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Baymeadows area residents hear plan for golf course site

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More than 300 people showed up for a town meeting last week to discuss a controversial plan to build a 1,400-home community at Baymeadows Golf Club, many wearing "Preserve the golf course" stickers on their shirts.

City Councilman Art Graham (second from right) and Michael Herzberg, the city's chief of comprehensive planning, listen to some of the dozens of questions asked by more than 300 people at a town meeting held to update them on a planned 1,400-home community at the site of Baymeadows Golf Club. DAN SCANLAN/The Times-Union

They didn't like what they heard during the 2 1/2-hour meeting called by City Councilman Art Graham to learn more about developer D.R. Horton's proposal.

Residents in the Los Lagos, Los Prados and Village Green condominiums, and the Linkside and Las Casas communities that ring the 170-acre golf course, have protested Horton's project since it was announced Aug. 17. They say Baymeadows Road can't handle the traffic that already clogs it, and this will make it worse.

"Say yes to control of traffic. Say yes to safety," said resident Michael Glinski to a standing ovation. "Help us to retain property values and preserve our life and environment."

Graham said he held the meeting to "get the bullets in the gun" to fight the project, and will negotiate "specific concerns and details, and figure out what it is I can and cannot get out of that developer.

"He is a big developer, and I know he is willing to sit down and talk," he said. "If he wasn't a responsible developer, he could push this through, but I don't think that will happen. I do understand your concern. My job is to sit down and try to fight."

Developer spokeswoman Victoria Pennington, at the meeting with company officials, said they are working with the city and state Department of Transportation to make the proposed community's access points on Baymeadows Road work better.

"We appreciate the concerns raised at the meeting. It is still very early in the planning stages, and we look forward to working through the process," she said. "We are also having informal discussions with the JTA to include their planned rapid transit station in the project. We also received input from members of Better Baymeadows Inc. on recommendations for improvements developed as part of the Baymeadows Road Mobility Study."

Horton has the 35-year-old golf course under contract for an undisclosed price, and plans to turn it into a mix of 1,400 homes and condominiums, with a new office next to existing office space and more commercial sites along Baymeadows Road.

Names added up quickly on a Baymeadows Community Council petition started in hopes of stopping a subdivision. DAN SCANLAN/The Times-Union

The site has been zoned for residential use for years, so it doesn't need rezoning. But Baymeadows Road in front of the golf course is over capacity on the city's Road Links Status Report, and the developer must make a \$4.8 million Fair Share payment to the city for its portion of future area road improvements. That needs City Council approval.

Members of 10 area homeowner associations opposed to the project formed the Baymeadows Community Council and launched last week's meeting with a presentation on its possible impacts. Using pictures of jammed traffic on Baymeadows Road, they claimed the Fair Share money wouldn't help because there are no projects planned for Baymeadows Road. And because many people use their narrow private roads as a shortcut between Baymeadows Road and Southside Boulevard, adding traffic from 1,400 more homes would make a bad situation worse.

"The traffic on this stretch of road is out of control," said Glinski, who made the presentation. "There is no action that can be taken to improve this situation. No amount of money can fix that."

The city's chief of comprehensive planning, Michael Herzberg, said he understood the concerns. When he said it was "entirely possible" Horton's Fair Share payment could go to improvements on or near Baymeadows Road, and got booed.

"New turn lanes are not enough," yelled a woman.

"Traffic engineers' review indicates traffic capacity can be increased by changing the network," Herzberg said after the crowd quieted. "All the roadway segments are interconnected, and where an improvement is made, potentially -- and I say potentially -- improvements will result elsewhere."

At the end, Baymeadows Community Council President Frank Morgan said the association doubts the traffic problem can be solved, so he wants the city to "do something else other than build 1,400 homes on it."

"I am very unhappy with what we are hearing from city officials because they have obviously made up their minds that there is nothing they can do," Morgan said. "That Fair Share goes into a fund, and it is spent somewhere else. It is not spent where the problem is."

Graham said he will meet with the developer, hold another town meeting and invite the Florida Department of Transportation and Better Baymeadows Inc.

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