

Editorial: Local Decisions

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If Plum Creek wants current Alachua County commissioners to approve its development plan, sneaking through state legislation that infuriates them would seem to be a bad strategy.

Yet some commissioners, without evidence to support their claims, suggested Tuesday that Plum Creek was trying to do just that.

The legislation — Senate Bill 832 and House Bill 933 — would severely limit the information that counties could request in the sector planning process for developments more than 15,000 acres in size. Plum Creek is seeking county approval for such a plan.

County Commissioner Ken Cornell read a prepared statement Tuesday not once, but twice, that criticized Plum Creek for possibly being behind the legislation. He called on the timber company to instead help defeat the measure.

A lot of the ugliness could have been avoided by simply calling local Plum Creek officials. They insist they had nothing to do with the bills and oppose them.

The legislation would take away local control over important issues such as conservation easements and the impact of development on wetlands. We

applaud the county and Plum Creek for opposing the bills, and support keeping decisions involving the company's plan in local hands.

For that to work, the county needs to engage in a productive relationship with Plum Creek. Episodes such as Tuesday's commission meeting won't help that happen.

Plum Creek's plan would allow up to 10,500 homes and 15.5 million square feet of non-residential development to be built in eastern Alachua County over 50 years. It's a massive project deserving of massive scrutiny.

But it's not the all-or-nothing proposition that some Plum Creek opponents and supporters suggest. A give-and-take approach is needed to limit the environmental impact of the plan while keeping its economic potential.

The good news is that appears to be happening behind the scenes. Plum Creek and the county have been discussing measures that would cap the wetland impacts in its plan, create additional wildlife corridors and improve forestry practices on its conservation land.

Plum Creek is also considering a land swap that would give the county a section of its property, located on State Road 26 between two conservation areas, in exchange for the county fairgrounds.

The proposal has the potential to jump-start the long-stalled development of the fairgrounds, giving Plum Creek a way to show its commitment to improving the economic climate in east Gainesville.

It would be wise for the county to keep engaging Plum Creek to ensure such decisions remain in local hands, but those negotiations need to be done in good faith to work.

It's a better strategy than refusing to work with a company that might decide that sneaking through state legislation isn't such a bad idea the next time around.