

Huge N. Brevard land deal pushes on County looks at Miami Corp. plan today in first step of long process

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NEW SMYRNA BEACH -- If approved, the Farnton Plan will designate more than 8,000 acres of northern Brevard County's serene forests, swamps and marshes as conservation land -- with no taxpayer purchase required.

Also included in the deal: 32,000 similar acres in neighboring Volusia County.

"If this were a cash deal, this would be the largest single conservation deal in Florida history," said Clay Henderson, a former Volusia County councilman and past president of the Florida Audubon Society.

"It'd be greater than the Big Sugar transaction. It'd be bigger than Babcock. It would be twice the value of the annual appropriation of Florida Forever," he said.

Henderson spoke Monday while lobbying for passage of the Farnton Plan, a 50-year blueprint guiding eventual development of Miami Corp.'s sprawling, 94-square-mile property across Brevard and Volusia counties.

The Brevard portion of the plan calls for eventual construction of up to 2,306 housing units on 11,531 acres northwest of Scottsmoor. Also included: roughly 2 million square feet of professional, manufacturing, commercial and retail development.

After nearly two hours of discussion Monday afternoon, the Local Planning Agency -- an advisory board -- unanimously forwarded Farnton Plan comprehensive-plan amendments to the Brevard County Commission.

Commissioners will consider these amendments this morning. If approved, they will be transmitted to the state Department of Community Affairs for months of study and review.

That action could let Miami Corp. secure approval before the growth-squelching Hometown Democracy constitutional-amendment election in November 2010.

Managed since the 1950s as the Farmton Tree Farm, the Brevard holdings could be split into a checkerboard of 2,306 5-acre "ranchettes" under today's zoning regulations, said Glenn Storch, company lawyer.

The Farmton Plan sets aside conservation property and congregates those 2,306 housing units into higher-density, mixed-use districts. Miami Corp. estimates the proposal would create 1,600 jobs with a \$56 million annual payroll in Brevard.

Laura Ward, a Local Planning Agency member and Titusville resident, criticized the plan. Questioning the future water supply, she said neighboring residents and organizations "got left out of the party" during the four-year planning process.

"It's probably one of the biggest things that's ever happened in our area -- and I don't feel like people in Brevard even know about it," Ward said.

Jason Steele, a real estate developer and the Brevard Republican Party chairman, said he was shocked to hear LPA members consider delaying the plan.

"We are in the worst possible economic time of our entire life. The taxpayers deserve a break, in regards to contributions," said Steele, speaking from the public podium. "The Environmentally Endangered Lands committee could never afford to buy 8,000 acres of land."

LPA Chairman Henry Minneboo likened Monday's vote to "a minuscule stop in the big picture" the Miami Corp. must navigate before the project could win approval.