

White, Margo

From: Theresa Soles <tsoles64@msn.com>
Sent: Friday, May 31, 2024 6:10 PM
To: White, Margo; Theresa Soles
Subject: [EXTERNAL]: Smokey Groves Development LLC LDCPAL-2024-8

From: Theresa Soles
9365 West Lake Marion Road
Haines City, FL 33844
863-206-9373

My name is Theresa Soles. I have lived in the Lake Marion area since the 1970s and currently reside at 9365 West Lake Marion Road in Haines City, FL.

To give you some perspective, my home is south and east of the Grenelefe Golf Course and immediately east of the Smokey Groves Development property. My husband and I purchased 10 acres of beautifully wooded property with a creek that flows into Lake Marion. We built a home to raise our two children in 1999. We made the decision to live outside the city, free from the noise, traffic, congestion and busyness. We chose to live here, despite the 15-minute drive to the grocery store and knew our jobs, schools, healthcare, church, and recreational activities were a good distance away as well.

I oppose the Smokey Groves Development LLC case #LDCPAL-2024-8 for several reasons:

The eventual development of this property would place a greater strain on Polk County's already ailing infrastructure, cause more traffic congestion and accidents, and further burden public services. Recent articles have been written on how understaffed, overworked, and burned out our first responders and 911 operators are. Each new development that allows such a density will continue to drain these services.

Such a development could bring an influx of low-income residents, which could lead to increased crime rates and other negative social effects. It would also drastically alter the aesthetics of our area, by replacing much of the tree-covered areas with cookie-cutter style housing and minimal landscaping. Another concern is the impact a development such as this would have on the value of homes in our area. A decline in property values would make it difficult for the sale of existing homes, should the homeowner decide to relocate. The subsequent development is not at all comparable with the homes and lot sizes of the surrounding communities (except for those located in the existing Grenelefe development to the north). Not only is it not comparable, it is not even a gradual increase in density compared to the surrounding homes, most of which are custom-built homes on half-acre lots and larger. Any development in this area *should* serve to complement the surrounding properties on West Lake Marion Road, Jim Edwards Road, South Bay Landings, Spring Pines, Sequoia Ridge, and the likes. I encourage you to personally visit our area to see what a large-scale development such as this will destroy. Consider how awful it would be to have our peaceful area ruined and the value our homes deflated by allowing homes that are out of character with the surrounding neighborhood.

Such a development could result in further environmental damage. There are deer, turkey, hogs, eagles, hawks, and other animals that make this area their home that have already been and will continue to be displaced, because of this development. A creek flows from the Smokey Groves

Development property and runs through my property and the properties of several others, into Lake Marion, and on to Lake Okeechobee. Lake Okeechobee was once Florida's most healthy and vibrant lake and is one of the top ten largest lakes in the U.S. However, the lake has shown a decline in its overall health in recent years, with the presence of toxic blue-green algae. Could excessive development be partly to blame?

Developments are also huge consumers of water, not only by humans, but by irrigation, new sod, etc., and put our aquifer at risk. All the rooftops, parking lots, driveways, sidewalks, and roads block the rainwater from seeping back into the ground naturally.

Litter is out of control in Polk County. On nearly every roadway, you will find discarded items such as furniture, tires, and other debris, bags of trash that have been intentionally left, and paper, food wrappers, or plastic items that have been tossed from passing cars. Litter causes pollution, kills wildlife, and facilitates the spread of disease. And with the potential increase to the population in our area, an increase to litter would likely follow.

This eventual development is expected to triple the amount of traffic in the area, based on the CDD request that was presented to the Board of County Commissioners in April 2024. Lake Marion Road is a small, two-lane road and the *ONLY* access for the 400+ home Smokey Groves development would be a roundabout the planning commission has identified as "precarious". Very little has been done to make and keep our roads safe with this latest development boom - there are intersections that need traffic lights, intersections that have traffic lights but need left turn signals, and turning lanes needed. These improvements would hopefully allow traffic to flow more smoothly and perhaps eliminate the need for drivers to make the risky driving decisions everyone seems to be making, in an attempt to get from point A to point B on time. Deadly accidents are now commonplace and there have been several on Polk County roadways this week alone.

Florida's home and auto insurance markets are in an ongoing crisis that has left residents struggling with skyrocketing premiums and deductibles, changes to or loss of coverage. The weather is not the only thing to blame – the high rate of auto accidents drives up the costs for all of us, regardless of one's driving record.

In conclusion, I believe such a dense housing development that will be allowed by this change would have a detrimental effect on our area and serves only to benefit a selfish developer and his interests. I appreciate your time and hope you will consider preserving the peace and tranquility many of the residents moved to this area for. This project is simply not the right fit for our neighborhood.

Sincerely,

Theresa Soles

May 27, 2024



Commissioner Bill Braswell

Polk County Commissioner, District 3

330 W. Church St.

Bartow, Florida 33830

Dear Commissioner Braswell,

My name is Dennis Leszczynski and I am President of the Grenelefe Country Homes Community Board of Directors. I write representing the majority of homeowners that make up our private gated community. Grenelefe Country Homes was historically part of Grenelefe. In 1993 Country Homes became a separate entity of single family homes and townhomes. We currently have 97 homes in low to medium density.

