

## Hideaway Cove plan meets with opposition

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Strong opposition from a large number of concerned residents forced Lee County Hearing Examiner Diana Parker to continue the Hideaway Cove case until June 14.

The applicant's representative, Wayne Arnold, presented witnesses who spoke to the environmental compatibility of the project and cited analysis and traffic studies that showed the development would have minimal impact.

The residents' attorney, Ralf Brookes, grilled each expert over their testimony. He asked whether the access road for the development would cross the slough, whether the area is in the 100-year flood zone, if it would be possible to build fewer units, whether fewer units would have less of an impact.

He also raised questions about the impact of fertilizer runoff from lawns on the slough and surrounding wetlands. When presented with testimony from a traffic expert, Charles Dean Smith, he questioned whether Smith had taken into consideration the impact of Coconut Point Town Center, traffic accident data from the area and how many cars could stack in the median opening.

"All they looked at was concurrency studies; they never look at the real safety issues. It's already a dangerous intersection," Brookes said.

Resident after resident took the stand to voice concerns about the impact 90 more homes at the end of a narrow residential street near the Estero Bay Preserve would have on their safety, traffic and quality of life. Many recounted experiences of near misses and collisions on U.S. 41 while trying to enter or exit Pine Road. Others spoke of the lack of sidewalks and lighting and the potential impact of more vehicles and construction traffic on the street. Each one challenged the studies and expert testimony presented by the developer in favor and sent the same message: This was their neighborhood and they do not want to see 90 more homes.

"I understand the studies, but we are the ones dealing with the situation every day," said Mark Jacobs, who brought a hand-drawn representation of the traffic turn-offs, intersections and median openings in the area. "I know this looks confusing. It's a hazard waiting to happen." He has two children and a third on the way, he said, and he is concerned about their safety. Several residents said the road already supports traffic from the existing homes, a new 60-home development, Estero Verde, being developed at the start of the street, a day-care center and two churches, one of which has events five nights a week.

"There's 300 cars from the homes right now. With the 60 homes from Estero Verde, there will be 120 more. If you add 180 more cars from these 90 homes, you are putting 600 cars on a little half-mile stretch of road," said Mike Stephens. "It's a stinking nightmare already, I cannot overemphasize the nightmare part. And to think that adding another couple hundred people to it doesn't change anything is ridiculous."

Several of the residents also objected that it was the Estero Community Planning Panel that held the hearings even though the project area is in the San Carlos Park Fire District.

Fire district officials had their own concerns. "I really think you should consider having two access routes into the development," said Fire Marshal Tom Beard. "When Charley hit we found out that people in communities that only had one access were landlocked. We had to cut our way through to get to those people. What happens if there are fires in the preserve area or in one of the houses in the development."

Another resident, Frank Gumpert, also challenged Bob Thinnes, a witness for the developer, on his assessment that the development was sound because it gradually increased density from a preserve area toward a more dense residential area. "The smallest lot in our area is a half acre. You are going to put 90 homes on 32 acres," Gumpert said. "That way it is heavier density in the back and less in the front. It is the worst possible use of that land."

The hearing took four hours even though about half the residents who had originally shown up chose to hold their testimony until the next hearing on June 14.

Thomas Gilhooley, who owns 28 of the 60 acres, the portion that would be donated to the state, said he was surprised at the strength in which residents showed up. "I don't understand. I never expected in my wildest dreams that the community would comment so vehemently about traffic concerns," he said. "I expected them to have environmental concerns and that is what we tried to address so carefully in this project."

Gilhooley said he and his partner were mindful of the environmental issues from the start. It was to be good environmental stewards that they chose Michael Hoggatt and Estero Preserve LLC as buyers for the developable 32 acres of the project, Gilhooley said. The development being proposed fits within the Lee County Comprehensive Plan. Gilhooley said he was sure Hoggatt and his representatives would be willing to work with the residents. "I am really disappointed that the residents are so opposed to this," he said. "I don't really have anything to do with this, but I am sure Michael will do the right thing. Gilhooley said he would recommend a "pow-wow" with the residents. "Working together is better than fighting."

Residents said they were prepared to fight. "Just for once I wish we would say no to a development," Stephens said.

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