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PLANNING COMMISSION

## Panel OKs Three Housing Projects

**Over neighbors' objections, three developments to total 373 residential units are approved.**

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The Ledger

BARTOW -- Traffic on County Road 540A, which is already bad, would become unbearable if three new housing developments are built, Lakeland Highlands residents told the Polk County Planning Commission on Wednesday.

Nonetheless, commissioners approved the three projects by a 3-1 vote.

Unless the decision is appealed, the projects will not need to go before the Planning Commission again or the Polk County Commission.

All three projects are along CR 540A, on land owned by Helen Miriam Gladman, a 104-year-old Lakeland woman who has held on to the property since inheriting it in 1939.

Rob Harper IV, the developer of one of the projects, said he hadn't expected much opposition Wednesday.

"It was an absolute shock," Harper said. "(Before Wednesday) no one called expressing their concerns."

The land in question is some of the most pristine, sought-after real estate in the county. Gladman's family has owned the land since 1910, when her father, W.F. Hallam, bought 3,000 acres in Lakeland Highlands and Highland City.

Family members say she is only selling now to pay the estate taxes on her property, money due after she dies.

Developers are planning three separate projects on a 337-acre tract just south of CR 540A. They are:

- Hallam Preserve. Harper and Lakeland attorney Brian Philpot have an option to buy 295 acres from Gladman. They will divide about 127 acres into 185 residential lots and set aside another 100 acres in the northwest corner for conservation. They will sell the remaining 68 acres to McDonald Development.
- Eaglebrooke North. McDonald Development, which owns The Club at Eaglebrooke community, wants to expand to the north. The company plans to divide its 68 acres into 126 lots.
- Highlands-in-the-Woods. Harper's father, Robert Harper III, will buy 42 acres just east of Hallam Preserve from Gladman. There, he plans 62 lots.

At one point Wednesday, the Planning Commission asked whether any audience members wished to speak out against the three projects. At least 25 hands went up. Their concerns were traffic, overcrowding in nearby schools and the destruction of pristine environmental land.

All told, the three projects would create 373 new residential lots. That would generate 3,531 trips

per day on the area's roads, the county's Planning Department found. Nearby residents said the two-lane CR 540A is already jammed at peak hours and can't handle the extra load. Meanwhile, a Wal-Mart Supercenter is planned for Carter Road and North Church Avenue in Mulberry, adding to Carter Road's burden.

The county does plan to start widening CR 540A to four lanes by next year, wrapping up by 2006, said Erik Peterson, principal planner for Polk County.

Neighborhood resident Robert Tylke said commissioners would be "derelict in their duties" if they approve the developments before the roads can handle the traffic.

"If you allow this development to go forward, you will create a boondoggle that will rival the Polk Parkway," Tylke said.

Stephen Kovacs of nearby Indian Trails Court drew up a list of 31 types of animals found on the property. Among them: gopher tortoises, bobcats, red foxes, rattlesnakes and eagles.

"This is a beautiful natural setting not to be found anywhere in the immediate Lakeland area," Kovacs wrote in a letter to county commissioners. "An environmental gift once destroyed will never be duplicated."

Ultimately, three of four planning commissioners decided they had little choice but to approve the projects.

While the developers of Miriam Gladman's land plan 373 lots, they could have created many more. County regulations permit them to create up to 615 lots. That would have generated some 6,100 new trips on the area's roads -- compared with the roughly 3,500 now proposed.

Commissioners Augie Fragala, Larry Seckel and John Webb voted to approve the developers' plans. Commissioner Larry Glenn opposed them. Commissioner Brian Philpot is one of the developers of the projects and recused himself from discussion and voting.

Peterson, the Planning Department official, said the developers will have to submit more detailed site plans to the county before breaking ground. They also will have to do a traffic study on their projects' impact on area roads, he said.

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