

## Resort plans come up short

By [Jodie Tillman](#), Times Staff Writer

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ARIPEKA — State officials say the latest plans for the proposed SunWest Harbourtowne fall short in protecting the Florida black bear.

SunWest developers say they will put together a protection plan for the bears later in the process. But the Department of Community Affairs wants more of those details now.

Pasco commissioners are scheduled to consider today the draft development order for the 2,340-acre coastal property that would feature 2,500 residential units, shopping and office space, a golf course, and a marina.

But the new criticism from the DCA, spelled out in a letter Friday to Pasco planners, has forced county officials and the property owners to regroup.

County staff expect to ask commissioners to postpone today's vote until March 30.

DCA's chief planner, Mike McDaniel, told Pasco officials in the letter that the proposed development order fails to provide assurances that developers will make up for disturbing bear habitat.

State rules say proposed development orders should include details of off-site land to be set aside for mitigation, including its location, size and acquisition costs.

Those details are not included in SunWest's proposed development order. Instead, the developers agree to submit a separate bear habitat mitigation plan before they apply for their first site plan approval with Pasco.

"(M)itigation is deferred to a later date and to a document which is outside of the development order," McDaniel wrote. "The department is concerned that deferral to the (habitat plan) does not provide adequate assurance that bear habitat will be mitigated.

"This results in a regional impact not being adequately mitigated and if not resolved, it could form the basis for an appeal."

State officials were performing a courtesy review of the draft development order, which will eventually come back to them for approval.

The property is now an active mining site.

SunWest officials say they were following the same schedule as other large developments when it comes to the timing of habitat management plans.

Honey Rand, a spokeswoman for the SunWest property owners, said her clients have been working on a preliminary habitat plan that incorporates feedback from government agencies and environmental groups.

But until they get the go-ahead on the development order, the owners have held off on spending money on an extensive analysis that would identify the quantity and quality of land they may have to set aside for the bears.

Rand said the property owners will now sort out with state and county officials what kind of language in the development order would satisfy the requirements.

"At this point, we think it's an administrative sort of thing," she said.

SunWest officials say that the project will not eliminate any critical bear habitat. Rand said experts hired by the developers have found evidence that only three tagged bears traversed the property in the last eight years and two of those bears are now dead.

But the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission have both weighed in on the project, saying it would have negative impacts on wildlife, particularly the Chassahowitzka bear population, a threatened species, by taking up a portion of its habitat and cutting its travel route.

Environmentalists opposed to SunWest have argued against the county approving the development order without a detailed habitat management plan in hand.

As it is written now, the development order would not allow SunWest to move dirt until a bear management plan is in place. But Joe Murphy, Florida program director for Gulf Restoration Network, said he worries something might go wrong down the road — such as the developer not being able to buy the mitigation property — and the county might cut them some slack.

"What we're saying is the future of an entire region is hanging in balance in terms of these bears," he said. "Given the track record of the development community in Florida, we'd be more comfortable seeing everything signed, sealed and implemented."

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