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Panel OKs Two Land Projects

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BARTOW -- In a testy, four-hour hearing on Wednesday, Polk County commissioners approved two land development projects on County Road 540A, which should bring 188 new houses to the area.

But, in a surprise, the developers of a third Lakeland Highlands project, called Hallam Preserve, withdrew the project from consideration. They are expected to resubmit the project -- which would add another 185 houses to the area -- at some later date.

The developments at issue are on pristine land owned by Helen Miriam Gladman of Lakeland, a centenarian who has kept hundreds of acres in Lakeland Highlands undeveloped for more than 60 years. Her daughter, Mary Borsch, said Gladman is only selling now to pay off her estate taxes, which will run into the millions when she dies.

Located on CR 540A, just southeast of Scott Lake Elementary, the projects are:

- Hallam Preserve. Local developer Rob Harper IV and attorney Brian Philpot want to buy 295 acres from Gladman. They would then divide 127 acres into 185 residential lots and set aside another 100 acres for conservation. They would sell the remaining 68 acres to McDonald Development, which owns The Club at Eaglebrooke community.
- Eaglebrooke North. McDonald Development wants to expand Eaglebrooke to the north. So, it is proposing to use the 68 acres for 126 residential lots.
- Highlands-in-the-Woods. Harper's father, Robert Harper III, has his own deal with Gladman. He proposes to buy 42 acres just east of Hallam Preserve from Gladman's property and divide it into 62 lots.

In November, the Polk County Planning Commission approved all three new subdivisions, but residents of the Lakeland Highlands area disapproved and requested hearings before the County Commission. On Wednesday, the County Commission approved the Eaglebrooke North and Highlands-in-the-Woods developments with 4-0 votes. Commissioner Jack Myers was absent.

However, Harper IV and Philpot withdrew the Hallam Preserve project, the largest of the three developments. An engineer for the developers said there are some legal tie-ups over the 100 acres of conservation land, and they can't progress at the moment.

At Wednesday's hearing, even opponents of the three projects conceded they will be attractive new subdivisions. But, some area residents worry about their impact on Lakeland Highlands. Assuming the Hallam Preserve moves forward eventually, the three projects will bring 373 new homes to the area.

One major problem: schools.

Right now, four schools in the area are at or near their student capacity. George Jenkins High School is operating at 107 percent of its capacity; Lakeland Highlands Middle is at 102 percent; Valleyview Elementary is at 92 percent; and Scott Lake Elementary is at 91 percent.

Jesse Pearson, facilities planner for the Polk County School Board, estimated the new homes would bring with them 100 or more new students. Meanwhile, there's no money for new schools to accommodate them, he said. If the school system can't find money, those four Lakeland Highlands schools would be "prime candidates" for double sessions -- students starting class at two different times of day.

"I will do everything in our power to keep from doing that," Pearson said.

Pearson asked commissioners to deny all three projects until the school district could study their impact on enrollment.

Another huge issue Wednesday was traffic. Residents of Lakeland Highlands complain that CR 540A, Lakeland Highlands Road and nearby Broken Arrow Trail are already crowded. They asked what will be the impact of another 373 homes in the area?

Carla Baker, a Lakeland Highlands resident and spokeswoman for other residents, didn't oppose the three projects outright. But, she did urge commissioners to make some demands of the developers. Among them, the housing developments shouldn't begin construction until the county starts four-laning CR 540A. That should start either late this year or early next year.

County commissioners didn't demand that of the developers, but the land projects aren't expected to start construction until well into 2004 anyway, said John McVay, the developers' engineer.

Also, the developers have to wait until Gladman dies before they can purchase the property from her estate. If they buy it before her death, there is a high financial penalty in the contract that would make the projects too expensive, McVay said. Gladman's age was unclear on Wednesday, but as of November she was 104.

Finally, Lakeland Highlands residents were concerned about flooding, because they suffered from significant flooding around New Year's. However, McVay said the developers will be required to build enough retention areas to accommodate for heavy rains.

In the end, both the developers and residents got a little of what they wanted -- and a little of what they didn't.

The entrance to one of the projects, Highlands-in-the-Woods, is on Broken Arrow Trail, a small road that intersects with Lakeland Highlands Road. But, Broken Arrow Trail already is operating above its traffic capacity. At the most heated point Wednesday, county commissioners considered forcing the developer of Highlands-in-the-Woods -- Robert Harper III -- to build a road to CR 540A. That, Harper said, might cost \$2 million and doom the project.

Visibly upset, Harper withdrew the Highlands-in-the-Woods project from consideration. Then, he withdrew his withdrawal and put it back up for discussion. Ultimately, commissioners didn't demand a road to CR 540A. But they did require that the developers create a second entrance to Highlands-in-the-Woods through the adjacent Hallam Preserve project.

After the hearing, Harper said he's always tried to do quality projects in Lakeland Highlands.

"But whether you want to do good projects or not, you still get beat up," he said.

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