next to existing neighborhoods.”

Ayech, the president of the Old Miakka Community Club, noted that the remaining 8,683 acres of Hi Hat Ranch, under the “village” development standard, would lead to “urban development” larger than the rural areas in east county.



This is a “backwards” approach, Ayech said, to the goals set forth in the 2050 plan. It allows developers to build more homes per acre as long as they follow certain guidelines to preserve open space.

“While the applicant says they only want 13,000 units at buildout, they will not be the developers,” Ayech said. “Any developer may ask for the maximum density, not the minimum, or any amount in between.”

Ayech pointed to the 400-home Lakepark Estates approved by commissioners in 2014, which became the first smaller “hamlet” development to be approved under Sarasota County’s 2050 growth management plan.

“The recommended density was 50 to 150 dwelling units and they got 400 instead,” Ayech said. “A lesson to remember.”



‘A big deal’

Hi Hat Ranch in the late 1930s was one of the largest properties in the area, encompassing nearly 42 square miles – or one-eighth of the county. In the mid-1940s the Turner family purchased 26,200 acres from its previous owner, a New York businessman.

The land was home to orange and grapefruit groves, timber harvesting operations and sod farming before the family sold off tracts, eventually shrinking it to the size it is today.

The family has already developed [The Forest at Hi Hat Ranch](#), a master-planned, residential community of luxury homes, on 270 acres.

The property is composed of mixed rangeland, improved pasture, as well as environmentally sensitive land such as freshwater marshes and wet prairies.



While the family still intends to stay in the agricultural business – at least into the next generation – Turner said that the proposal before the county helps to prepare the family for future financial sustainability. The proposal also pays homage to the family’s long history of environmental stewardship.

The plans also call for the preservation of about 5,500 acres of open space and native habitat. There are 297 acres set aside for parks and trails.

“That’s a big deal,” Turner said. “We’re fairly proud of our environmental stewardship.”

The master plan also includes 13,081 residential units in two to five villages spread throughout the 9,960-acre property. It also calls for two major internal roadways – the Bee Ridge Extension and the “North South Roadway B.”

It’s unclear where the first village development will be built or where the main entrance will be. However, the county has indicated that it prefers constructing its new schools off the planned extension of Bee Ridge Road. That’s also where existing utility services are closest.