

Old Miakka needs support in fight to save rural heritage

Seidman Says

Carrie Seidman

Guest columnist

Last week the Sarasota County Planning Commission voted, 4-3, to recommend to the Board of County Commissioners that it approve a comprehensive plan amendment submitted by Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, Inc. which would increase the density on more than 4,000 acres of rural land in the east county to accommodate up to 5,000 new homes.

The proposed 'Village Transition Zone,' located about 15 miles east of downtown Sarasota along and north of Fruitville Road, would require moving the Countryside Line and creating an entirely new land use designation.

It represents a dramatic and contradictory departure from the Sarasota 2050 Comprehensive Plan, created in 2002 to guide long range growth planning and sustainability initiatives, prevent urban sprawl and protect historic areas like the neighboring Old Miakka community.

The proposal now heads to county commissioners on Aug. 31, when residents will again have an opportunity to give input, as more than three dozen did at the recent meeting. (No one but city staff and the applicant spoke in favor of the amendment.) If commissioners agree, the application will move to the state for review, after which it would return for a final determination Oct. 25.

The area in question currently includes three zoning classifications that allow a maximum of 717 houses; changing the entire area to any one of those three classifications could result in as few as 200 dwellings or as many as 1,600. The increase

requested represents somewhere between a 733% and a 2,400% increase over those figures, an amount the applicant described as 'slightly more dense.'

Given that virtually all employment and amenities would require a trip to town, it's estimated those 5,000 houses would generate more than 45,000 vehicle trips daily. In addition, the amendment proposes a reduction of open space – from the currently required 60% to 80% – to as little as 43% and a narrowing of a wildlife 'buffer zone' from 500 feet to 50 feet.

'This is the kind of project the well-thought-out 2050 Comprehensive Plan was written to stop,' said Richard Grosso, attorney for the Miakka Community Club, representing historic Old Miakka (which was established in 1850).

Among the residents who spoke in opposition was Becky Ayech, longtime president of the Miakka Community Club, who has been battling local government and developers for decades to preserve the community's rural way of life. Though the decision represented the latest defeat in her long crusade, Ayech was surprisingly upbeat after the vote.

'I actually considered it a win in a bizarre sense,' Ayech said. 'The last few times the community has appeared before [the Planning Commission], it was a 7-0 vote against us. So our arguments were persuasive enough to get almost half the vote. It's an incredible improvement.'

Ayech attributes the shift to a mounting grassroots concern throughout the county over unchecked development, inadequate infrastructure and environmental threats – all arguments presented by residents during the public comment. That sentiment appears to be reflected in the candidates running for the two open commission seats to be filled in November.

At least three – representing both the Republican and Democratic parties – are

running on platforms that are either outright anti-development or at least pro-controlled growth. If this indeed is a key issue for voters, the incoming commission could make a decidedly different call on this amendment than the currently seated board, which has strongly favored developers.

Given that – and the significant departure from the 2050 Plan – it would make sense to table discussion and decisions on this amendment until after voters have had their say, so the newly-elected commissioners can be part of the decision-making process. After all, whether the application is approved or not, they are the ones who will be dealing with the decision for at least four, and possibly eight years.

Though the threats to Old Miakka have taken a variety of shapes over decades, the argument put forth by Ayeche and her neighbors has never changed. It's succinctly expressed on bright yellow signs posted near a corner of the land in question that read 'Keep the Country . . . Country. Rural heritage, not urban sprawl.'

'What this is about,' Ayeche said, 'is current and future generations having the opportunity to live on, learn from and love the land.'

It isn't her persistence or passion that convinces me. My childhood was spent in the county, too – in southwestern Michigan, outside a tiny village which has now given way to the sprawl of Amway corporate headquarters.

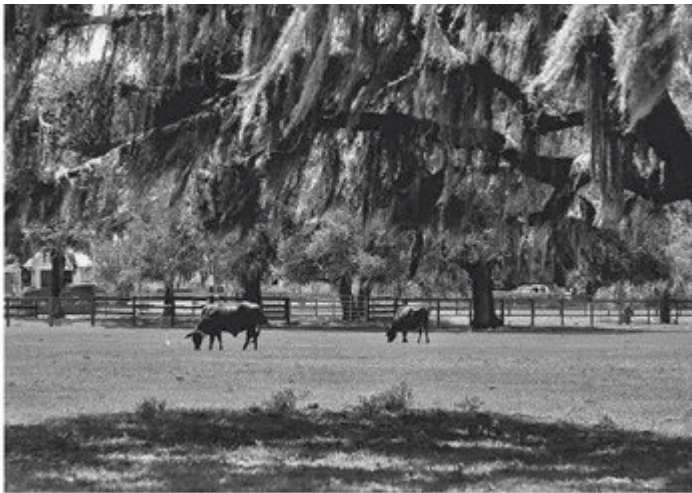
The lifestyle and values I grew up with as a 'country kid' were formative and remain an integral part of who I am. Independence and self-sufficiency were instilled early on, as was a strong work ethic and a respect for the land. Siblings, pets or your own self passed for company when you lived far from town, and dinner was what was in the cupboard or in the ground. You knew and helped your neighbors and they helped you, even if you couldn't see their place from yours.

I learned where food came from almost before I could walk, sitting in the garden stuffing cherry tomatoes in my cheeks as Mom picked corn for dinner. A bolt of lightning that struck and killed our Shetland pony, Popcorn, was a sobering lesson in the ephemerality of life. Kittens birthed in the hay barn taught us about reproduction long before we learned the facts of life.

Not everyone wants to live 'in the sticks.' But anyone who has spent even a day in the country can attest to the restorative value of fresh air, open vistas and wildlife sightings. Let's hope we, and the commissioners we elect this fall, continue to revere and retain what little is left of our rural heritage.

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Cattle graze in a field off Myakka Road in Old Miakka. Last week the Sarasota

Cattle graze in a field off Myakka Road in Old Miakka. Last week the Dan Wagner/Herald-Tribune file

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