

Commentary

It'z the zoning, ztupid by Tina Richards

The controversial plans to build estate homes on the 52-acre Ridgeline property and a senior citizen's complex on the sully miller site rest on one thing. Both properties are currently zoned as open space/recreation or open space/resource. In order for developer JMI to proceed, the Orange City Council must change the zoning to residential.

Supporters of the plans have turned the issue into a debate over the value of a 3.9-acre horse arena to the community. JMI has offered to let the community continue to use the property (with restrictions) in exchange for Ridgeline/Sully Miller approvals. Opponents argue that 52 acres of recreational land, available for use by everyone, overrides the worth of a limited-use arena.

Clouding the issue

Recently, the YMCA weighed in, hoping to gain community support for a proposed facility on the sully miller property. Supporters tout the recreational opportunities the Y would provide; opponents cite traffic and congestion concerns and note that the Y will likely never raise the funds to build it anyway.

Yes, the developer has property rights. He has the right to build on the arena site as well as a portion of the parcel bordering Mabury Ranch. That zoning already exists. The rest of the acreage was not zoned residential when investors bought it. It was no secret that the development required a zone change. And any zone change authorized by the city is purely discretionary; it does not have to acquiesce to the new owner.

Council calls it

While the community is hashing out the developer's credibility regarding the horse arena offer, facing off on the merits of the proposed exchange, and debating the suitability of a YMCA on Santiago Canyon Road, the developer is wooing the city of Orange with campaign donations, library grants and promises to keep his promises once the zone change is approved.

Five people in Orange – the City Council – will decide the future of Orange Park Acres and surrounding East Orange. It is up to them – not the YMCA, not local equestrians, not the Orange Park Association Board – whether or not the community will keep its heritage as a rural, natural space environment or be led down the road to urbanization.

Despite developer agreements and assurances, high-density housing, traffic congestion, loss of open space, and facilities designed to attract more and more users *will* urbanize Orange Park Acres and East Orange. And once the zoning is changed, there is no guarantee the property owner won't sell it to another developer.

Whatever happens, or doesn't happen, depends on zoning.