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SARASOTA

First hurdle cleared for 10,000-acre Hi Hat Ranch development plan in Sarasota County

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SARASOTA COUNTY – A blueprint for one of the largest housing projects ever planned in the rustic, wide open area east of Interstate 75 has been OK'd by Sarasota County's planning board.

The Planning Commission's unanimous decision last week brought the owners of the 10,000-acre Hi Hat Ranch closer to its vision for replacing much of the rural landscape with a cluster of villages, retail shops and new schools 30 to 40 years from now, despite pleas from residents against moving forward.

Opponents raised concerns about potential traffic, environmental impacts and other aspects of the proposal. They also argued that there were not enough details or proposed solutions to proceed with the plan to bring more than 13,000 new homes on a tract of land that stretches from Fruitville to Clark roads.

But planning commissioners, who serve as an advisory board for the Sarasota County Commission that has the final say on development, insisted that the proposal to develop Hi Hat Ranch at this point is only the big picture. The finer details will be worked out later.

"This is the 80,000-foot view here," said Planning Commission Chairman Colin Pember, noting that additional steps and years were needed before the first home could be built.

"Right now, we're just setting the stage," Pember said.

The proposal calls for a cluster of new homes and retail space on half of the property's acreage. According to the blueprint approved by the planning board, the future development would also include 450,000 square feet for commercial space. In all, the proposal hopes to accommodate about 30,000 new residents decades from now.

Most of the development would concentrate on the eastern half of Hi Hat Ranch.

There are also future plans for a 250-acre gravel, sand and soil excavation site on the northwestern portion of the property – somewhere within the 5,400 acres set aside for open space and native habitat. Critics assailed that decision as shortsighted and one that could potentially harm the environment.

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

While commissioners lauded the proposal, they also appeared to acknowledge past mistakes. Those mistakes, they said, have led to massive, suburban-style housing projects in recent decades.

“It’s a shame that we took this long to figure out how to make developments like this and that we had to go east of the interstate to do it,” said Commissioner Kevin Cooper.

‘We’re not going anywhere’

The recommendation by the planning board sets the stage for how and where growth will occur on 1,259 acres on the northeastern portion of the property.

The comprehensive plan amendment would allow for a high school, a regional sports complex and future housing proposals.

This change would also move Countryside Line, which delineates the suburban-type development to the west and the rural designations to the east.

The change in the land-use designation would also allow for more pristine portions of the property to be retained for conservation because it distributes development density throughout the entire property, proponents say.

Jim Turner, the heir to the 10,000-acre Hi Hat Ranch, noted that those 1,200 acres are on the least environmentally valuable area of Hi Hat Ranch.

“It’s scorched earth; it’s not very pretty,” Turner said of the landscape. “It’s black plastic and tomato stakes.”

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Michael Hutchinson, the president of the Bern Creek Homeowner’s Association, the community directly across from Hi Hat on Fruitville Road, said his biggest concern is around

changes proposed to the comprehensive plan.

Hutchinson pointed to Lakepark Estates, next to Bern Creek. Those homes haven't been built yet. He said if the county approves the changes, there will be nothing to stop the developer of Lakepark Estates from asking for similar density increases.

"Once it's done here, it will be difficult to get someone else not to do it," Hutchinson said. "If they can get an exception to the rules, I'm sure they will."

Other speakers expressed frustration about broken promises by the County Commission, allowing for greater density and stripping away hard-fought guidelines that have led to a degradation of rural Sarasota County.

Opponents also fear that if these proposals are approved by county commissioners, Turner or a future developer will have to file separate rezoning requests for portions of the property in two to five increments. Nothing can be developed until the rezone request is approved.

While opponents appeared to praise Turner and his family, the longtime owners of Hi Hat Ranch, for their efforts to work with neighbors and environmental stewardship, some feared that another developer could come along and change those blueprints.

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Turner said his family has its reputation at stake. They are also dedicated to honor its commitments to the community and will be involved in the development process as it moves forward in the coming decades.

"We're not going anywhere," Turner said. "Not unlike Lakewood Ranch or Palmer Ranch, we're going to see this through to the end."

'Leaping over lands'

The main village center is proposed at the intersection of Bee Ridge Road Extension and "North South Roadway B," which cuts vertically through the property. A smaller village is proposed farther north, where retail and commercial spaces and schools are planned.

The master plan calls for a minimum of two and a maximum of five villages within Hi Hat Ranch.

Critics said that the locations of the future villages are not clear enough and expressed concern about the timing of the villages, specifically related to infrastructure and the

incremental development of utilities.

Turner has previously indicated that the first village would be at the Hi Hat Ranch offices on Fruitville Road, 2.1 miles from the property's western boundary.

"This location is akin to a hole in the doughnut," Becky Ayech, the president of the Miakka Community Club, told commissioners in an email.

This likely would require running utility lines either from the Bee Ridge Road facilities or from the extension of utilities at Lakepark Estates.

"This would be leaping over lands where it would make more planning sense to begin the villages and the move easterly," Ayech said.

There will be three major access points to Hi Hat Ranch. The first is from an easterly extension of Bee Ridge Road through Rothenbach Park. Another is planned for Clark Road in about 20 or 30 years. Fruitville Road is another entrance. Turner or a future developer will have to pay for road improvements.

Hi Hat Ranch has several agricultural wells and plans to use those wells as backup wells for lawn irrigation, if reclaimed water is not available and lakes and storm water ponds fail. The developer will have to construct these, as there are no lakes on the property.

Critics have asked that the county require Hit Hat Ranch to cap these wells. That's because many of the wells on the ranch are drilled deep and cased shallow, allowing the upward migration of poor-water quality they fear will move to homeowners' wells.