

County tables rule changes for Ag Reserve development



A car on U.S. 441 passes land in the Palm Beach County Agricultural Reserve near Boynton Beach. County officials are seeking more information before making any possible changes to the Ag Reserve's rules. Amy Beth Bennett/South Florida Sun Sentinel

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Palm Beach County will gather more information before deciding whether to move forward with any changes in the Agricultural Reserve, officials said Thursday.

County commissioners discussed the idea of allowing a new sports venue or other entertainment options in some of the Ag Reserve's last-remaining developable land.

But there are certain “barriers” to more mixed-use development in the Ag Reserve, a 22,000-acre swath of farmland dedicated to preservation, agriculture and sustainable development, officials said at a meeting Thursday.

These constraints include the Ag Reserve’s commercial cap, the preserve requirements, locational criteria and a traffic policy. With these rules, county commissioners could consider expanding, eliminating or keeping them the same.

The goal of bringing more mixed-use development would be to bring more amenities and services to the people who live in the Ag Reserve. Many people don’t want to see any changes though, worried about harming the integrity of the reserve by bringing in more people and cars.

“The most important thing, I think, is what do the people want?” Commissioner Maria Sachs said during Thursday’s meeting. Sachs’ district represents the Ag Reserve.

“The purposes of the development in this area is to serve the residents.”

A sports arena in the Ag Reserve?

The commissioners agree: They do not intend to touch the more than 13,000 acres listed as preserved in the Ag Reserve.

But with what little land remains undeveloped, Sachs believes entertainment offerings could be considered.

“Entertainment brings in our ability to have an indoor, air-conditioned sports arena that would be world class,” Sachs said. “We have some acreage left, not a lot, but we have some acreage left that would be adaptable for this.”

Sachs also suggested bringing theaters to the Ag Reserve, which is something she said her district does not have. Some examples Sachs referenced included West Palm Beach’s Kravis Center for the Performing Arts and the Wick Theater in Boca Raton.

Commissioner Maria Marino said, “I am always in favor of what we can do to keep our kids healthy, whether it’s indoor training facilities or outdoor multipurpose fields, but there’s plenty of locations around the county.”

The indoor sports arena idea comes shortly after the commissioners reviewed a tourism master plan that contained ideas for how to increase the county’s visibility as an attractive destination. One of those ideas was a “state-of-the-art indoor multipurpose sports complex.”

But bringing this kind of facility, or a theater, to the Ag Reserve was not welcomed by all.

Dagmar Brahs is a former president of the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Association. During Thursday’s meeting, she said the intent of the Ag Reserve and what COBWRA always has supported is to “give the people what they need.”

Brahs argued the Ag Reserve already has everything residents need: grocery stores, dry cleaners, nail salons.

“We have everything you could possibly need to take care of those residents in the Ag Reserve,” she said. “We don’t want uses that are going to pull people into the Ag Reserve.”

County Commissioner Joel Flores said he worries how if services and entertainment offerings remain east of Florida’s Turnpike, then “other districts and other communities (will) have to take the brunt of the services that these communities require.”

“You have to service your own community, and different districts have different needs,” he said.

Mixed-use development, mixed reviews

Chris Heggen, a longtime transportation engineer, said during the meeting that creating an area where people don’t need to drive as many miles is a way to reduce overall traffic congestion.

“Rather than having people commute 10 miles to their place of employment, having them be able to commute three miles or less is better,” he said.

“The residential units are already there in the Ag Reserve. The issue is placing these destinations closer to the the folks that are there. And mixed-use can actually help even reduce that further by creating an opportunity for people to make those trips without even having to get in their cars.”

Lauren McClellan, director of planning for JMorton Planning and Landscape Architecture, also encouraged the commissioners to consider bringing more mixed-use.

JMorton Planning and Landscape Architecture is behind projects in the Ag Reserve such as Park West, a plan for warehouses and a fitness center in West Delray, and warehouses for Bedner Bros Farms, which is behind Bedner’s Farm Fresh Market in West Boynton, a longstanding staple providing local produce near the intersection of Lee Road and State Road 7.

“For too long the Ag Reserve has developed in a pattern where residents live far from daily services, far from jobs and far from housing options for the workforce that supports this county,” McClellan said at Thursday’s meeting. “Mixed-use can help break that pattern by allowing uses to be planned together instead of separated by miles of roadway.”

But some county residents disagree.

The current COBWRA president, Barbra Roth, said during the meeting that to “just very precipitously adopt a mixed-use category” would be unwise.

COBWRA has supported changes in the Ag Reserve before, including the more recently adopted Commerce and Essential Housing land uses.

When asked if she supported the idea of an indoor sports complex, Roth said she understands the “goodwill that went behind suggestions such as that.”

“One of the definitions and imperative of the Ag Reserve was something that would not bring in heavy additional traffic to the area. Something like that, I expect, would bring in heavy, additional traffic,” she said.

What’s next

None of the county commissioners expressed a particular interest in increasing the commercial cap or changing the preserve requirements, traffic policy or locational criteria.

Instead, after hearing from residents and other county stakeholders, county commissioners agreed they liked the idea of hosting public meetings in the Ag Reserve for people to share what they do and don’t want to further inform decision-making. County commissioners also agreed they might benefit from touring the Ag Reserve.