Having reviewed the 2nd proposed plan from Axion relative to the "Grenelefe Redevelopment" project we as a community were shocked at the number of homes that had been added to the initial plan. It appears that the developer's upcoming request for rezoning will be for high density. This is in no way compatible with the existing homes in our community and nearby Arrowhead Lake Estates. I have attached Axions current plan. The white areas represent Grenelefe Country Homes. You will see our street names such as Robyn, Nottingham and Canturbury.

Our community is made up of people who purchased in Country Homes because of its country setting. The fallow golf course, while not necessarily beautiful, was open space that is increasingly difficult to find in Polk County. Wildlife abounded with frequent sightings of deer, raccoon, fox, possum and the odd coyote. All of these animals with the exception of the endangered Gopher Tortoises, rabbits, and turkeys are gone. The remaining wildlife will also be driven away.

Many of our residents are long term residents who plan to live in our community for the rest of their lives. Many, if not all of our neighbors have the same plan. As we understand it the project will last up to seven years. Are we to give up the homes that we love or sustain years of construction that will literally be 20 to 30 feet from our back yards? We understand that rebuilding the east side of Kokomo road makes sense. The buildings and amenities are dated and perhaps even unsafe. We even understand remodeling the condominiums to the West of Kokomo road for rentals is worthwhile as they too are dated. We remain awestruck that our small community on the West Golf Course will literally be swallowed up with high density housing being built directly behind each our existing homes.

While we are made to understand that both our water plant and sewage plant have the capacity for the additional development, we are concerned about the potential overload of our current water lines. We have had numerous water line breaks and boil water notices.

Even though CDD financing will not affect Country Homes per say we remain skeptical that they are a safe vehicle for financing. I have enclosed just one article about failing CDDs in Florida but there are many more. The result these failures has resulted in families being forced to attempt to sell their properties at very reduced prices. Should this occur our home values will also be negatively affected. Not knowing what the financial future will be, is a CDD a safe gamble at this time?

In summary, our concerns about increased traffic, an aging water system, the density of homes and the risks involved in CDD financing, we feel compelled to ask the Board of Commissioners to decline Axioms upcoming request for high density zoning. In our opinion the above stated concerns would a be series of risks that are unnecessary and offer no value added to the Country Homes community.

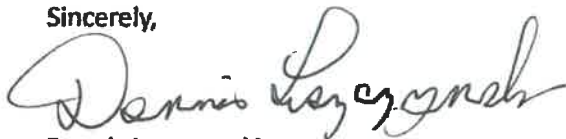
I expect to attend the upcoming meeting with as many like-minded neighbors as can attend to demonstrate our resolve in this matter.

I would encourage you to visit our community prior to the upcoming meeting to experience what we have now as opposed what we can expect should the proposed plan be approved.

We feel this issue to be so critical to the future of our neighborhood that if possible, I would like to meet with you prior to the June 5th Commissioner's meeting. I know your time is valuable. If interested I can be contacted at dlez10@aol.com or (863)258-1616.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dennis Leszczynski".

Dennis Leszczynski

President, Grenelefe Country Homes, Inc.

NEWS

Homeowners in failed tax districts find themselves in a bind

DALE WHITE

Published 3:32 p.m. ET March 8, 2013

When James Quinn arrives home in Gran Paradiso, he does not see the posh, gated community he thought he bought into five years ago.

“My goal was to have a neighborhood for my kids,” the father of three said. “But there's nothing here but weeds and dirt.”

The recovery in the housing market that is reviving Florida real estate is noticeably bypassing Gran Paradiso, where a special tax district that funds services to the neighborhood is now awash in debt and unable to pay for basic maintenance.

Only two dozen homes exist in what was to be a 1,999-home, master-planned community. The homes are separated by undeveloped tracts of high weeds that residents say attract snakes, field mice and wild boars.

Trespassers illegally dump debris on empty lots.

The streetlights are shut off, compelling drivers to use their high-beam headlights at night so they can negotiate the development's meandering lanes.

The palatial, Tuscan-style clubhouse stands eerily empty and only partially built — without the promised library, media center, fitness club, steam and massage rooms, crafts room, and billiards and card room.

The clay tennis courts, two swimming pools, biking trails, grilling cabana and other outdoor amenities referred to in sales brochures have not materialized either.

But what is happening here, experts say, threatens scores of similar communities across Florida that are funded by special taxing districts called community development districts, or CDDs.

Richard Lehmann, a securities adviser who also writes for floridacddreport.com, says 183 CDDs across Florida are currently in default on \$5.5 billion in debt.

“Too many CDDs were authorized that should not have been,” Lehmann said.

Real estate consultant Jack McCabe sees Gran Paradiso as a dire warning. He predicts numerous other developments across Florida are soon to be in the same trouble because their “community development districts” are in default.

“We’re going to see CDDs across Florida in financial peril,” McCabe said.

To pay for roads, streetlights, water and sewer pipelines and other infrastructure, some developers obtain the state’s permission to set up CDDs. The special tax districts function as a government body that floats bond issues to pay for that infrastructure. The district boards add annual assessments to property tax bills to pay off the bond issues.

