

KEEP THIS PROMISE TO PUBLIC

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When a developer makes an offer that, if accepted, would violate the word of elected officials and the will of voters, the developer has to show that the offer would serve a greater public purpose. The idea is to present something that sounds so beneficial that those elected officials can't refuse, even if it breaks a promise sealed with the public's money.

That is the approach Broward County builder GL Homes is taking with its proposal to swap nearly 5,000 acres west of The Acreage for 910 acres in southern Palm Beach County's Agricultural Reserve. It's hard to imagine, however, any benefits from the swap that would outweigh the harm to public trust. The swap would require breaking the promises that prompted voters in 1999 to pass a \$100 million bond referendum to preserve at least some vestige of farming in the rich soils of the Agricultural Reserve.

Indeed, the GL Homes proposal looks like a deal that mostly would benefit GL Homes. The company overpaid for the land west of The Acreage, under the delusion that it would be allowed to build at suburban densities in an area of dirt roads near Lion Country Safari. With the bursting of the housing bubble, GL may never get a return on its \$185million investment.

Despite the downturn, homes in the Ag Reserve, which is west of Florida's Turnpike from northern Boca Raton to Boynton Beach, are selling. GL is the area's most prolific builder. Thanks to the referendum and Palm Beach County's strict development limits, however, the Ag Reserve no longer has large vacant tracts for new housing.

To fill that void, GL not only wants the county to turn over farmland the public paid \$50 million to buy and preserve but to resurrect development rights retired to reduce density. In exchange, GL suggests that the potential environmental benefits of its 5,000-acre property are too great to ignore. Those benefits, the company says, include flood control for The Acreage, flexibility for moving water north to the Loxahatchee River and the certainty that no homes would be built on the land. None of those benefits, however, help the area where GL wants to build. And none justifies the government going back on its word to the voters.

County Administrator Bob Weisman agrees. He correctly directed his staff to take no action on the proposal. That means it will die unless GL Homes can get a majority of the seven-member commission to keep it alive. The only two commission holdovers from 1999, Burt Aaronson and Karen Marcus, championed the Agricultural Reserve referendum. Commissioner Marcus opposes GL's proposal. Commissioner Aaronson said he has "great reservations."

The five remaining commissioners cannot take lightly the promises of the past. Voters expected their will -- and their \$100 million -- to last longer than 10 years.

All that undeveloped farmland in the Agricultural Reserve may annoy builders, but that is what voters and politicians demanded. There's no more room for gated communities among the farms.

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