

Panel: Revisit public input

Seeks stricter rules on growth issues

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SARASOTA COUNTY – The nine-member board charged with advising

the Sarasota County Commission on planning and development decisions wants elected leaders to consider making it harder for citizens to help shape growth management.

Before a unanimous vote late Thursday that would formally request that elected officials investigate a rarely used process for the public to launch proposed growth management changes, one board member expressed

particular satisfaction with the effort.

“Oh, yes,” said Commissioner Andrew Stultz, the president of Atlas Building Co. of Florida, during a roll call vote.

The planning board members did not speak in depth about the issue on Thursday. But it’s clear from previous discussions that the advisory panel believes that the required 20 signatures now required to trigger a request that

the county revisit its roadmap for growth is insufficient.

Section 94-87 of the county code allows citizens to submit to the county a proposal to amend the county’s long-range comprehensive, or growth plan, amendment, as long as they meet the signature requirements. The requirement has been in place as far back as

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1990 in the early days of implementing Florida's sweeping Growth Management Act of the 1980s, but its origin or intent is unclear.

In a letter to the County Commission, the planning board recommends that staff review the criteria for residents who want to change the use of public and private property in the growth plan. They also want to compare Sarasota County to other jurisdictions.

"We want to know if this is really standard protocol across the state, then in our efforts, we're going to find some good reason behind it," said Commissioner Kevin Cooper, who is also the vice president of communications and strategic initiatives for Mote Marine.

It's unclear when county commissioners will take up the issue.

The effort to change publicly initiated growth plan changes came after the Planning Commission unanimously voted on Aug. 21 to recommend denial of a citizen effort to preserve some of the last rural landscape in east Sarasota County.

Vice Chairman Colin Pember, the land acquisition manager at the Atlanta-based construction company Pulte Group Inc., led the charge.

"I could go to Publix and in five minutes get 20 signatures," Pember said.

The publicly initiated amendment was the brainchild of Becky Ayech, a longtime resident, environmental activist and president of the Miakka Community Club in northeast Sarasota County.

Instead of paying the customary \$5,000 fee to pursue the proposed east county growth management change, Ayech gathered signatures of 47 verified registered voters to file the proposal. She later collected more than 500 signatures.

Pember did not respond to an email requesting comment.

Ayech has said the Miakka Community Club was willing to pay the fee but was told by county planning staff that it could instead gather signatures.

In an email to elected officials on Aug. 23, Ayech expressed her dissatisfaction with how she and others were treated by the advisory board, saying planning commissioners did not consider the proposal's merits.



Wendy Rossiter holds up a sign during a Sarasota County Commission meeting in 2019. Commissioners considered a citizen-initiated comprehensive plan amendment last year regarding development in the northeast corner of the county. MIKE LANG/HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE

Instead, "they lectured the participants on how egregious they were by following the process set out by Sarasota's planning department."

Both planning and county commissioners frequently consider proposals to amend the comprehensive plan, which outlines how and where growth occurs.

However, the most recent proposal was different. The Miakka Community Club is seeking to preclude more intense development on 6,000 acres north of Fruitville Road, far from the county's urban core.

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None of the residents own property there and a number of property owners and developers within the 6,000 acres of pasture land have said the effort, if approved, would strip them of their rights to build homes there.

Prior to a rezoning, developers are required to get the consent of the property owner beforehand. By law, only a

property owner or the County Commission can do so. So what happens when someone is trying to alter the use of land that they don't even own?

The answer: It's complicated. It also hasn't been done before in Sarasota County.

Any repercussions would be on the County Commission, because it took up the responsibility when it voted last September to support further consideration of the proposal. County commissioners will take a second look at the plan on Sept. 23.

The issue of petition signatures came up last year, too.

Last June, before the Planning Commission rejected the Miakka Community Club's proposal, Laura Benson, now the board's chair, expressed astonishment that as few as 20 people could initiate such an amendment.

"This opens up a Pandora's box of more requests from anybody with 20 friends who want to start a process," Benson said. "I think it's a very bad precedent to set."

Three months later, County Commissioners Mike Moran and Christian Ziegler also expressed reservations about how the citizen-led amendment came about.

"I do have some concern about people hijacking this process," Ziegler said.