

Developers hold breath awaiting Fla. decision

BY PETER BLAIS

A Southern version of Sherman Hollow? Developers of Eastpoint, Fla.'s Green Point Golf Club hope not.

"You read about things like this. But you never think it will happen to you," said Green Point project manager Chuck Crabtree, referring to the lengthy environmental review process that has plagued the Huntington, Vt. course and a similar one that could ensnare his own.

Principals Jack Dodds and Dave Tuplin have spent the last 18 months and \$1.2 million trying to meet state environmental concerns regarding their proposed \$25 million project on the shores of northwest Florida's Apalachicola Bay, said Crabtree.

The state's Department of Community Affairs, which oversees land planning in Florida, shocked developers by recommending rejection of the project two days before a scheduled Franklin County Board of Commissioners public hearing, said Crabtree.

The county commissioners ignored the DCA's advice and unanimously approved the project following April's public hearing, Crabtree said.

But the DCA could still appeal the commissioners' decision, a move that could delay construction for years and ultimately kill Green Point, Crabtree added. The DCA has until mid-June to appeal.

The sticking point is 25 acres of golf course

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located along the shores of environmentally sensitive and economically depressed Apalachicola Bay.

The Gulf of Mexico serves up some of the world's most flavorful oysters and shrimp to the fishermen of Franklin County, among the poorest counties in the state. Fishing is one of the area's major industries. But pollution closed the bay to fishing for five weeks during the first four months of this year, said Crabtree.

The state has designated the bay "an area of critical state concern," in effect removing final land-planning powers from local governments and giving it to the state through the DCA. Portions of the Florida Keys, Green Swamp in

central Florida and Big Cypress Swamp in southwest Florida are the only other regions so designated.

"Local governments aren't always pleased with the state oversight. But the Legislature set up the program. It's up to the DCA to carry it out," said Morgan.

The DCA will make a recommendation on Green Point to the governor and cabinet, who are required to make final development decisions in areas of critical state concern.

If the DCA recommends against the project, the governor and cabinet would turn the matter over to the Division of Administrative Hearings for further review.

"It would probably take several months to get a decision at that level," conceded DCA spokesman Richard Morgan.

Green Point is a 540-acre development that would include an 18-hole championship course designed by Lloyd Clifton; 275 single-family homes; 500 multi-family units; recreation complex; and bed-and-breakfast. Approximately 150 acres, including several golf holes, are located in the southern watershed that DCA officials fear could drain into the bay.

"Our concern is the location of the golf course," said Morgan. "Several holes would front on U.S. 98. The drainage would run under the road and directly into Apalachicola Bay. Our job is to stop any degradation of the bay. It's a source of a thriving oyster industry and the pollutants could make their way into the bay."

But Green Point has taken steps to ensure that runoff wouldn't end up in the Gulf, Crabtree said. Developers have agreed to install a storm water system that would capture any runoff before it reached the ocean. The storm water system, which Crabtree believes will become a model for other developments, is one of several modifications made in response to DCA concerns. Others include:

- Tying the project into the local wastewater treatment plant and upgrading the facility at the developers' expense.
- Installing pumps to remove water from the 10 southern watershed lakes to the northern part of the property;
- Digging monitoring wells to constantly check ground water quality.

"It was a major expense to redesign our original plans. But we bit the bullet," said Crabtree.

Developers believed they had met all DCA's requests until the state agency announced it would not approve the project unless the golf course was moved, the project manager said.

"It was the first time we'd heard that," said Crabtree. "We can't move those golf holes. More importantly, there's no reason to."

"We believe that if you took all the wastewater the project would produce, and dumped it in the bay, it wouldn't contaminate it. We would put 50,000 to 70,000 gallons of treated water into the bay every day. The (Apalachicola) river dumps in 16 billion gallons of untreated water every day with a lot of it coming down from Atlanta."

"The greens take up just two acres in the southern watershed. Yet if we don't move the course, they won't approve the project. That's terrible."

Countered Morgan: "Our concern is the Green Point development. We need to deal with that specifically."

Crabtree had hoped to begin construction in March and open the course by December. Now it's unlikely construction could begin before September with the course opening no earlier than mid-summer 1991. If the DCA appeals, it could be much later, he added.

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