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URBAN DEVELOPMENT BOUNDARY

Last residential developer pulls out before UDB vote

On the day before Miami-Dade county commissioners begin deciding whether to open more land for development, another in a series of proposals was withdrawn.

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Another developer has pulled out of the fight to open hundreds of acres of land to intensive development -- less than 24 hours before the Miami-Dade County Commission begins its final hearings on the proposed expansion today.

Backers of a plan to build on more than 70 acres of farmland near Homestead -- including commercial and business spaces and up to 270 homes -- withdrew their application Monday afternoon, according to Chairman Joe Martinez's office.

The application, filed under the name Barry Brant Land Trusts, and represented by attorney and former county commissioner Miguel Diaz de la Portilla, is the fourth of the controversial proposals to pull out in recent weeks.

Those opposed to moving the Urban Development Boundary, which was created to shield agricultural and environmental land from sprawl, hailed the latest surrender.

But they remain concerned about the remaining five applications, which could bring a big-box home store, offices, warehouses and retail shops to hundreds of acres near the Everglades.

The commission is expected to vote on the issue over a three-day hearing that begins today.

"Every day that passes, we hope another one will pull out," said Cynthia Guerra, an environmental activist and a member of the loosely knit Hold the Line campaign.

Diaz de la Portilla did not return calls for comment Monday evening.

His client was the only one of the remaining applications seeking residential development.

Andrew Dolkart, a consultant to several developers seeking to move the development boundary, said the latest withdrawal is understandable.

"The residential applicants just don't have the votes," Dolkart said. "It is simply a political equation."

Major home builders Shoma, Adrian and Lucky Start, whose bids to build homes on the far west and south fringes of the county were much larger than the Brant application, all cited a lack of support on the commission dais for their abrupt pullouts.

The developers also cited Martinez's request that residential builders come up with plans to ease traffic -- a major concern in Martinez's congested West Kendall district.

TAKEN CRITICISM

Martinez himself has taken pointed criticism during the contentious debate over the development boundary. Monday was no exception.

Opponents say the three-day process for voting on the development proposals that Martinez has outlined is unfair to their side, and will force volunteers to wait for hours -- or even days -- before the controversial items are open for public debate.

"There are reams of people who have signed up to speak, but can't wait around all day. They have jobs to get back to, or families to care for," Guerra said.

Martinez, who also drew heated criticism for his handling of a November round of the UDB hearings, said through a spokesman that he "was trying to be as inclusive as possible."

"This way, more people can come after work," said Gilbert Cabrera, spokesman for the commissioner. "Because it will be later in the day, more people can participate."

Cabrera also said that Martinez has no plans to recuse himself from any of the votes this week, despite a report in The Miami Herald that he has a job with a security firm whose clients include prominent builders, and whose owner is a vice president of the Builders Association of South Florida.

The county's ethics commission has ruled the relationship did not pose a conflict.

LAST APPLICATIONS

The most recent battle over the Urban Development Boundary began last year with an unprecedented push by the building industry -- which filed a flurry of applications seeking to expand the line.

The remaining applications are:

- The city of Hialeah's plan to build industrial and office space on a site that includes a former landfill; roughly 790 acres between Northwest 97th Avenue and the Turnpike.
- Doral West Commerce Park, 2.5 acres west of the Turnpike and east of Northwest 122nd Avenue near Northwest 22nd Street.
- A Lowe's Home Centers store on 51.7 acres near theoretical Southwest 138th Avenue and north of the Tamiami Canal Area.
- An office and business project on 42 acres south of Kendall Drive, west of Southwest 167th Avenue. Applicants are David Brown, Steven Brown and Victor Brown.
- Businesses and offices on 14.7 acres southeast of Southwest 142nd Avenue and 312th Street. Applicants are Pedro Talamas, Juan J. Valdes and Nadia A. Valdes.

Proponents maintain Miami-Dade's supply of undeveloped land is dwindling -- and that the county must open more space to accommodate a growing population. They also point to some municipalities that look unfavorably on added growth, meaning that the county has to look at the far reaches of unincorporated Miami-Dade to provide affordable housing.

Opponents insist there is plenty of land within the boundary for responsible growth, and say the county should focus on existing problems such as traffic, overcrowded schools and concerns over the county's water supply -- all of which have prompted sharp criticism from the Tallahassee.

Earlier this year, the state's Department of Community Affairs -- which reviews major land-use decisions such as these -- recommended all of the applications be denied.

Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez appealed to the commissioners to listen to the state's recommendations.

"Your ultimate decisions," wrote the mayor in a Monday memo to Martinez, "will reflect a distinction between sprawling development and managed growth."