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Proposed development faces approvals, potential lawsuit

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Sun staff writer

A proposed resort and marina on the Taylor County coast must still clear several hurdles before being approved, but opponents are already threatening to sue if that happens.

The Magnolia Bay project would bring six condominium and hotel towers as high as 25 stories to an area now touted as the least-developed coast in the country. The \$700 million project would mean filling more than 100 acres of wetlands near Dekle Beach and digging a 36-acre channel through the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve.

Manley Fuller, president of the Florida Wildlife Federation, flew in a small plane to view the project site this week. He said the project is one of worst he's seen in decades and the group would likely file a lawsuit under the Clean Water Act if it is approved.

"Fundamentally what they're proposing is inappropriate for that site," he said.

The Suwannee River Water Management District this week approved an extension for project developers, giving them until Jan. 31 to answer more than 160 remaining questions. The district's Megan Wetherington said developers must show the project won't cause adverse environmental impact before district staff recommends approval.

The project would then be considered by the district board and would also have to pass muster with Taylor County commissioners and the state Cabinet.

The Cabinet must approve the project because it involves developing submerged wetlands and the aquatic preserve. The likelihood of obtaining Cabinet approval is an open question with the election of Charlie Crist as governor and two new Cabinet officers.

The property is owned by Dr. J. Crayton Pruitt, a retired St. Petersburg heart surgeon. Pruitt, his family members and one of his businesses contributed \$4,500 to Crist's campaign. But Pruitt said he doesn't think the contributions will affect the governor's consideration of the project.

"Charlie Crist is going to do what he thinks is right for the state," Pruitt said.

Project developer Chuck Olson said he hopes all hearings will be completed by next summer. He believes the project will be approved and development will begin by Christmas 2007.

"I think we're doing a lot to improve the Nature Coast," he said.

He said the development will provide both economic and environmental benefits. The project will include restoration of damaged areas of the sea grass preserve and wetlands either near the project or in another area, he said.

Olson, a Treasure Island-based developer, was accused last month of punching project opponent Rick Causey during a meeting at the Perry Elks Lodge. Perry police say they're still investigating, but Assistant State Attorney Ernie Page said charges aren't being pursued at this time due to inconsistent statements and a lack of evidence.

Since the meeting, Taylor County commissioners have approved a development agreement with Pruitt. He agreed to give the county ownership of a planned public boat ramp and a 30-acre property on the site to be used for county services.

The project has brought attention to Pruitt's company, Secret Promise Ltd., and its ownership of 1,600 acres in the project area. The property is assessed at nearly \$6.7 million in value, but 96 percent receives an agricultural exemption, meaning the company paid about \$4,100 in property taxes this year for the land.

Olson said the land has been used for timber harvesting and cattle ranching. But Taylor County Property Appraiser Eldon Sadler

said he looked at the property last week to see if agriculture was the main use of the land and could change the agricultural designation at the end of the year.

In the meantime, project opponents have started a letter-writing campaign in the scientific community. Biologists from Arizona to New York have written dozens of letters and e-mail opposing the project.

The Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratory, an environmental education facility in Panacea, organized the campaign. Laboratory President Anne Rudloe said she's especially concerned about the two-mile-long, 100-foot-wide channel proposed to be cut through protected sea grasses.

"That creates a precedent for the entire state," she said.

Pruitt said the project will restore damaged sea grass and result in improved water quality.

"I think reasonable people will see what we're trying to do is going to help, not hurt," Pruitt said.

But Fuller said the project is incompatible with the area's designation as a preserve.

"The purpose of that was to protect sea grasses from exactly this kind of project," Fuller said.

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