

Tension mounts over Taylor development

By NATHAN CRABBE
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PERRY - The Magnolia Bay resort and marina proposed on the Taylor County coast has brought allegations of flying fists, as questions remain about the project's environmental impact.

Perry police are investigating whether project developer Chuck Olson punched project opponent Rick Causey in the face at a meeting last week at the Perry Elks Lodge. Olson, 61, denies the incident occurred and police are looking for a witness among the more than 100 people in attendance.

"If it did happen, I'm sure somebody saw it," said Perry Police Lt. Vern Clark.

The meeting was meant to bolster local support for the project, which would bring six condominium and hotel towers as high as 25 stories to 525 acres near Dekle Beach. The project would mean filling more than 100 acres of wetlands and digging a 36-acre access channel through a state sea grass preserve.

J. Crayton Pruitt, a retired St. Petersburg heart surgeon who owns the land, said he believes the lingering environmental questions won't derail the project.

"So far no one has said anything indicating that we're not going to get approval," he said.

The Suwannee River Water Management District has twice given Pruitt an extension to answer questions before it makes a recommendation on his environmental permit. He now has until Nov. 22 to answer more than 100 questions, including some about a Port of Manatee dredging project in Manatee County that was used to show that sea grass restoration can work.

Salt Springs environmental consultant Roy "Robin" Lewis said the port project shows sea grass can be restored in one place to make up for it being damaged in another. But Lewis has joined an environmental group's lawsuit against the state Department of Environmental Protection, which charges the state is

allowing shipping berths to be used despite restoration work being incomplete.

The port project has shown the difficulty in restoring sea grass, said Glenn Compton, director of the ManaSota-88, a Nokomis-based environmental group that is part of the lawsuit.

"Sea grass mitigation is at best an art," he said. "It's not an exact science."

Even as those questions remain, Pruitt is moving forward in negotiations with Taylor County commissioners. The commission is scheduled Oct. 17 to discuss Pruitt's offer to give the county ownership of a 30-acre property on the site for county services as well as a planned public boat ramp.

One commissioner, Clay Bethea, attended part of the meeting in which the alleged fight occurred. Bethea said in a written statement that he "heard what sounded like one person striking another" and then looked to see Causey off-balance and Olson moving backward.

Bethea declined to answer other questions, saying he might be asked to testify.

Causey, 60, a retired soil scientist who lives in Dekle Beach, told police he refused Olson's demand to leave the meeting and was subsequently punched in the jaw. Clark said he's investigating the case further before sending it to the state attorney for possible prosecution.

Olson said he engaged in shoving, but no punch was thrown. A Treasure Island developer, he has faced legal issues before. He pleaded no contest to two cocaine-related felonies in 1993 and was sentenced to 10 years' probation, but was allowed to finish the sentence early.

He said those problems are in the past and he believes the project will move forward, despite questions about whether restoration work would be effective.

"If you do it properly, it can be done," he said.

The development would bring more than 1,400 hotel rooms and condos to an area touted as the least-developed coast in the country. It would include stores, restaurants, a waterside amphitheater, a helicopter pad and a marina with 374 boat slips.

Boaters would have Gulf access via a 2-mile long, 100-foot-wide channel cut through the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve. Lewis said the developers would make up for the damage by restoring seagrass scars sliced by propellers and conducting education efforts with boaters to prevent further destruction.

"There will no net loss of seagrass in this project," he said.

Lewis was a consultant on the Port of Manatee project, before quitting in 2003. He said the project's sea grass restoration work wasn't being done according to his specifications, causing problems in its effectiveness.

He said he believes Magnolia Bay's proposed sea grass restoration will be different.

"The bottom line is if you do it right, it works, and if you don't do it right, it doesn't work," he said.

The water district, in its letter to Pruitt, cited a report by Lewis that found that the port's sea grass restoration project "largely failed at a cost of \$6 million." The district will not accept the restoration of prop scars as mitigation for the channel dredging, according to the letter.

"Any given prop scar has the potential to revegetate naturally with no further action," the letter said.

The state Department of Environmental Protection and Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission also sent letters expressing concerns about the project. The Fish and Wildlife Commission questioned whether damage to the sea grass and wetlands could hurt manatees, commercial and recreational fisheries and shorebirds.

The project would fill 100 acres of wetlands, including 35 acres of coastal marsh. Environmental consultant Beverly Birkitt said proposals to restore wetlands are still being completed, but will result in wetlands that better circulate water.

"It will actually be left in better condition after the project than before the project," she said.

Causey began his opposition to the development because of concerns about its environmental impact. He said the alleged fight with Olson has helped convince locals who were unsure about the project.

"The ones that were on the fence about the project . . . have fallen off on our side," he said.

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