

## **County votes 3-2 against Plum Creek plan**

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In a 3-2 vote Tuesday night, the County Commission decided not to transmit Plum Creek Timber Company's comprehensive plan changes to the state for review, effectively halting the plan and giving the county more room to negotiate.

While Commissioners Charles Chestnut and Lee Pinkoson supported Plum Creek's proposal to develop some of their lands in eastern Alachua County, Commissioners Ken Cornell and Mike Byerly expressed serious concerns over the proposal, including its impacts to the environment.

"There are people who are going to feel good about tonight and people who aren't going to feel good about tonight," said Commissioner Robert Hutchinson at the start of the meeting.

In an e-mail sent to the news media after the vote, Plum Creek called the decision disappointing.

"Our team wakes up every day focused on how quickly we can bring jobs to the east side of our county, so this delay compounds the issues now facing our neighbors," said Todd Powell, general manager of real estate for Weyerhaeuser in an e-mail response.

Plum Creek Timber Company Inc. recently officially merged with the Weyerhaeuser Company and took the later company's name, although locally the Plum Creek name is more recognizable.

Hutchinson, who previously identified himself as the swing vote on Plum Creek issue, made the motion not to transmit, which the board voted on, but also included an instruction for county staff to schedule a workshop to discuss a Tacachale land swap and invite Plum Creek to participate. The meeting adjourned without a workshop date being set.

Earlier in the evening, Hutchinson spoke about Tacachale, a state nursing facility on Waldo Road that is in need of improvements. The facility employs 1,100 people and houses 400 clients that have either physical or intellectual disabilities. Other facilities of its kind have been shuttered around the state, and Hutchinson has seen the Plum Creek proposal as an opportunity.

Hutchinson is hoping that instead of Plum Creek building and creating jobs so far east, that it would re-build Tacachale, keeping east Gainesville's single-largest employer afloat no matter what happens at the state level. After building a state-of-the-art multi-story facility on about five to 10 acres, Plum Creek could then swap it to the state for title to the remaining hundreds of acres that are part of Tacachale.

"We have always been willing to sit down with the community to develop win-win solutions, but we have been told that any such action on Tacachale, even if possible, would be many, many years away," said Powell. "Even the potential county fairground swap, which is on land the county already owns, is at least five years from a potential exchange."

Many questions still have to be answered, and at the end of Tuesday night's meeting Hutchinson handed his fellow commissioners a road map to that

destination, though no copies were immediately made available to the public.

“There’s really nothing holding us back if we want this,” Hutchinson said.

Passage of the motion not to transmit the plan was met with loud applause from the approximately 140 audience members seated in the Alachua County Senior Recreation Center, located at 5701 NW 34th Street -- a location chosen for its ability to accommodate about 500 people.

The Plum Creek application calls for up to 3,380 acres of future development out of a total 52,745 acres in eastern Alachua County. The plan calls for 11.2 million square feet of urban development and 8,700 residential units with more than 20,000 acres getting conservation and preservation easements.

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

At issue Tuesday night was whether the county should transmit Plum Creek’s proposed comprehensive plan amendment changes to the state for review. The state would then look at the plans and provide feedback to the county, which would then decide if the development should proceed further.

Tuesday night was the fourth installment of a transmittal hearing that began Feb. 16 and bled into other dates because of the more than 11 hours of public comment.

Before the vote the commissioners weighed in with their thoughts about the proposed comprehensive plan amendments.

“Plum Creek has provoked such an intense reaction because they want to remove two of the most fundamental pillars of the comprehensive plan,” Byerly said, referring to the urban cluster, which provides boundaries for growth, and

environmental protections. “Without those policies what remains doesn’t really deserve to be called a plan.”

According to county staff, the proposed development would occur outside the county’s urban cluster, or space designated for urban development. Staff has also said that Plum Creek’s plans strip away some of the county’s environmental safeguards and instead subjects the property to less restrictive state requirements.

Byerly said Plum Creek is marketing hope to east Gainesville.

“A drowning man would grasp at anything because he has nothing to lose,” said Byerly, pointing out that Plum Creek’s proposed job growth would not really be in east Gainesville, but actually much farther east.

Cornell was concerned about environmental impacts.

“Our state is littered with expensive examples to taxpayers of environmental disasters from big private polluters that have destroyed our fragile natural infrastructure,” Cornell said. “The protection of this natural public infrastructure through our comprehensive plan is essential to our local economy and the way we live.”

Cornell also didn’t buy Plum Creek’s promise of economic opportunity.

“I’m not interested in outsourcing community-building to a private corporation,” said Cornell.

Pinkoson said Plum Creek’s proposal demanded a walk-able community, which is something emphasized in the current comprehensive plan. It also called for less sprawl than is currently allowed under the current plan, he said. Pinkoson also said 97.7 percent of wetlands would remain untouched under the proposal and would provide opportunity to bring manufacturing to the area.

“Even if Plum Creek makes money in this deal the county also benefits,” Pinkoson said.

Commissioner Charles Chestnut spoke of better opportunities for future generations, but also exuded a unifying message in light of the often mentioned disparity between east and west Gainesville.

“I think no matter where we are on this issue we have to respect each other and move on and heal,” he said.