

## **Citizen comment over, vote to come on Plum Creek plan**

***Alachua County Commission will wait until a fourth date to finish discussion***

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*Published: Friday, February 26, 2016 at 6:50 a.m.  
Last Modified: Friday, February 26, 2016 at 6:50 a.m.*

After listening to more than three hours of staff and applicant presentations and more than 11 hours of citizen comment — all spread over the course of three days — the County Commission decided Thursday night it would wait until a fourth date to begin its deliberations on transmitting the Plum Creek Comprehensive Plan Amendment to the state for review.

After listening for more than three hours to the remaining members of the public who signed up to have their voice heard Thursday evening the commission decided it would be better to start fresh next week rather than deliberate into possibly the wee hours.

A fourth meeting will take place at 5 p.m. on March 1 at the Alachua County Senior Recreation Center, located at 5701 NW 34th Street. The venue can accommodate 500 people. The meeting will not be available live via television or streaming, but a recording will be made available after the meeting.

At the end of Thursday's meeting Commission Chair Robert Hutchinson said the next steps would include the commissioners asking questions of staff and the applicant, putting motions on the table and deliberations.

After closing out public comment, but before adjourning the meeting, the commission reflected on the vast amount of public participation.

"It's been an incredible turnout," said Commissioner Mike Byerly. "By my tally there were 200 speakers, which is the most there has been on any subject since I became a commissioner in 2000."

Commissioner Lee Pinkoson thanked the citizens for their attendance. "It's great to see that Alachua County has so much interest in the issues at hand," he said, looking out over a crowd of about 125 citizens. "I just wish there were other items that evoke this kind of passion because a lot of times we talk to empty seats. But to have this many people here sitting in the audience is just a fantastic, fantastic thing, it says a lot about Alachua County."

Commissioner Ken Cornell thanked the citizens and said the three nights of hearings started a dialogue. "What I know about this, when we are done, is that we, as a community, on both sides of this issue are going to be stronger with every issue going forward."

Hutchinson put into perspective the gravity of the board's decision.

"We all know that these are probably the most significant decisions we will make in our careers as elected officials," he said.

The application in question is being presented by Plum Creek Timber Company Inc, which officially merged with the Weyerhaeuser Company last week and took the latter company's name, although locally the Plum Creek name is more recognizable.

The application calls for a max 3,380 acres of future development out of a whopping 52,745 acres in eastern Alachua County, while more than 20,000 acres would get conservation and preservation easements. Plum Creek is proposing 11.2 million square feet of urban development and 8,700 resident units.

The local planning agency recommended approval of the application in a split decision this November. County staff has recommended the board reject the application over concerns over the environment, infrastructure and sprawl.

On Thursday citizens both for and against the plan spoke, although many of the voices were negative.

Bonnie Barnes-Kelley lives close to Newnans Lake and says when it rains the ditch in front of her house will have running water for three to five days. “The back of my property becomes soup, I can’t walk out there,” she said.

Many have wondered how development would occur on soils that are often submerged. Plum Creek has said it would be able to work with such conditions and such efforts have already been done in the county. It has also said part of the plan would include wetland mitigation.

Barnes-Kelley spoke passionately against the plan, at times her voice quivering. “It affects me,” she said. “I moved from Dade County, I saw what could happen.” She said she moved to eastern Alachua County for some peace and quiet and the forest lands near her home should remain forest.

“The world is changing so much of life as we know it is being environmentally lost, changed forever,” she said, urging the commission to do its part locally and protect the environment.

Resident Sally Johnson said she knows Alachua County to be one that respects its natural areas and wild spaces. “By accepting this sector plan we’re abandoning our values and our culture,” she said.

“Say no to sprawl and the urbanization of our wetlands,” said Jeff Schaller.

Eileen Roy, school board member and local educator for 30 years spoke as a private citizen. She accused Plum Creek of putting up a facade and behind it lies manipulation and greed.

“Taxpayer will be stuck with the bill for providing infrastructure for this boondoggle for the next 50 years,” she said.

Others said Plum Creek doesn’t care about the little guy. “They view us as nothing but a succulent fat plum waiting to be plucked,” said Bruce Morgan.

Others spoke in favor of the plan, which has promised to bring jobs and economic opportunities to the east side.

Citizen Rob Richardson called Plum Creek’s promise a “great opportunity” and something that could aid young children in the county living in poverty.

Evan Pitts, said if the county turns down the plan, such an opportunity might not come again.

Diyonne McGraw is the chair of the African American Accountability Alliance. “We support Plum Creek,” she said. McGraw, referencing the promise of economic opportunity from the proposal said people need help paying their bills.

“Make sure we move forward with change that’s going to benefit the future,” she told the commission.