

Builder has big-city plans for tiny Holopaw

By Lawrence J. Lebowitz

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

HOLOPAW — It's hard to imagine this dusty speck of a ghost town at the junction of U.S. Highway 441 and East U.S. Highway 192 turning into suburbia.

But that's the dream of one of the Orlando area's shrewdest real estate czars.

Maury L. Carter wants to build a city in the middle of nowhere.

Twenty years from now, Carter sees Triple E Ranch becoming Birchwood, a 10,000-acre community of 9,722 homes of all sizes and prices, offices, light industry, stores, schools, elderly care facilities, parks and golf courses stretching from five miles east of St. Cloud all the way to Holopaw.

Grandiose plans like this are nothing new to Central Florida. What makes Carter's dream unique is the way he intends to do it.

Carter wants to create Birchwood using an obscure development mechanism called a Florida Quality Development. Only five FQDs have ever been approved in Florida; the nearest is in Tampa. None have been approved in Central Florida.

"This is all very new to us," said Osceola planner Dori DeBord. "It's going to make things very interesting around here."

Normally, a development of that magnitude faces the extensive review described in state law as a Development of Regional Impact. Developers hate DRIs. They take a long time. They cost a lot of money. And they get more scrutiny than any other type of development.

DRIs are reviewed at the regional level and then face a second wave of questions and conditions with the county planning staff and commissioners.

"On the face of it, they've got a major challenge to prove it's not urban sprawl," said Greg Gologowski, project review director of the East Central-Florida Regional Planning Council, who sat in on one of the early Birchwood discussions.

But Carter will bypass Gologowski's deal and try to make his deal directly with the state Department of Community Affairs, which oversees all FQD applications.

FQDs were created in 1985 by the state Legislature to give developers another option to the time-consuming DRI process.

The biggest advantage to the FQD process is time. In the development business, time is money.

With an FQD, all of the deals with local, regional and state planning, zoning, environmental, and transportation agencies are negotiated at the beginning. During the DRI process these talks are spread out over many months.

The other advantage is in marketing. The salesmen will actively promote that Birchwood is an officially sanctioned "quality development" by the state of Florida.

The biggest disadvantage to the developers is that all of the expensive traffic and environmental studies are required by law from the very beginning, meaning the developer shells out large sums before turning one spade of dirt.

"It loads everything up front from the get-go," said Carter's attorney, Duke Woodson of Orlando. Woodson and project engineer Larry Walter met Thursday in Tallahassee with DCA administrator Marcus Hepburn, who directs the FQD program.

Hepburn, who said he is neutral about the Birchwood plan, nonetheless wasn't very encouraging.

The most serious issue, several planners said, is the phenomenon known as leapfrog development, one form of urban sprawl that the state is legally required to discourage under the 1985 Growth Management Act.

"We were very candid with him," Hepburn said Friday. "It's way out there. That raises some serious issues."

The developers could be putting more than 9,700 homes and stores in a rural area, "leaping" over a vast area of undeveloped land closer to urban boundaries.

"It may be well-designed and have a good mix of uses, but that doesn't assure it will pass," said Hepburn. "Local government has to be concerned about what will happen to the intervening land."

What usually happens to the land caught in the middle of leapfrog development is a patchwork of strip-mall commercial development, Hepburn said. And that's not a plausible alternative for any of the planners.

Woodson said the FQD legislation gives the developer an out if he proves that he is creating a self-sufficient "compact urban center" with a mix of land uses.

That is exactly what Carter intends to build, Woodson said.

The community would have its own internal central water and sewer service. Carter will provide for a wide array of community needs, from police and fire service to schools, parks, libraries, ball fields and roads. He also wants to provide a child-care center, an elderly health-care facility, affordable housing and paths for bicycling and walking.

The city likely would be compact. All of the construction would be on 60 percent of the 10,000-acre tract. More than 4,300 acres of wetlands will remain untouched, according to the plans.

Carter will run into at least one other major roadblock before DCA will even consider his project for FQD status. Carter wants to build Birchwood in two phases.

"They want to do it incrementally, and there's never been an FQD done incrementally," Gologowski said.

By law, FQD developers must make lifetime commitments for a broad array of items such as off-site transportation improvements and on-site wetlands preservation.

If the project is built in phases, it will be very hard to determine all of the improvements from the beginning, Hepburn said.

"That's definitely something that they're going to have to work out before we approve an FQD on this," Hepburn said.

Woodson said the major wetlands that bisect the property north to south act as a natural divider for two distinct development phases.

"We are going to present detailed information on the western half of the property closest to St. Cloud, and conceptual info on the east half of the property," Woodson said.

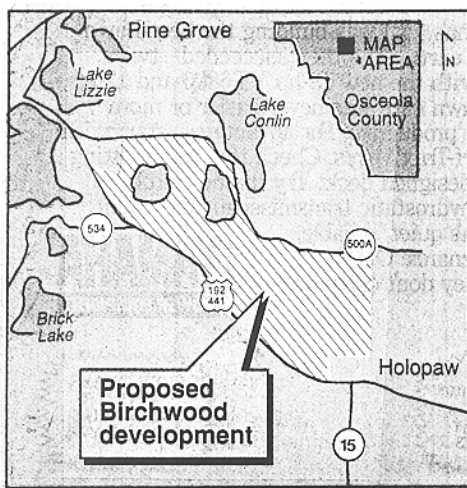
The developers hope the planners will see that the first phase of Birchwood would be a natural extension of the St. Cloud urban area, Woodson said.

Carter likely would build larger estate homes on the western half of the property, Woodson said. That would be more consistent with the existing homes, which are primarily 5-acre mini-ranches.

If the FQD concept doesn't fly, Carter will face a virtual alphabet soup of government acronyms and development options.

If it's not an FQD reviewed by the DCA, Carter could scale it all back and try to build a DRI that's reviewed by the RPC, or maybe propose a Planned Unit Development (PUD) reviewed by local planners.

"It's still very early," Woodson said. "Anything can happen."



The proposed development covers 10,000 acres.