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Sarasota County housing plan stalled by roads

A town-size housing project would require millions in highway improvements

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SARASOTA COUNTY -- Worries over pending cuts to the county's road-building plans have delayed -- and may even scuttle -- plans for what would have been the region's biggest affordable housing project.

Over much of the last three years, the county has encouraged Sarasota developer Billy Springer to construct the town-sized Palmer Place in exchange for his promise that half of the project's 1,488 homes would be affordable. For much of that time, neighbors have opposed the project, mainly because of the traffic it would add to narrow rural roads in the area two miles east of Interstate 75.

But the possible delay of a \$6 million county road improvement project for Palmer Boulevard threw the long-sought housing project into limbo Wednesday. State rules require the traffic caused by new developments to be addressed through road improvements. If the plans to improve Palmer Boulevard are scrapped, the project would violate those traffic concurrency rules.

Although the project faced a final vote Wednesday, Springer asked at the last minute that the commission delay its decision until after setting its road-building budget next month.

So the issue, which drew well-organized opposition from about 40 neighbors, was delayed to a Dec. 11 hearing before the commission.

At a minimum, Palmer Place would add at least \$400 million worth of construction to the county's tax base, according to the low-end of estimates from the developer.

In exchange for high density in the semi-rural area, the developer promised that half the 1,488 homes would be affordable. That would make Palmer Place the biggest project of its kind in the state. It would also make the Community Housing Trust of Sarasota County one of the biggest affordable housing land trusts in the country.

As part of the deal, the developer would donate the land that the affordable homes are built on to the land trust. Owning the land would allow the land trust to help keep the homes affordable even if the real estate market took off again and the homes were resold.

Whether the county funds the \$6 million for nearby road projects is a "make-or-break decision" for the project, said Charles "Dan" Bailey Jr., Springer's attorney. While the developer could pay for part of the costs, "it cannot anywhere approach the \$6 million we're talking about," he said.

After the vote, Springer said he has invested too much in the project to walk away from it. Negotiations with the county on the affordable housing project have been going on for three years, he noted.

"This community really needs affordable housing," he said.

Asked if the project could absorb the cost of the road improvements and still be profitable, Springer said, "we're going to take a look at it."

The request to delay the vote may also have been prompted by concerns over the outcome. Springer said that based on comments made by commissioners during the hearing, he thought three of the five commissioners were set to vote against Palmer Place.

Neighbors' arguments against the project dominated the three-hour meeting, which was capped by the unexpected delay.

Their main point was that the semi-rural roads in the area could not handle the traffic from the 3,000-plus people that would live in Palmer Place, and that schools in the area were already at capacity. They also objected to the affordable homes in the development being "segregated" by a four-lane road and walls from the part of the project where houses are expected to sell for \$400,000 to \$800,000.

"This is NIMBYism in disguise," said Martina Guilfoil, executive director of the housing trust. NIMBY is an acronym for Not In My Backyard, referring to the tendency of neighbors to oppose such projects.

"If not in this neighborhood, where?" Guilfoil asked. There aren't big tracts of land for a project like this west of the interstate.

Neighbors showed up in force wearing little yellow stickers with question marks featuring the statement "We have questions." They also were organized, providing statistics to support their position that Palmer Place would be too dense for what they called a "countryside setting."

And neighbors found problems with the project that the county missed.

For instance, Palmer Boulevard from Webber Road to the project's entrance at Iona Road is a two-way street whose lanes are only 10 feet wide.

County rules do not allow projects that would add traffic to a road with lanes less than 11 feet wide, so the developer had to promise to widen the boulevard.