

LOCAL

Planners urge rejection of Ag Reserve land swap

Recommends County Commission kill GL Homes development plan

Mike Diamond
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The county Planning Commission on Friday delivered a blow to a GL Homes land swap that would allow it to build 1,250 homes west of Boca Raton in the Agricultural Reserve.

The Planning Commission voted 9-4 to recommend to the County Commission that they kill the plan when it is presented to them on Feb. 2. County commissioners rely on Planning Commission

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The 683-acre Hyder West parcel is farmland west of State Road 7 and borders the Stonebridge Country Club, top, west of Boca Raton.

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Land swap

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recommendations to determine whether developments should be approved but they are not obligated to accept them, and have sometimes arrived at different decisions.

Lori Vinikoor, who has served on the Planning Commission for more than 12 years, noted that the Planning Commission serves in an advisory capacity. "They seriously consider our recommendations, but ultimately it is their call."

Vinikoor, president of the Alliance of Delray Residential Associations, said she was concerned about placing another dense development in the Ag Reserve.

The homebuilder wants to build 1,000 high-end homes and 250 workforce housing units on a parcel known as Hyder West on State Road 7 just north of Stonebridge Country Club.

To obtain the zoning changes it needs, it will give the county 1,600 acres in Indian Trails Grove in the Acreage area and significantly reduce the number of homes it would build there.

The benefit to GL Homes is that its houses in west of Boca Raton will sell for much more in the area than in Indian Trails Grove.

The homebuilder is seeking to initiate "a text amendment," which is a change in the county's zoning code. An initiation results in staff developing the actual wording for an amendment that county commissioners would ultimately act on. If the initiation is denied, the process ends, and no further action is taken.

GL Homes needs the text amendment changes because the current code bars development west of State Road 7 and prevents a developer from using land outside the Ag Reserve to increase the density of developments within the Ag Reserve.

The county created the 21,000-acre Ag Reserve 20 years ago. It stretches from Clint Moore Road to Lantana Road between the Turnpike and State Road 7. It is designed to protect agriculture and preserve open space by limiting density in residential developments.

GL Homes Friday presented a nine-minute video touting the benefits of its land swap.

The county would acquire 1,600 acres in Indian Trails Grove, more than double the size of the 683-acre Hyder West parcel in the Ag Reserve.

And 250 of the 1,250 housing units built would be for workforce housing, units that would help address the county's critical lack of affordable housing.

Staff recommended that the initiation occur to allow for GL Homes to

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Lori Vinikoor
Planning Commission member for more than 12 years, on its recommendation the County Commissioners reject Ag Reserve land swap

more fully develop its proposal.

"This is not a good idea," said Drew Martin of the Sierra Club. "It needs to be turned down now."

The plan would be the end of the Ag Reserve, Planning Commissioner Dagmar Brahs said Friday, noting she was concerned about the precedent.

While the plan is site specific and only applies to the two sites in GL Homes' proposal, Brahs noted that it opens the door to similar proposals.

The county, she added, voted to exempt self-storage facilities from the commercial cap in the Ag Reserve so that one could be built on Boynton Beach Boulevard.

Just before the GL Homes' hearing, the Planning Commission considered a plan from a developer who wants to build another self-storage facility near the intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Lyons Road.

"So that self-storage decision we made came back to bite us in the butt," she noted.

GL Homes argues that one of the benefits to the county is that it would acquire "a critical piece of property" at Indian Trails Grove that could be used for needed water storage projects but Planning Commissioner Barbara Roth said there has been no evidence presented that such a project would or could be built. Other commissioners were concerned about the "tremendous burden" that would be placed on staff to process the text amendment.

Area Realtor Jim Knight spoke in favor of proposal. He said the 250 workforce housing units are needed to address the lack of affordable housing in the Ag Reserve, where many homes sell for more than \$800,000. He said issues need to be addressed on a county-wide level, and the GL Homes' plan does that.

Clifford Hertz, an attorney representing GL Homes, said he was taken aback by some of the criticisms of the homebuilder. One speaker called the plan "a gimmick." Hertz said GL Homes has been very transparent about its intentions, and that the criticisms were inappropriate.

If the land-swap deal is rejected, GL Homes says it will proceed with already approved plans to build 3,897 homes in Indian Trails Grove.