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In a 26 July, 2022 letter to the Sebastian City Council, four environmental groups requested that the Council hire an outside consultant to help develop a master plan for the proposed Graves Bros. annexation. That request was met with immediate rejection and skepticism, and treated as an insult to the capabilities of Sebastian staff.

Such reaction was unfortunate: it is common for large development projects with the capability of changing the character of a community to utilize professional consultants to develop a collaborative process by collecting input from citizens, advocacy groups and other governmental entities. Such process is happening in Alachua County where a 4,000-acre tract of land is being master planned to include significant open space, central water and sewer systems, a new University of Florida Golf Course, and a possible solar project. That landowner has engaged with CHW Consultants to guide the process for developing the masterplan *before it seeks its development entitlements*.

Likewise in Martin County, the Newfield development on 3,400 acres in western Palm City will permit the development of 4,100 residential units. The project will include residential, village retail, office space, and three school campuses encompassing 1,023 acres, while 2,388 acres will be set aside as open space, most of it in large blocks of land. Dover, Kohl & Partners developed the master-planned community. Martin County Commissioner Doug Smith commented to TCPalm: “ ‘In my 20 years of doing this, I don't know that we've ever had this level of detail, this level of understanding of exactly what is to come.’ ”

Those examples show how the Graves Bros. annexation and land use change should work. Good luck finding out from officials what the annexed property will look like as a final, developed project. The narrative of “10,000-foot view” is the common refrain. It was made abundantly clear at the (only) two workshops held by Sebastian that they don't know what the development will look like because there is no plan.

And that's the problem. There should be a plan - a great plan. A plan based upon community input and collaboration with local and state agencies, one that protects the headwaters of the St. Sebastian River, provides for known residential capacities, development patterns, open-space locations, and community amenities.

Sadly, there was no plan two years ago when an annexation half this size was proposed. The landowner had two years to work on a plan for this property, but nothing was done.

What most municipalities understand is that you don't give away development entitlements without knowing what you're getting in return. The property proposed for annexation currently allows 1 residential unit for every 5 acres. Whether the development is approved at 2 or 3 units an acre, the increase in value for the landowner is astronomical. It's the difference between allowing only 400 residential units on the property versus 4,000-6,000, plus as much commercial/industrial acreage as their hearts desire.

There's nothing wrong with a landowner making money, but there is something wrong with a jurisdiction that heaps huge financial windfalls without securing the necessary exactions to protect its current residents

The St. Sebastian River headwaters runs through the property. It should be a no-brainer to require a significant buffer. Likewise on requiring meaningful open space – not the open space you get when you count front yards, back yards, and swale ditches.

Too many red herrings are floated in and around Sebastian attacking the environmental groups who aren't trying to stop the city from growing, but are trying instead to ensure that growth is done in a way that protects our natural environment. Rather than hire the requested development consultant, the city hired a south Florida law firm at \$325 an hour!

It will be up to residents to cut through the smoke and demand that the city council guarantee this process be done in a way that protects our environment and quality of life.