

Big week looms for Plum Creek proposals

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After many months when Plum Creek Timber Co.'s plans to develop lands in eastern Alachua County seemed to sit quietly on a back burner, this week brings some important issues to the forefront.

County commissioners are expected to talk about the future of the county-owned fairgrounds property, which could be part of a land swap with Plum Creek; the city of Hawthorne will likely vote to annex 1,200 acres of Plum Creek property into its borders; and the county Planning Commission will take up the timber company's revised, scaled-back development plan.

County planners still don't believe the company's plans mesh with the county's comprehensive plan, but Plum Creek officials say that's up to county commissioners to decide.

Plum Creek is Alachua County's biggest landowner. It's current plans involve a mix of residential, commercial or industrial development, plus preservation and conservation efforts across 54,000 acres. Whichever way commissioners lean on the Plum Creek plan, it will have an enormous impact on the county's development.

At 10 a.m. today, county commissioners will talk about the future of the fairgrounds property on Northeast 39th Avenue. The county has planned to move the fairgrounds about two miles north to a location near the Leveda Brown Environmental Park.

The current site, about 100 acres, would then be given to Plum Creek in exchange for 1,200 acres in east Alachua County, which is now forested timberland, according to Tim Jackson, Plum Creek's project manager.

The parcels are believed to have about the same value, although appraisals will need to be done. The swap would give Plum Creek land closer to east Gainesville to develop, with the hope of attracting businesses to the area.

At 6:30 p.m. today, the Hawthorne City Commission will meet at Hawthorne High School to cast a final vote on the city's annexation of about 1,200 acres of Plum Creek land. This is a larger venue from the meeting's normal city hall spot in anticipation of a potentially large crowd.

The properties are west of U.S. 301, with one chunk to the north of State Road 20 and a second area south of the roadway.

Plum Creek officials estimate the area would be shovel-ready in 2017. Current plans show 2.8 million square feet of light industrial space and 150,000 square feet of commercial development north of State Road 20 and up to 800 residential units south of State Road 20.

The 1,200 acres would add to the company's current holdings already inside the Hawthorne city limits, near the railroad track, for a total of 1,365 acres.

Residents have weighed in with concerns about what the annexation would mean for the area's sensitive environmental features like wetlands and routine flooding.

The county has also said the plan creates enclaves that could create confusion over public services, and doesn't include water or sewer connections or a timeline to implement such services.

Jackson says the annexation adds lands that are already designated in the county's comprehensive plan to be converted from rural to urban.

If the annexation vote favors Plum Creek, it's expected the city would then vote tonight to change the Future Land Use designation on the lands from rural to Envision Alachua Hawthorne Mixed Use.

Then at 6 p.m. Wednesday, the county Planning Commission will meet to talk about Plum Creek's larger 52,000-acre Envision Alachua Sector Plan involving county lands. The discussion will address whether or not the county should accept the company's proposed amendments to the county's comprehensive plan.

Under state law, since the mid-1980s, local governments have had to create comprehensive plans, which cover how that area should develop and grow. Proposed developments are then weighed as to how they fit into that overall plan.

The planning commission's discussion could spill over to Thursday evening. But the eventual result could be one of three options: Planning commissioners could agree with county staff's recommendation not to make Plum Creek's suggested changes to the county comp plan; commissioners could make changes to the Plum Creek application so it becomes in line with the comp plan; or they could accept "as is" Plum Creek's comp plan changes.

That decision would then go to the County Commission, but likely not until January or February, according to Steve Lachnicht, director of county's growth management division.

In June 2014, Plum Creek submitted a plan that included 60,133 acres, of which 6,608 acres could be developed. The plan called for 10,500 residential units and 15 million square feet of non-residential urban development on lands near wetlands with clay soils.

After the county raised concerns over environmental impacts, public resources and other issues, Plum Creek submitted a revised application this summer.

The new plan calls for a total 52,745 acres, of which 3,380 acres could be developed. It calls for 8,700 residential units and 11.2 million square feet of urban development.

In a report made public Nov. 3, county planning officials recommended that county commissioners deny Plum Creek's proposal.

After an in-depth look at the new plan, county planners pointed to four major areas of concern.

Plum Creek's proposal includes development outside the county comprehensive plan's designated "urban cluster," which is located mostly in the southwest area of the county and includes areas like Oakmont and Haile Plantation. Two smaller clusters exist in the eastern part of the county, west of Newnan's Lake.

Development outside of that area would require new infrastructure, like roads, and water and sewer facilities and county officials prefer that development stay within the urban cluster to take advantage of existing infrastructure.

Jackson said the revised plan clarifies that developers would be responsible for bearing the cost of new infrastructure and roads, and points out that the development would add to the county's tax base. County officials are still concerned

the county would be responsible for maintaining those roads and adding other resources, such as schools.

County planning officials also didn't like Plum Creek's plans to fill in up to 400 acres of wetlands northwest of Hawthorne. The county says this area contains mostly poorly drained soils with high water tables and the proposed amendments take away county protections on the lands, which are more stringent than state standards.

Jackson says Plum Creek would mitigate that impact by restoring other area wetlands and would look to build a treatment facility near Lake Lochloosa that would help take out phosphorus and nitrogen already in the waters of Lochloosa Creek, Lake Lochloosa and Orange Lake.

Jackson also said Plum Creek would have to go through a state review by St. Johns River Water Management District that would address water quality, and also get approval at the federal level from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"I think the point is we're looking at the big, big picture here," Jackson said. "What are the issues and how can our land be used to address these issues."

The county's third concern is Plum Creek's plans to allow development design to drive where conservation areas are preserved, instead of incorporating conservation protection policies and locating development away from natural resources. It also calls for the widening of State Road 20 to six lanes.

Plum Creek says in its revised plan that it expanded the preserved area around the Lochloosa Creek from 2,300 acres to 3,500 acres. That preserved land still has to be managed, according to Jackson, and that would be at the developers' expense.

Of the entire plan, Plum Creek has said about 90 percent of 52,000-plus acres would be permanently protected from development.

Finally, county planners looked at the economic impact and questioned whether allowing for urban level infrastructure in the rural area would cause financial liability for the county and whether these new areas would compete economically with the current urban cluster. While Plum Creek has said things like roads would be put in place by the developer, if the area draws a significant number of residents, the county knows it would be responsible for things like schools and possibly public safety services.

Plum Creek has said the plan would bring 30,000 new jobs over 50 years.

Plum Creek officials said while the county's report doesn't have many positive things to say about its proposal, county planners are explaining all the potential problems to the County Commission, which will weigh the pros and cons and decide where the county should be heading in the future. Jackson says he believes both Plum Creek and the county can get on the same page with tweaks to the language, but whether just tweaks or significant changes will need to be made will become clearer after the planning meeting.