

Weyerhaeuser's plans on hold, IFAS looks for room to expand

By Anthony Clark

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The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences led the charge for the University of Florida's support of Plum Creek's development plans in eastern Alachua County.

As the agricultural arm of a land-grant university, IFAS has some of the oldest facilities on campus and around the state. With Plum Creek — now Weyerhaeuser — IFAS saw an opportunity to get a much-needed upgrade to research facilities in partnership with the big agricultural businesses that the timber giant would help try to recruit.

The County Commission voted against the plan March 1 and IFAS' hopes for the land are at least delayed indefinitely if not over as Weyerhaeuser turns its attention elsewhere.

Now UF is in the process of devising a strategic development plan that considers increasing building heights and density on the eastern side of campus and the neighborhood to the east, away from most of IFAS's land and buildings on the southwest side of campus.

Despite the emphasis on a part of campus that would seem to benefit other colleges, UF administration and IFAS officials said the strategic plan is not another missed opportunity for the institute, but just one of many possible opportunities going

forward, some of which could benefit IFAS.

“It’s not quid pro quo. It doesn’t mean because we’re looking at filling in holes on campus that the university as a whole and IFAS in particular are not interested in looking at other opportunities,” said UF's Jack Payne, senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and the head of IFAS.

Nor does UF’s interest in expanding closer to campus exclude its support for Weyerhaeuser’s development hopes, as some have suggested, or any other economic development opportunities in which UF could play a part.

As consultants for the former Plum Creek researched community strengths to leverage for industrial recruitment, IFAS stuck out for its world-class expertise in a field of growing importance — how to feed a growing population in a world with less water and a changing climate.

“IFAS really is this major asset that we maybe have not capitalized on from an economic development perspective,” said Todd Powell, vice president of real estate development at Weyerhaeuser.

Plum Creek saw a way to use IFAS to try to recruit big agricultural companies such as DuPont or Syngenta that could benefit from IFAS’s research capabilities. IFAS saw a way to use Plum Creek to create the kind of public-private partnership that colleges are increasingly relying on for new facilities as legislative allocations don’t keep up with capital needs.

A 2015 study commissioned by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities found that agricultural colleges had a backlog of \$8.4 billion in needed repairs.

“It’s a problem throughout the U.S. and IFAS being a college of agriculture where it all began has among the oldest facilities on campus, so my challenge is looking at updating what we have as well as getting new facilities,” Payne said. “That’s what I’m about, trying to fix what we have and make it better, renovate labs so I can continue to hire the best scientists. Plum Creek was added value to that.”

Former UF President Bernie Machen asked Payne to sit on Plum Creek’s Envision Alachua advisory committee.

During the County Commission’s Feb. 16 hearing on the plan, Payne was second on the agenda during public comment, behind Charlie Lane, UF’s senior vice president and chief operating officer, to express UF’s support.

That support was a bone of contention for Jack Putz, a biology professor with a research focus on sustainable forestry. Putz said he gathered over 600 signatures from UF faculty, staff and students on a petition against Plum Creek’s plan and UF’s endorsement.

He thought he saw in the UF strategic development plan’s focus on infill a retraction to the university’s support of the Envision Alachua plan to develop in a rural area. During an Aug. 24 public meeting on the strategic plan, Putz tried to pin down Lane for a retraction.

In Lane’s response, Putz thought he had his retraction, though others at the meeting drew different conclusions, and set to make it as widely known as possible through social media and an unpublished letter to the editor of The Gainesville Sun.

To Putz, the supposed retraction was important issue in the Aug. 30 primary election, especially in the race pitting Mike Byerly, whom he supported, against Kevin Thorpe.

“The problem for me is that this lobbying is very influential because UF, as you know, is a big player in this community,” Putz told The Sun. “When they say they’re in favor of something, people take notice, as I would hope they would. In this case I just didn’t think it was at all appropriate.”

Putz would later find out that UF still endorses Envision Alachua and had to, in his words, send a retraction of a retraction.

Janine Sikes, a UF spokeswoman, confirmed that UF’s endorsement has not changed.

Powell sees UF’s strategic development plan as complementary to Envision Alachua.

“It confirms the need for something to happen in this town from a large-scale economic development perspective,” he said. “UF is very supportive of realizing that it’s going to take more than them just to sit there and grow the job base.”

With all the discussion about development’s form and density around campus, Powell said lost in the translation is that the community needs new employers to drive the economics for more expensive vertical construction.

He points to cities such as Austin, Texas, and Greenville, South Carolina, where major employers on the outskirts of town help drive downtown redevelopment.

“UF is master planning what they can be in control of but we need to have more than just six blocks of economic development activity for all that really to come to fruition,” Powell said. “To have a strong inner core, you’re going to need a strong outer core.”

In the meantime, Weyerhaeuser is focusing its local efforts on the 1,300 acres annexed into the city of Hawthorne. The first reading of a comprehensive plan amendment comes before the Hawthorne City Commission Thursday night and, if it passes, would come back for a second vote before Weyerhaeuser can apply for rezoning and recruit an industrial user that can take advantage of the nearby rail line.

Powell said IFAS likely doesn't have a place on Weyerhaeuser's Hawthorne property and it could be awhile before the company comes back to the county with a revised plan.

With IFAS operating research centers statewide and UF opening a pharmacy campus in Orlando and an engineering office in Sarasota, Powell said he's concerned UF could find its needs met elsewhere without some development support.

"If we can't figure some of this out, their path of least resistance may not be Gainesville or Alachua County and then you can do all the strategic planning that you want but we'll never have the disposable income to support the high densification of midtown and downtown," he said.

UF President Kent Fuchs' position is "the university is part of the community and we've got to work together toward the much bigger issue of promoting Gainesville, Alachua County and the University of Florida," said Sikes, the spokeswoman.

Meantime, IFAS has 3.9 million square feet of offices, labs, barns and sheds all over the state and occupies about a quarter of the main UF campus.

"We're always looking for ways to improve our facilities. That includes fundraising and partnerships. We have a lot of different renovation and improvement projects,

but the funding is limited,” said Jeanna Mastrodicasa, associate vice president of IFAS. “I spend a lot of my day talking about space and the need for space.”