

Editorial: River Hall deserves rural designation

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(Photo: SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS)

It is a vague three-word term that has residents in the Buckingham area pitted against Lee County government over a planned development in the River Hall community.

The term is "overriding public necessity" and it is steering emotions, attitudes and attorney opinions over whether River Hall should remain designated as rural, where density is limited, or require a change in the comprehensive land development plan to allow 850 new homes.

On Wednesday, three of the five commissioners — to the dismay of River Hall residents — agreed with County Attorney Richard Wesch's opinion the land should not carry a rural designation. It will now be up to the state to agree or disagree with the amendment, before returning to the commissioners for possible approval.

We believe this process over the past eight years has been confusing and frustrating for residents, brought on by a Lee County Comprehensive Plan that lacks completeness in definitions for rural designations and overriding public necessity.



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For residents, they have been dealing with threats to the rural land-use designation for eight years. Lee government also seems to lack clearly defined answers for this group based on its land-use plans and Wesch's opinion that this area is more urban than rural. Commissioner Frank Mann, clearly frustrated by the back and forth over whether this community should remain rural or be redefined for more development, calls the process "awful, bloody ... and silly."

Residents moved into the River Hall community believing it would remain rural, at least for several years. That they would not have to worry about battling density — the land was free and clear of development — and they would embrace the space and environmentally protected areas that shape this development. They want the land to retain what they call "its character."

Those arguing for the development change say the area is already approved for 1,999 housing units, and has urban infrastructure features supplying water and for storm water.

Most of the county commissioners say they have always relied on their legal counsel to advise them on how to proceed with complicated issues. Since September, Mann says, the legal staff has switched positions and is now agreeing with the legal team of the developer, saying this area should lose its rural designation and GreenPointe Communities should be allowed to build the additional homes.



Condos face acres of empty land at the River Hall development in east Lee County. The neighborhood has space available for new homes but a number of residents want future development to cease. (Photo: photos by SARAH COWARD/THE NEWS-PRESS)

Development vs. environmental preservation has been a consistent battleground for decades. There have been past commissioners — such as Tammy Hall — who have been pro-development. There have been past commissioners — such as Ray Judah — who have steadfastly supported land conservation and environmental preservation.

The River Hall residents believe they live in a rural area and there really is no proof that they don't. Large sections of undeveloped land still exist, as only 350 of the planned units have been built since its initial approval in 1999. This is the fourth time River Hall residents have been called into county chambers to fight for their open space. They left Tuesday with no answer as to what the outcome might be.

The point was made that once the other 1,666 units are built and residents move in, then they can look at possible land-plan changes. Despite Wesch's opinion that the necessity does exist, that proof is murky. There seems to be little evidence that populating that area with more structures is vital to the economic growth and health because the community is not close to approaching build-out.

River Hall's land designation has always been rural. Attempts to change that designation in 2005 and 2007 failed. We know commissioners need to depend on the opinion of their attorney. His opinion guides them. But River Hall residents deserve to have the life they are paying for — free of more development.

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