

Volusia County gives 1st approval to Farmton – city in the wilderness

Miami Corp. plan would conserve 40,000 acres of timberland

September 22, 2009

By Ludmilla Lelis

Sentinel Staff Writer



Miami Corp. wants to develop 25 percent of the 59,000 acres it owns in Volusia and Brevard counties. (Jacob Langston, Orlando Sentinel / September 3, 2009)

A plan that would conserve more than 40,000 acres of remote timberland while establishing a new city of more than 20,000 homes has passed its first round of approvals.

The Miami Corp., a Chicago company that has owned the vast tree farm in Volusia and Brevard counties for more than 80 years, won unanimous approval Tuesday from Volusia's planning commission. Brevard County's planning agency and county commissioners have also approved the plan.

What's next?

The future city of Farmton, carved alongside wildlife corridors, must win the backing of the Volusia County Council in October before the state Department of Community Affairs reviews it.

What do plans include?

The proposal offers a trade-off for the company's 59,000 acres, which approaches the size of Orlando.

About 75 percent of the property, more than 40,000 acres, would be permanently set aside for wildlife corridors for the many species there, including Florida black bear and swallowtail kites. The development would be clustered into eco-friendly villages and business districts.

Because there would be no infrastructure or schools at first, the only development occurring within the initial 15 years would be a "gateway" business district near [Edgewater](#). Most of the development would occur after 2025, after roads, utilities and a school plan are in place.

What's the price for the conservation lands?

At Tuesday's hearing in **DeLand**, Clay Henderson, an attorney for Miami Corp., said the land to be preserved would make up the biggest conservation deal in Florida's history if public money had to buy it. The land is valued at \$600 million to \$1.25 billion, depending on its approved use.

The company has promised to conserve the corridors without asking for a dime.

To make the whole package viable, Miami Corp. attorney Glenn Storch said the development rights would be transferred onto the remaining areas, but the company is not in any rush to build soon.

"The Miami Corporation is not a developer. They've been good stewards of the land for 80 years," he said. "We don't need to develop anything now."

Why now?

Opponents of the project questioned whether such a massive project should be approved now, especially such dense development in a remote area within the 100-year flood plain.

"What's the rush? There is no rush to build anything right now," said Betty O'Laughlin, with the Environmental Council of Volusia and Flagler Counties, an umbrella group for local advocates. She pointed to a glut of vacant homes and others that had already been approved for construction by the county.

Becky Mendez, Volusia County senior planner, pointed out that the proposal included several thresholds to be met before each phase of construction could move ahead.

The company has pressed for approval of the plan before the constitutional amendment called Hometown Democracy appears on next year's ballot. It would give voters potential veto power over development plans being considered by governments.

Storch emphasized that construction would only occur when the homes and businesses are needed.

"This is a 50-year plan, and we're trying to create a vision so that when the need is here, when the market is here, we have a vision for what will be here."

Ludmilla Lelis can be reached at llelis@orlandosentinel.com or 386-253-0964.

Copyright © 2009, **Orlando Sentinel**