In other words, property owners within a community development district assume a debt beside their mortgage and property taxes. They are obligated to pay off the district’s bonds.

Why would anyone buy a home that would also require paying extra for basic infrastructure? In the real estate boom, buyers expected their property values to increase so rapidly that the added CDD costs were ones they could easily handle.

Prior to CDDs, developers obtained financing for the construction of roads, utilities and such — the cost of which would be reflected up front in the price of the homes.

As happened with Gran Paradiso, developments were started in what was becoming a declining housing market and the buyers needed to pay off CDD debt did not materialize, Lehmann said.

“It’s been going on since 2008 and it’s not going to solve itself in less than a decade,” Lehmann said.

The state approved the establishment of the West Villages Improvement District for Gran Paradiso and nearby IslandWalk.

In IslandWalk, a DiVosta Homes development directly across U.S. 41 from Gran Paradiso, homes are still selling and the West Villages district is meeting its financial obligations.

In Gran Paradiso, “no one is living up to their obligations except the homeowners,” resident Eddie Wadsworth said.

Gran Paradiso residents were made aware of the West Villages CDD prior to purchasing there but they thought enough new buyers would follow them that the shared financial obligations could be met.

Residents say there has been no construction in Gran Paradiso since 2009, when builder Sam Rodgers stopped paying assessments to the West Villages district.

The district and Rodgers are suing each other over money they claim each owes the other.

Todd Wodraska, manager of the West Villages Improvement District, insists Rodgers' stopping payment on the assessments for the empty lots is what caused the district to default on a 2006 bond issue of \$40.8 million and for conditions to deteriorate in Gran Paradiso.

“There's no money to pay for electricity, mowing, maintenance,” Wodraska said.

Rodgers blames the bond market. “The debt service was so high, the market wouldn't stand it — and the bondholders wouldn't reconfigure the bonds.”

Rodgers insists the district still owes him \$3.95 million of the \$4.25 million he has already spent on infrastructure.

He wants to be paid, too.

Homeowners in Gran Paradiso are paying more than \$3,000 a year in district assessments and say their community gets minimum maintenance in return. They are hesitant not to pay, though.

“If we stop, they'll come after us because we have something of value — our homes,” Quinn said.

Yet the value of their homes is declining.

For example, a four-bedroom, three-bath home in Gran Paradiso had a market value of \$261,700 as of last year — compared with \$362,400 in 2009, a 27 percent drop. It's likely to drop even more in value this year.

“We're stuck,” said Tom Palguta, a retired state trooper whose wife is a retired teacher. “For some of us, this represents our life savings. We had to sell a house to buy a house. It's not like we can walk away.”

Overcoming the “negative stigma” associated with a failed CDD will be difficult because the development is unlikely to attract new buyers, McCabe said.

“Realtors tend to take buyers to other properties that don't have problems,” McCabe said. “If the CDD floated bonds and is now delinquent, that would give any buyer concerns. . . . Will

they be stuck in a ghost town?”

The residents of Gran Paradiso feel they have no legal remedy.

“Several of us talked to lawyers,” Palguta said. “They said we better have deep pockets.”

Quinn said an attorney he approached wanted a \$10,000 retainer.

All of the parties are cautiously hopeful that the situation may soon improve.

Rodgers is talking with another developer who may be willing to “come in and take over,” Wodraska said. “He hasn’t disclosed who that developer would be but he is encouraged.”

“We’re talking to numerous parties,” Rodgers said. “Nothing has gelled yet but I’m very optimistic.”

Should another developer step forward, it, Rodgers, the tax district and the bondholders would have to reach “a negotiated settlement,” Wodraska said.

That worries residents, who say that, even if a new developer is found, such negotiations could break down.

“You have all these entities and they all have to agree,” Wadsworth said. “It’s a messy situation.”

“It’s going to be a tough sell,” McCabe said.

Florida law allows developers to set up community development districts. The special tax districts float bond issues to pay for roads, pipelines, storm-water retention ponds and other infrastructure. Residents of those communities pay off the debt through assessments added to the property tax bills. **HOW MANY CDDS ARE THERE?** Florida has 600 CDDs, though not all of them have debt. **HOW MANY CDDS ARE IN DEFAULT?** According to analysts at floridacddreport.com, 183 of those CDDs are in default on \$5.5 billion of debt.

WHAT ARE CDDS?

The included development plan (second rendition) from Axion shows Grenelefe Country Homes roads highlighted in black. Our homes are within the white areas inside the highlighted roads. This will hopefully illustrate the result of high density zoning in our area.



Nottingham Dr.

Marion Rd.

Robin Ln

Canterbury Dr.

Abbey Ln

Fairway Dr.

Burrows Rd.

Larkspur Dr.

Abbey Ln

The Park

TENNIS RANGE

W. Lake Marion Rd.

Kukamo Rd.

Tuxford Dr.

Coventry Dr.

Lefe Ct.

Hushby Ct.

Country Life

Springing Ct.

60' BLUE

OVERALL PLAN