

Commission hears more public comment

A vote on the plan is scheduled for Feb. 25

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Residents eager to find out whether or not the County Commission decided to transmit landowner Plum Creek's comprehensive plan amendment for developing of thousands of acres to the state for review will have to wait until next week.

The 5½ hour transmittal hearing that began Tuesday evening with presentations from Plum Creek and county staff continued for hours Thursday evening, but commissioners ended the meeting at 10:30 p.m. before all 222 members of the public who signed up had the opportunity to have their voices heard. About 50 people were left to speak when the meeting ended.

Another meeting where commissioners will discuss the application and ultimately vote has been scheduled at 5 p.m. on Feb. 25 in the auditorium of Eastside High School, where this week's meetings were held because of its ability to accommodate a large amount of people. The additional 50 speakers from the previous meeting will have their voices heard during the meeting.

Plum Creek's plan calls for a maximum 3,380 acres of potential development in an application that encompasses a total 52,745 acres in eastern Alachua County. The

proposal calls for 11.2 million square feet of urban development and 8,700 new residential units. The plan would require changing the county's comprehensive plan and the first step in that process would require the county to approve transmitting the plan to the state for review.

County staff has recommended the commission reject the application. In a split decision this November, the local plan board recommended approval of the application.

“The choice before you tonight is really a monumental decision,” resident David Pais who spoke against transmittal Thursday evening during public comment. “It will affect land use patterns and growth in our county long after our lifetimes.”

Pais, a realtor and conservationist has lived in the Hawthorne area for 15 years. He told the commission he cringes to think of two Town of Tioga's or three Haile Plantations plopped down on U.S. 301 or surrounding roads. He also has concerns over the area's environment.

“We have one chance to get it right and I think the commission should make sure they do the right thing and also remember a scheme is not a vision,” he said.

Samuel Jones Jr. has been a pastor in Alachua County for years. He spoke in favor of the plan, highlighting Plum Creek's promise to bring jobs to the area. Jones said those jobs would improve the lives of many of his parishioners, some working two or three jobs to make a living. “Many can't attend services because they are working seven days a week,” he said.

Resident Dr. Joe Sparks said Plum Creek isn't a developer, and they won't turn a shovel of dirt. “Their goal is to turn around and sell it (the land) to the highest bidder,” he said.

William Elliott has been a resident of Campville in eastern Alachua County for 43 years. He is worried about development being constructed on soils that are unstable and how that would affect his home and quality of life.

On Tuesday, Michael Drummond, with the county's environmental protection department expressed concerns over developing on existing clay soils that don't absorb water quickly. Plum Creek wants to develop on no more than 400 acres of wetlands.

Tim Jackson, project manager with Plum Creek says the county has already developed on 30,000 acres of poorly drained soils around the county and said the chosen wetlands are limited in their value and function. According to Jackson, Plum Creek would also perform wetland mitigation.

As for the hope of bringing jobs, Elliott says that's not guaranteed and if jobs were available, local residents would be vying alongside applicants from other counties. "We, the people of Campville, who voted for you are asking you to stay with your original comprehensive plan," he said.

Resident Vivian Filer was involved in the Envision Alachua Task Force and says the community was given the opportunity to give feedback on the plan to the landowner. She also says the majority of the acres in question will remain untouched.

According to Jackson for every one acre of development, a little more than six acres would be protected with conservation and preservation easements.

County staff says they would have chosen different acres to put under protections. They also point out while protecting the lands does remove development rights, storm water treatment facilities, hunting and silviculture would still be allowed.

Filer said she's lived on the east side for decades and sees the Plum Creek plan as an opportunity. "There are disparities in education, there are disparities in jobs, disparities in everything," Filer said. "We have to travel 18-20 miles to go to the doctor's, to go to the grocery store."

Gainesville's income gap also been touted as one of the widest in the country. According to Jackson, 4.7 percent of individuals in West Gainesville do not have a high school diploma compared to 17.8 percent of East Gainesville residents.

"The biggest income disparity are the people working for Plum Creek and everyone else in this room," said resident Tamara Robbins, who spoke against the plan.

Steve Burroughs came to Gainesville in 1978 to attend the University of Florida, got married, had children and never left. "I'm 100 percent invested in this community and I want what's best for it," he said.

Burroughs rattled off the names of local entities who support Plum Creek: UF, Santa Fe College, Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce, Gainesville Alachua Association of Realtors and the local builders association.

He spoke about the power of change and encouraged the commission to review its current vision, saying opportunity would only be around for a limited time. "If we're not constantly improving, we're going backwards," he said. "There is no standing still."

Susan Baird, a former county commissioner spoke in favor of Plum Creek's proposal. "I'm a little envious," she said. "How exciting to be on the commission at a time when you can be part of history."

Baird said the plan opens to door to help those unemployed or underemployed and can give rise to joint-research projects with local institutions of higher learning while protecting many acres of land.

If the county transmits the plan to the state, it would still come back before the commission again for future votes.

If the plan is rejected, Plum Creek will be able to resubmit the application.