

POSSIBLE LAND SWAP THREATENS FARMING, OPPONENTS ARGUE

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Author: JASON SCHULTZ, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

A land swap being proposed by a major home builder could drastically change the future of thousands of rural acres near Loxahatchee and in the Agricultural Reserve west of Boynton Beach.

But the deal, proposed by Sunrise-based GL Homes, has angered environmentalists, farmers and a county commissioner who say it could destroy a valuable farming area created using taxpayer money.

"This flies against the promises that the county commission made to the people about what was going to be done with that land," said Eva Webb, assistant director of field services for the Florida Farm Bureau Federation. "It's called the reserve because it has been reserved for agriculture."

GL Homes Vice President Larry Portnoy said the deal preserves more land for farming and puts homes in an area where the roads and other infrastructure are better suited to handle more people.

"It has a lot of environmental benefits and it has the potential to have a lot of public benefits," he said.

GL Homes wants to give the county a 4,984-acre plot commonly referred to as the Indian Trail Groves area west of The Acreage.

That land could be used to store stormwater runoff to reduce flooding in The Acreage, Portnoy said. It could also provide filtration to clean pollutants from the water in nearby canals headed to the Loxahatchee River and the Grassy Waters Preserve, which supplies drinking water to West Palm Beach.

In exchange, GL Homes wants the county to give it 910 county-owned acres in the Agricultural Reserve west of Florida's Turnpike between Boynton Beach Boulevard and Atlantic Avenue. The county would also have to give GL Homes the development rights from all the county-owned land in the Ag Reserve, allowing the developer to build 2,742 homes on the 910 acres.

The county created the reserve after voters passed a \$150 million bond in 1999 to buy land to preserve farming and the environment.

Joanne Davis, community planner for 1000 Friends of Florida, said her environmental group is opposed to the land swap.

"The whole point was to preserve farmland, not hold onto it until a developer wants it," she said.

Portnoy argued that the 1999 bond language does not specifically mention the Ag Reserve. The Indian Trail Groves land is being used for farming, so the county would be getting 5 acres of farmland for every 1 acre it gives away, Portnoy said.

County Commissioner Karen Marcus opposes the swap.

"That 900-acre piece is the jewel of the Ag Reserve," Marcus said. "Without it the whole thing wouldn't be as good."

Davis argued that the county can't do what GL Homes wants. When the county bought its land in the Ag Reserve, it "retired" or stripped away all of the development rights from that land so there are no units to give GL Homes, she said.

"They could be setting precedents all over the place if they get away with this," Davis said.

Barbara Alterman, director of Palm Beach County's planning, zoning and building department, said the county did retire the development rights. But she said the county is researching to see if those rights could be reinstated.

Ken Lassiter, president of the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Communities that represents residents living in that area, said his group would hold a public meeting on June 16 to make a recommendation to county commissioners.

In The Acreage, Indian Trail Improvement District Board President Michelle Damone said that having the Indian Trail Groves area preserved means there won't be an added burden of thousands more cars feeding onto Acreage roads in the future.

Portnoy said the builder is taking the idea to community and environmental groups to answer all their questions and probably wouldn't apply for the comprehensive plan amendments needed for the swap until next year.

~ jason_schultz@pbpost.com

Correction: Because of a reporting error, The Palm Beach Post incorrectly said Tuesday that the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Associations would make a recommendation at its regularly scheduled June 16 meeting about a land swap proposed by GL Homes. The June 16 meeting is still being held, but the date when the group will meet to make a recommendation on the land swap has not yet been scheduled. The error appeared in a page 1B story in the Local & Business section.