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## **Storm brews over Boggy bay**

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Locals call this place Boggy Bay, named for the marshlands bordering a coastal seagrass preserve.



A \$700 million development with the more polished name Magnolia Bay would transform the landscape.

A tract of land between Keaton and Dekle beaches stretches out along a road in this photo illustration created by placing three images together to form this panoramic view.

More than 100 acres of wetlands would be filled to build condominiums, a hotel, stores and restaurants, an aquatic lab and a marina. A 36-acre path would be dug through the seagrass, allowing big boats continual access from the new development to the Gulf of Mexico.

Some local residents and conservationists say the plan flies in the face of a preserve intended to protect aquatic life. Human impacts have already destroyed much of the seagrass along the Florida coast, which experts say provides habitat for 70 percent of commercially important fish and shellfish species.

"This project seems to be designed to violate every coastal protection law we have, or ignore them," said Anne Rudloe, president of the Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratory, an environmental education facility in Panacea.

Dr. J. Crayton Pruitt, a retired St. Petersburg heart surgeon, said his project would serve the community and the environment. Local residents would have more Gulf access through the marina, he said, while measures would be taken to protect and repair damaged seagrass in other locations.

"We don't want to mess Florida up," he said. "It is possible to develop a place like this provided you follow all the rules, and that's what we're trying to do."

The Suwannee River Water Management District is reviewing his proposal, still awaiting answers to several of the 157 questions officials had about the initial plan.

Some local residents are hoping the district puts the brakes on the project, saying it could spell the end of the sleepy coastal fishing communities they love.

"If this guy gets his way, we can forget about the Big Bend area," said George Stamos, a South Florida builder who's now a full-time Keaton Beach resident.

A sign on the road leading to Keaton Beach touts the area as the least-populated coast in the country. About 85 percent of Taylor County's coastline is owned by the state of Florida, meaning the project's location between Keaton Beach and Dekle Beach is one of the last available places that can be developed there.

Despite the town names, the area's only beach is a tiny swath of sand. Local residents prize the place not for the sandy comforts familiar in the rest of coastal Florida, but the scallop and fish that thrive in the seagrass.

"The Big Bend seagrass is like an ecological treasure," said Paul Carlson, a research scientist with the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute in St. Petersburg.

Carlson said the economic importance of seagrass has been quantified at \$20,000 an acre due to its benefit to commercially important fish and shellfish. Bay scallops and spotted trout spend their entire lives in seagrass, while grouper and other fish spawn in the beds before migrating elsewhere.

Sewage discharges, dredging projects and other human impacts have devastated seagrass in places such as Tampa Bay, he said. That area lost half its seagrass from 1950 to 1982, before efforts to clean sewage discharge helped them rebound, according to the Tampa Bay Estuary Program.

Carlson said about 2.3 million acres of seagrass remain within the state's jurisdictional waters. Those areas are largely represented by seagrass around Key West and the Big Bend, the two largest areas of seagrass in the continental United States.

Seagrass around the Big Bend is protected as part of a state aquatic preserve, established in 1984. Melissa Charbonneau, director of the preserve, sent a letter to the water district questioning whether the project violates those protections.

"It's held in the public trust," she said. "Part of that is making sure it's available for future generations."

Treasure Island developer Chuck Olson, who is working with Pruitt, said the channel would actually benefit the seagrass. The channel would cut just a 100-foot-wide path through the 150-mile-long preserve, he said, keeping boaters from driving through and damaging other places.

In addition, he said, the project would include seagrass restoration in places damaged by propellers and possibly at the mouth of the Fenholloway River. The Perry-based Buckeye pulp mill's discharges into the river have darkened waters and killed seagrass, though mill officials say they're working to clean the discharge.

But part of that plan, which is currently tied up in legal action, is to pump the discharge through a 15-mile pipeline nearly directly into the Gulf. Experts say the impact of the discharge and variable success of restoration efforts could spell trouble for the seagrass preserve.

"It's death by a thousand cuts," Carlson said.

Some local residents say county officials' support of the pulp mill, as well as a defeated plan to allow military bombing along the coast, reveal their priorities. Those officials will allow any economic development without considering the environmental impact, said Rick Causey, a retired biologist who lives in Dekle Beach.

"People here are very hungry for money," he said.

Taylor County is one of the poorest counties in the state, leading Gov. Jeb Bush to declare the county a rural area of economic concern. Keaton Beach real estate broker Jerry Cawthon said the project would provide a needed boost in land values and taxes.

"The county does not have the funds to give the services that should be throughout the county," he said.

Project backers are also selling Magnolia Bay as providing more public access to the Gulf in an area popular for scalloping. Olson said the project would ease the crunch in the area's overcrowded boat ramps, by adding 300 public access points.

He said the project would also include protecting some of the remaining 3,870 acres owned by Pruitt from development. But building on coastal wetlands is unavoidable for a marina project, he said, so he dismissed suggestions about moving the project.

"Is it fair to Taylor County that they're being robbed on this coastal frontage?" he said.

But some critics question whether more people should be encouraged to come to the area. The No-Name Storm of 1993 smashed homes and caused millions of dollars in damage to the region, killing one person in Keaton Beach and nine people in Dekle Beach.

Causey said the safety concerns and environmental concerns combine to make the project a bad deal.

He questioned why the retired heart surgeon would propose something that potentially has such wide-ranging impacts.

"I don't understand how someone who's devoted his life to saving people, and as smart of a man as he is, can propose something so ignorant," he said.

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