Hurdles for rural living in Sarasota County?

Citizen-led movement to protect property expects bad news at hearing

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SARASOTA COUNTY — A unique proposal to change Sarasota County's official roadmap for growth — a plan submitted by residents instead of a developer to protect their rural lifestyle — is back on the planning board's agenda for Aug. 20 after being indefinitely postponed in June.

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HURDLES

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But there's potentially bad news ahead for homeowners who feel their lifestyle and property values are threatened by nearby development.

Last September, county commissioners voted 3-2 to support further consideration of the proposal by requiring a staff analysis — an analysis that is generally supportive of the plan but recommends that it be denied.

"When you read everything they say, it sounds like they're on board with it," said Becky Ayech, a longtime resident and president of the Miakka Community Club, the organization that submitted the proposal.

"I am shocked; I thought they'd say yes," Ayech said.

The recommended denial comes down to two points:

First, there are two proposals on the table for 6,000 acres of pasture land between Old Miakka and the ever-expanding Lakewood Ranch.

The first "comp plan" amendment, submitted by the development firm NeuMorris LLC, would allow higher housing density on their parcels. The second proposal, submitted by homeowners in nearby Old Miakka, is asking commissioners to consider decreasing the density to preserve a "rural heritage" designation.

But the property at the center of NueMorris' amendment has been sold — and the firm's "comp plan" amendment is on hold indefinitely. Without the developer's amendment, the county believes that the citizen-led initiative would "probably have not been filed," according to a staff analysis.

Not so, said Ayech.

"This is immaterial," said Ayech. "When people talk about why we did this, it really was so that we could codify neighborhood plans so that we wouldn't have to go down and fight over zoning every time there's a new proposal."

The intersection of Fruitville and Verna Roads looking northwest. More than 3,000 acres of agricultural land is the proposed site of a 2,662-home development with commercial space and full utility service. [HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE PHOTO / DAN WAGNER]

Ayech and other homeowners in nearby Old Miakka are asking commissioners to reverse a "hamlet" designation under the county's Sarasota 2050 land-use agreement — which allows for one home per acre after green space has been set aside.

Residents of Old Miakka want to set the area's maximum residential density at one home per five acres and disallow businesses except for agricultural ones, like beekeeping or plant nurseries.

The main argument presented by Ayech and other homeowners is that the "hamlet" form of development does not blend in with the Miakka Community Club area. The preference expressed by many of those residents is for the area to remain country in feel without any additional residential density being added.

While the county agrees that the citizen-led amendment is generally consistent with the primary tenets of Sarasota 2050, it does not fully meet the intention of preserving large tracts of green space by clustering a variety of housing styles around a town center.

In contrast, the county agrees that 2,400 homes on the properties that comprise some 6,000 acres of pasture land near Fruitville Road in northeastern Sarasota County may lead to urban sprawl. The analysis also agrees that greater density and more development east of Interstate 75 would increase traffic, and necessary utility expansions would require financial assistance from county taxpayers.

Why the denial?

The change proposed by the homeowners in Old Miakka asks the county to reverse the hamlet designation and travel back in time to before Sarasota 2050 was adopted, preserving that 6,000 expanse as part of a "rural heritage" area that also includes Old Miakka.

The county argues that the "hamlet" designation provides the ability to master plan large land areas for wildlife and environmental corridors. The current land designation has an obligation to protect 60% of the lands for green space, which could be protected and managed through a conservation easement and land use management plan.

It is notable that Sarasota County has gradually chipped away at allowances for these protected areas — including allowing developers to count lakes constructed for drainage purposes as open spaces, leading to less land set aside for conservation.

In 2014, the county unanimously agreed to approve a developer's plan to build a 400-home community off Fruitville Road, seven miles east of I-75. The high-end Lakepark Estates, with agricultural operations bordering the site on two sides, was permitted to count nearly 600 acres of drainage ponds as a wildlife green space.

In emails to county staff included in information for the Aug. 20 hearing, several residents called that decision a "contradiction" that "ignored" or "overlooked" the county's own rules.

Residents also felt that the county would continue to approve development projects that green-light the maximum allowable density of 400 homes — stripping east Sarasota County of its country feel.

Old Miakka residents also argue that suburban "hamlet" developments similar to Lakepark Estates don't support the rural nature of eastern Fruitville Road.

"Eliminating the hamlet subdivisions will ensure that eastern Fruitville Road will remain the rural paradise that we were promised," Alan Woodle, an east county resident, told planning commissioners in an email on May 30.

The Old Miakka Community Club argues that "less is more" when it comes to preserving environmental systems — particularly because the land in question falls within the Myakka River and southern coastal watersheds. The less intrusion into these important watersheds, they argue, the better off they will be.

The county's public utilities and environmental protection division indicated that they have no objections to the changes proposed by the Miakka Community Club. The county's analysis also admits that it isn't clear what effect, if any, the proposed change would have on the ability to protect wildlife and environmental corridors.

'Generally consistent'

In NueMorris' application — which asks the county for a density increase — the firm acknowledges the lands are not developable under the current designation without the financial assistance afforded through a utility extension agreement with the county.

According to the staff's analysis, the need for a utility extension agreement raises questions about one of the main tenets of Sarasota 2050 — that development be fiscally neutral to the county and its residents.

More homes in the farthest eastern and northern reaches of the county would put an undue burden on Sarasota's already beleaguered wastewater system, Old Miakka residents say. The proposed change to Sarasota's growth plan would eliminate the county's responsibility and associated costs to provide drinking water since each home will provide its own water by individual wells.

The new date

Both the citizen and the developer-led proposal were set to go before the Planning Commission on June 18 but were indefinitely postponed.

The planning board is expected to review the citizen-led initiative on Aug. 20 and give recommendations to county commissioners. The board is expected to hold two public hearings on the amendment.

One is tentatively scheduled for Sept. 23, and the adoption public hearing may be set for Dec. 9.

While Ayech expressed some reservations about the county's analysis, she said she was pleased to finally move forward.

"I'm happy we're finally having our opportunity to put forth the reasons why we want this designation," Ayech said.

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