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Martin 'Ag-Tec' project clears hurdle

■ State finalizes change to county growth plan to allow development of citrus groves

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PALM CITY— A proposal to convert a dying citrus grove along Interstate 95 into an employment center received a big boost when state officials finalized a change to the Martin County growth plan to allow a mix of industrial, commercial and agricultural development on the 1,717-acre tract.

State Department of Community Affairs William Buzzett issued a final order Wednesday that officially makes the "Ag-Tec" land use amendment part of the county's Comprehensive Growth Management Plan.

The final approval of the new land use sets the stage for King Ranch and its Consolidated Citrus subsidiary to formulate a site plan for an

See **AG-TEC, 7A**

THE PROJECT

- 1,717 acres west of I-95, north of Martin Highway in Palm City
- New land use category called Ag-Tec that allows a mixture of industrial, office, institutional, retail, and agricultural uses
- 5 million square feet of

industrial and research and development space

- 1 million square feet of office and institutional space
- 200,000 square feet of retail
- 500 hotel rooms
- 817 acres for agricultural uses
- Will connect to Port St. Lucie's water and sewer system
- Will build connector road to Port St. Lucie

estimated 6 million square feet of development on the grove west of the Martin Highway interchange on I-95. The agricultural giant also anticipates stepping up the marketing of parts of the property to a variety of companies.

Depending on the pace of the county's review of the site plan and the success of the marketing efforts, construction of the Agricultural & Targeted Employment Center could start 2012 or 2013, said Mitch Hutchcraft, vice president of real estate for King Ranch/Consolidated.

"We think construction could conceivably start in six to 12 months ... depending on the level of interest in the end users," Hutchcraft said. "If we identify an end-user partner that is ready to go, I know that the county has the opportunity to do expedited review, and we as a company are ready to move faster. So, with the right partners in place, I would say that we could accelerate it and be ready for breaking ground in as soon as six months."

"It's obviously a difficult market out there, but we have had a number of conversations with companies that are in the arena that we are in or interested in ... alternative energy, agricultural research, biofuels, biofuel production," Hutchcraft said. "Those types of companies have expressed interest. Those are areas that I think that corporately, we're very interested in."

Hutchcraft said the companies involved in the discussions want to remain confidential.

"We have been very cautious about marketing the project until we cleared this legal challenge. So, I feel like the issuance of the final order gives us the green light to pursue in a much more aggressive way

end users. That's a phase I believe we're beginning in earnest now."

Buzzett's final order accepted a May 5 ruling by an administrative law judge that determined the land use change adopted Aug. 10, 2010 by the Martin County Commission complied with county and state rules.

Some opponents of the project grudgingly accepted the ruling.

Donna Melzer of Palm City, president of the Martin County Conservation Alliance that was part of the legal challenge to the land use change, lamented the loss in the case, but said she did not expect an appeal of the decision.

"It's very sad for Martin County," said Melzer, a former county commissioner. "I can certainly tell you I would have never voted for it. It's not a proposal that I think any resident that loves Palm City would have voted for. I don't think it's a positive for us."

The relatively isolated location of the property between I-95 and the Allapattah Flats conservation land is somewhat consoling, Melzer said.

"If it's going to happen someplace, that's the best place for it to happen," Melzer said. "It's kind of encapsulated up there and connected more to Port St. Lucie. It also more than provides the industrial and commercial (land) that's needed for the next 50 years in Martin County."

Leonard Wein, a homeowner in the nearby Stuart West subdivision, said he's concerned about the effect the massive project could have on residential drinking wells, but doesn't anticipate much construction at the site in the near future because of the difficulties in the building industry and the overall economy.

"I'm not happy about it," Wein said. "My primary concern would be our water. I am concerned about contamination of our water system and supply since our aquifers do flow from west to east."

"I'm not really that concerned about any noise or additional traffic," Wein said. "I don't see this materializing anytime soon (with) the economy and the inventory that we have. I feel sorry for future generations that are going to live out in this direction."

Ricou "Rick" Hartman, another Stuart West homeowner, said he expects the project to be well-planned.

"King Ranch's reputation is solid and Martin County is fortunate to have a landowner willing to take a long-term view and invest in our community," Hartman said in a statement issued by the company.

The new land use could result in the potential development of 5 million square feet of industrial and research and development space; 1 million square feet of office and institutional space; 200,000 square feet of retail, and 500 hotel rooms, county records show.

Early proposals envision 817 acres for agricultural uses, county records show. There are also proposals to connect the project to the city of Port St. Lucie's water and sewer system, and build a connector road to Port St. Lucie.

There are also plans to store and filter groundwater on the property to improve the quality of the water flowing into the C-23 Canal, which empties into the St. Lucie River, Hutchcraft said.