

The Fruitville Initiative: Subsidizing Developers in Violation of The Sunshine Law

How about a \$350,000 taxpayer subsidy of developers, with much more to come?

How about funding that at a time when the County is cutting back library hours, law enforcement, parks and other public needs?

How about putting it all together in a series of secret meetings between property owners and public officials in violation of the Sunshine Law?

Well, all of that was approved by a vote of the County Commission, without a public hearing, on February 10, 2010.

It has been temporarily stopped only because of the lawsuit by opponents of subsidies of major league baseball which were also put together in violation of the Sunshine Law, who discovered the deal called The Fruitville Initiative.

The \$350,000 is to pay for two-thirds of a half-million dollar contract with a private planning firm to conduct a charette and draft a plan for the intense "mixed use" development of six properties totaling 300 acres east of I-75 on Fruitville Road.

The deal also includes a lowballed figure for the developers to buy "flood plain compensation" from the County for their low-lying properties (that is the purchase of fill and other drainage measures). Although an appraiser calculated a value of \$14,000 to \$20,000 per acre foot to the County, depending on location, the secret deal approved by the County sets the figure at only \$15,000 throughout the 300 acres. Additionally, the County agreed to use much of that money for "shared infrastructure" that the property owners would normally fund themselves.

Also on the table are "concurrency options" which may allow the developers to overcrowd the roads more than allowed today and other "public-private" monetary contributions by the taxpayers.

\$132,000 of the funding is to be for a five-day charette in which the property owners and the planning firm would work together to put together a development plan for the properties. All of the property owners would have to agree, as well as the County. While others would be invited (Schroeder-Manatee Development has been mentioned as one), only the agreement of the property owners and the County are required, in the terms of the deal approved by the Commission.

Forgotten in all of this of course is the time-honored role of I-75 as a barrier to intense eastern development. Of course, the County Commission abandoned that years ago in approving the Sarasota 2050 scheme, to allow three huge intense "Village" developments east of the Interstate.

Whether the County moves forward to reconsider and again approve the Fruitville Initiative, as it did for the subsidies of the Baltimore Orioles, remains to be seen. Word is that some of the property owners are getting nervous about the deal now that the Sunshine Law violations have been exposed and it is being subjected to greater public attention.

Maybe this is a good opportunity for our County Commissioners to truly reconsider and put taxpayers' interests ahead of the developers. We have better things to do with our dollars than to pay for the planning and infrastructure to turn east County farmland into even more overdevelopment at the public expense.