



January 5, 2010

County says Midtown Estero is a go

Retail-residential plan won't have 'big box'

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Estero leaders will focus on giving input on the appearance of Midtown Estero now that the project has been approved.

The Lee County commission approved a rezoning request 4-0 Monday that will allow for up to 220,000 square feet of stores, 80,000 square feet of offices and 92 homes at the southwest corner of Three Oaks Parkway and Corkscrew Road in Estero. Commissioner Bob Janes was absent.

The development will not include a big box home improvement store because none of the buildings is allowed to exceed 100,000 square feet.

Five Estero residents spoke in opposition of the rezoning request, mainly because of traffic concerns.

Ascot Development must submit a revised site plan to finalize the zoning resolution, shrinking a 140,000-square-foot building and converting retail space to office.

Ascot will then be able to seek a development order. As it goes through that process, the developer will be asked to go before the Estero Design Review Committee.

"We may be able to make this thing work better from our main street overlay perspective and try to

get some buildings along the road on Corkscrew so that they look like other buildings that we've got coming online," said Don Eslick, chairman of the Estero Council of Community Leaders.

"The design review committee will have ample opportunity to work on the details."

He still thinks the project is too large but was pleased it does not include a big box store.

"It's something that we will have to live with," agreed Jack Meeker, who also opposed the rezoning request, mainly because of concerns about traffic congestion and getting in and out of the development.

In 2008, an average of 32,700 vehicles per day traveled on Corkscrew west of Interstate 75 while an average of 17,700 traveled on Three Oaks south of Corkscrew, according to Lee County Department of Transportation traffic counts.

Thirty-four crashes were recorded at the intersection in 2008, according to county data.

The developer had sued the county after the commission previously denied its rezoning requests twice, but a circuit judge deemed the commission's decisions unsubstantiated by fact.

So the case was back in the commission's court Monday to consider Ascot's request to be able to build up to 92 homes, 20,000 square feet of offices and 280,000 square feet of retail.

"In the judge's decision it appears to me he did indeed dismiss the comprehensive plan," Commissioner Ray Judah said. "I think those policies spoke to traffic issues, water issues, compatibility issues."

The south branch of the Estero River flows through the 48-acre Midtown Estero property.

Judah said he would be willing to approve a settlement agreement of up to 180,000 square feet of retail, with no building exceeding 100,000 square feet, which a special magistrate had previously recommended.

Attorney Matt Uhle, who represents Ascot, made the counterproposal of 220,000 square feet of retail and 80,000 square feet of office. The four commissioners present then voted unanimously to approve it.

The developer has also agreed to pay for a traffic signal and median cut outside the Estero fire station on Three Oaks Parkway a quarter-mile south of Corkscrew.

Nothing in the county's land use plan prohibits commercial development on the west side of Three Oaks Parkway. Chairwoman Tammy Hall said the plan's language should be more specific as to what type of development is allowed where.
