

GRIDLOCK ALERT: COUNTY STAFF SEEKS BAD AMENDMENTS

On August 20, the Sarasota County Planning Commission will hold a public hearing and vote on two Comprehensive Plan amendments that would let developers overcrowd our roads.

The hearing will be at 6:30 pm at the South County Commission Chamber at 4000 S. Tamiami Trail in Venice. The amendments, with others that pose no problems, may then go to the County Commission for consideration.

Lower Levels of Service

The first amendment, 2010-01-D, is very complicated but important to understand because of the increased traffic congestion it would allow. It is titled "Levels of Service". The Level of Service on a road is the amount of traffic which a developer is not allowed to exceed until needed improvements (if possible) are made by the County or the developer. This is the essence of "concurrency", the concept that a developer may not add more traffic to a road than it can handle concurrent with, that is at the same time as, the impacts of the development.

Levels of Service are rated A through F, with A being the least congested and F being the worst. The County has an adopted Level of Service C on County roads and D on State roads, that being the level a developer cannot exceed.

For roads that are presently below the adopted Level of Service, the County has a lower Level of Service if it they are presently deficient. If the road can be improved but the improvement is not in the five-year plan it is deemed a "backlogged" road. If it is permanently deficient it is a "constrained" road.

What the amendment would do is lower the adopted level of service on many additional roads throughout the County based merely on a projection that they will become deficient within the next five years, at present by 2014. Both the present and projected deficient roads would be labeled "non-conforming" roads.

County staff alleges that this is required by a state law which states that the Comprehensive Plan must be "financially feasible". However, there is nothing in that law which requires what the staff is proposing. Even if it did, the 2009 Legislature delayed the financial feasibility requirement for several years, so there is no arguable need adopt this amendment now, particularly because it will add so many roads to those to which developers can add more traffic congestion.

Further, the amendment is fatally flawed because it projects an increase in traffic volume based on three past years of data. Those were during recent "boom" years. That projection is no longer accurate, as most recently traffic volumes have remained stable or even decreased with the slowdown of the economy and the population.

Among the roads that would be affected by adoption of this amendment, on which developers would be allowed to add more traffic congestion, are US 41, US 301, 17th Street, Bahia Vista, Bee Ridge, Osprey, Beneva, Cattlemen, Fruitville, Gantt, Gulf Gate, Higel, Honore, Jacaranda, Laurel, Lockwood Ridge, McIntosh, Palmer, Ringling, River, swift, Tuttle and University Parkway.

Developer Can Overcrowd Roads by Adding a Bus Stop

The other bad amendment is the provision of 2010-01-E, Transit Service Standards, that would allow a developer to add more traffic congestion to a road than is now allowed if the developer agrees to put in a bus stop. Actually, the phrase is "services or facilities that coordinate with and enhance public transit", but what that means is a bus stop.

This is based on the unproven premise that if a development has a bus stop there will be a significant reduction of the amount of traffic leaving and entering the development.

The amendment would revise Transportation Policy 3.2.2, which presently allows the County to “consider” amending its standards to reduce a development’s parking requirements if there is a bus stop. It would instead require the County to amend its standards “as alternative to the provision of roadway and parking requirements for the development”, that is to allow traffic congestion as well as inadequate parking, if it has a bus stop.

Although staff said at its recent workshop on the amendments that the change in standards would only allow a little increase in traffic congestion, there is no limit stated in the amendment.

Staff also acknowledged that even without the amendment a developer can get a break on its traffic limits if its engineers can prove that a planned bus stop would reduce traffic. They said that was done for example in the large Benderson development that was approved off University Parkway. If that is true then there is no need for this amendment, which makes things even worse by its failure to require engineering proof of the traffic-reducing impact of the bus stop and its lack of limits on that concession.

All citizens and groups opposed to letting developers overcrowd our roads more than allowed today should appear at the August 20 Planning Commission public hearing and urge that these bad amendments not be approved.