

PAVING PARADISE AND GRIDLOCKING ROADS

On January 26, 2016, the Sarasota County Commission demonstrated that they don't care about preserve nature as part of our urban environment and don't care about protecting motorists from gridlock on our roads.

The Commission approved a rezoning which allows a developer to pave over 4 ½ acres of very rare and valuable forested wetlands for commercial development. It's a sharp departure from decades of protection of this habitat from development by previous Commissioners, who designated the wetlands as a habitat in return for approval of two other adjacent developments.

This also gives a black eye to the Whole Foods company, which touts its environmental sensitivity yet steered this rezoning to approval as a location for its second Sarasota County store.

Sarasota County staff recommended against approval, stating that the wetlands should be preserved on the 8 ¼ acre site at University Parkway and Honore Avenue. They point out that most of these wetlands were agreed to be preserved in a previous business park approved for the site, so the developer would violate the requirement of the Sarasota County Comprehensive Plan that there is "no reasonable alternative" but to destroy the wetlands.

Staff reported that the particular wetlands "are very rare in Sarasota County" and "have a high degree of environmental importance for water filtration, assimilation of nutrients, floodwater storage and as a refuge and habitat for a wide variety of species that rely on this urban environment." "Such isolated habitats within the urban environment," staff says, "are becoming increasingly more important to migratory species."

The wetland destruction will be "mitigated" six miles away on Manatee County property unconnected to any Sarasota County habitat, which staff says also violates the Comprehensive Plan requirement that mitigation (where there is "no reasonable alternative" to destruction) should be on-site or nearby.

This approval follows a brand-new pattern of the Sarasota County Commission allowing destruction of valuable habitat for mitigation in Manatee County, as it granted to Benderson Development last year for expansion of the University Town Center.

The commercial development will also create severe traffic congestion at the University Parkway-Honore Avenue intersection which can only be solved by a large, expensive road and intersection improvements and a traffic light. Two lanes must be added to University Parkway from Honore to Medici Court and to Honore Avenue from University Parkway to Desoto Road, if

the traffic is to be handled. However, amazingly, transportation staff recommends – without any evident concurrency analysis required by state law – only to require the developer to add the traffic light. The developer also indicated an intent to make a few additional improvements but there are no plans at all to construct and fund the major laneage additions staff reports are needed to handle all the new traffic.

To add insult to injury, the developer is getting a 47.5% reduction in transportation impact fees (now called mobility fees) because the development will be on the west side of Honore Avenue, in the huge “urban infill” area where those fees are slashed.

So not only do valuable wetlands get paved over, but another stretch of University Parkway, and of Honore Avenue, and their intersection, gets gridlocked.

The Planning Commission, which the County Commission has stacked with development interests, unanimously recommended approval of the developer’s proposal. (Earlier on the County Commission agenda, the Commission passed over citizen advocates Lourdes Ramirez and Ray Porter to appoint two developers and a development contractor to the Planning Commission, with no deliberation whatsoever).

Increasingly, when it comes to nature, neighborhoods, transportation mobility and making growth pay its own way, this County Commission is making it increasingly clear that they stand with the developers who fund their campaigns rather than with the will and the needs of those who they are supposed to represent.

-- Dan Lobeck