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County votes against land swap

This, despite developer adding more to deal

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For the second time this year, the Palm Beach County Planning Commission has recommended that county commissioners nix a land swap that would allow GL Homes to build a billion-dollar plus development in the Agricultural Reserve west of Boca Raton.

The commission voted 8-4 Friday against the land swap despite a new

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Land swap

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sweetener from the homebuilder to construct a reservoir at its own expense to address water-supply issues and improve water quality in the Lake Worth Lagoon and the Loxahatchee River. The project would cost GL Homes as much \$7.5 million.

The above-ground reservoir would provide storage for about 3,000 acre-feet of water. One acre-foot equals about 326,000 gallons, or enough water to cover an acre of land – about the size of a football field – 1 foot deep, according to the Water Education Foundation.

The reservoir will have a normal high-water depth of 4 feet. The perimeter berm is proposed to have a top width of 20 feet.

GL Homes proposed land swap: County has final vote Aug. 31

County Planner Bryan Davis acknowledged that the project would have benefits but noted there was no guarantee it would receive the necessary state and federal permits, and that even if they were acquired, it could take years to complete permitting and construction.

County commissioners will have the final say on Aug. 31.

Davis said the land swap would undermine rules put in place to protect the Ag Reserve, a 22,000-acre zone west of Boca Raton, Delray Beach, Boynton Beach and east of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

Davis noted the Ag Reserve has long been recognized “as an area of unique farmlands and wetlands.” A growth plan was adopted more than 20 years ago to foster preservation of agriculture and limit development. Despite the loss of thousands of acres of farmland to development, much of it is still preserved. It generated farm sales of \$120 million in 2017, according to the county report.

GL Homes has built several developments in the Ag Reserve by agreeing to preserve land off-site but within the Ag Reserve. At issue is that it now wants the county to change its zoning code to allow it to build on that preserved land, which is west of State Road 7. Current zoning bars development west of the state highway.

“To do the deal, I need to un-preserve the land at the Hyder West parcel (west of Boca Raton),” said Kevin Ratterree, a vice president with GL Homes. “At end of the day, we are taking 1,285 homes out of Indian Trails, and building 1,277 at Hyder West. It is effectively a wash.”

GL Homes land swap idea: Who would get what in the trade?

The unprecedented land swap would result in GL Homes giving the county 1,600 acres in Indian Trails Grove in The Acreage in exchange for being able to build a 1,000-unit, high-end development on State Road 7 adjacent to Stonebridge Country Club in suburban Boca Raton.

GL Homes has also agreed to build a 277-unit townhouse development for affordable housing. There would be 152 for-sale units and 125 apartments. In addition, GL Homes would build a 100-

acre passive park and an equestrian riding trail.

Planning Commissioner Rick Stopek said the land swap was an extraordinarily good deal for GL Homes, adding: “If I were GL Homes, I’d want to do this deal, too.”

Ratterree acknowledged that sale prices of homes on the Hyder West parcel would start at \$800,000. With lot premiums and extras, most of the houses would be expected to sell for more than \$1 million.

In The Acreage, sale prices would be about half of that amount, Stopek said, noting that means that GL Homes would generate nearly a half-billion dollars more in sales by selling homes west of Boca Raton.

“You cannot not look at these numbers,” Stopek said. “I respect everybody’s right to make money, but then you don’t cloak this as a gift.”

GL Homes land swap idea: What are the pros and cons of the deal?

Planning Commissioner Lori Vinkoor argued the project was of no benefit to Ag Reserve residents who already struggle to cope with the lack of necessary infrastructure. All the benefit is for residents in the northwest part of the county, she noted.

To that point, Palm Beach County Fire Rescue said the development in the Ag Reserve would have “a significant impact” on its operation, generating nearly 185 additional calls a year. The expected response time would be 9 minutes and 30 seconds, which is greater than its goal of 7 minutes and 30 seconds.

In January, the Planning Commission recommended that the land swap not be submitted to the state for review. County commissioners voted 4-3, nonetheless, for transmittal following a five-hour plus meeting. With the state review complete, the issue returned to the Planning Commission for a second time last week.

Some Planning Commissioners supported the project. John Carr and Dennis Grohmann both noted that water supply and water quality are major issues affecting the county. Grohmann said the proposal is “a great private-sector solution” to help address those issues along with the critical need for affordable housing in the Ag Reserve.

Said Carr: “GL Homes benefits but so, too, will the county.”

Pumps at the reservoir would direct the flow of water toward the Grassy Waters Preserve, which would cleanse it before it reaches the Lake Worth Lagoon and the Loxahatchee River, according to a consultant hired by GL Homes.

In a prepared statement, Ratterree called the proposal “a bold idea with a multitude of benefits, including 1,600 acres dedicated for preservation and agricultural use, a water preservation project and the largest for-sale-workforce housing project ever. The county commission will have the opportunity to weigh these benefits and make the final decision (on Aug. 31).”

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