

## Before development, get the details settled

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Nailing down the details on planned protections for black bear habitat shouldn't be superseded by private sector interests pitching a high-end resort and residential community in Aripeka.

Pasco County commissioners were correct Wednesday to delay consideration of a development order for the SunWest Harbourtowne proposal after the state said the proposed order didn't go far enough to ensure replacement of black bear habitat disturbed by the construction.

The property owners had said that mitigation plan would come later, but a Department of Community Affairs planner, doing a courtesy review of the suggested development order, said those requirements should be spelled out now. It is not unreasonable to ask for the size, location and cost of off-site land for mitigation to be part of the order and the county shouldn't give serious heed to pleas that it is a premature expense because the project has not yet been approved.

In light of past objections over damage to the habitat of the endangered Florida black bear, the county should be adding scrutiny, not relaxing standards. In that regard, it is disconcerting that it took the DCA to throw up the caution flag considering the same questions came from environmentalists at a Development Review Committee meeting in January.

The County Commission also must show greater diligence in light of its own less-than-stellar track record on similar issues. Less than 18 months ago, this same commission charged ahead with unanimous approval of a 530-acre mixed-use development in Shady Hills that included a wildlife corridor more narrow than their own consultant recommended. The vote also came after the county attorney voiced concern about setting a poor precedent allowing other developers to negotiate for reduced wildlife protections.

The County Commission would be wise to recall the lessons from that proposed project. It, too, drew DCA scrutiny, which kicked it back to the county after a challenge from environmentalists.

SunWest Harbourtowne wants to build as many as 2,500 residential units, a golf course, hotels, shops and marina on 2,300 acres between U.S. 19 and the Gulf of Mexico near the Hernando County line in rural Aripeka. Developers tout the project as a significant environmental improvement over the mining operation there that pre-dates reclamation requirements. Supporters also point to the economic potential from the resort, including a newly dredged channel to the gulf that will abut a new county park and boat ramps.

Regardless, the County Commission cannot abandon responsible environmental stewardship in favor of potential commerce or recreational opportunities for its residents. It shouldn't bless a development order that promises vague considerations for endangered wildlife at some unspecified future date.

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