

Editorial: Economic hope for Hawthorne

Published: Sunday, October 25, 2015 at 6:01 a.m.

Last Modified: Thursday, October 22, 2015 at 5:08 p.m.

Few places in Alachua County need an economic shot in the arm more than Hawthorne.

A Georgia-Pacific plant that had been the city's main employer for decades closed in 2011, putting hundreds out of work. The closing had a ripple effect on other local businesses, and local schools have also faced struggles.

So it's no surprise that city officials and residents have greeted the Plum Creek Timber Company's development plan with enthusiasm. This year, the company separated nearly 1,400 acres it owns near Hawthorne out of its bigger plan for eastern Alachua County.

Plum Creek is instead working to have the city of Hawthorne annex the land for a jobs center that could be ready to develop by 2017. About 800 acres of the land would be slated for up to 2.85 million square feet of industrial/advanced manufacturing space, 150,000 square feet of commercial space and 800 residences.

The wider Plum Creek plan has faced intense controversy, but the Hawthorne portion seemed to offer an opportunity for agreement. Even County Commissioner Mike Byerly, who helped formed the Stand By Our Plan group opposing Plum Creek, said earlier this year that he supported development near Hawthorne.

Yet county commissioners are now laying the groundwork for a possible challenge to Plum Creek's Hawthorne plan. Letters recently sent to the city outline county staff's concerns with the annexation and related amendment to the city's comprehensive plan.

Some of this is simply due diligence on the part of the county in ensuring the proper agreements are in place for services delivered to the area. The city and county should be able to work out these issues before the city votes on the comp plan amendment and annexation Nov. 3 and 17, and the county meets Nov. 23 to discuss the outcome and a possible challenge.

The issue provides a prelude to a debate over Plum Creek's bigger plans for allowing increased development on nearly 3,400 acres of its timber land between Hawthorne and Newnans Lake. If no agreement can be reached on the Hawthorne development, it bodes poorly for Plum Creek's prospects with its more ambitious plans for that land.

While there are certainly issues involving wetlands and other environmental concerns that must be addressed, the county should welcome master planning of development on large parcels of land as opposed to development happening on a piecemeal basis.

Commissioners should work to negotiate the best plan with Plum Creek rather than just putting roadblocks in its way. They must maximize economic benefits and minimize environmental impacts, rather than giving Plum Creek reason to just wait until after the Boundary Adjustment Act ends and the composition of the commission changes with elections next year.

The act, which governed annexations in Alachua County for around 25 years, was repealed by the Legislature and expires at the end of February. Yet Plum Creek's plan for Hawthorne still aims to follow the act, with the development planned within the area slated for city annexations under the measure.

Given that the county's western municipalities have grown their borders in more expansive and scattershot ways, it would be unfair for Hawthorne's annexation to face a higher level of scrutiny. If commissioners care about raising the economic prospects of all county residents, they'll find a way to work with Hawthorne rather than against it.

If Hawthorne is to be more than a bedroom community for Gainesville, it needs good-paying jobs and diverse employment opportunities. Plum Creek's plan is no guarantee that will happen, but offers a better chance than sitting around pining for better days.