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Developer asked to slice Sarasota project with affordable homes

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SARASOTA COUNTY -- The biggest affordable housing project in Florida is about to get a lot smaller.

For the second time in five months, Sarasota County commissioners balked at the sheer size of a proposal to build 1,488 homes -- half of them affordable -- east of Interstate 75 off Palmer Boulevard.

Developer Billy Springer said past objections to the project were focused on the traffic it would add to neighboring roads. After his Palmer Place project was tabled by the county in August, Springer offered to spend \$2.3 million to widen Palmer Boulevard and another \$769,330 to improve Cattlemen Road.

"I tried to solve them; that's what I tried to do," he told commissioners about the earlier objections.

If built, the project would have dwarfed the county's efforts in recent years to encourage the construction of affordable homes.

But it became clear during a hearing Tuesday that at least three of the five commissioners were set to vote against it.

Commissioner Nora Patterson, who could potentially be the swing vote, said she would like to see the project "ratcheted down" to 600 homes, 300 of them affordable.

So the issue was tabled again and set for yet another hearing on Jan. 22.

At the lower density, neighborhood groups would be willing to talk to the developer about supporting the project, said Don Schultz, chairman of the Bee Ridge Neighborhoods Association, which has so far opposed the project.

But it is density that enables the developer to absorb the cost of building the less expensive homes, which would sell for as little as \$135,000.

Dan Bailey, Springer's attorney, said the developer "could live with" cutting the number of homes to between 600 and 1,500.

The population in this section of the county has grown rapidly even though zoning restricts construction to one home for every two acres in semi-rural areas and one for every five acres in rural areas.

Despite the growth, county commissioners have said they would allow Springer to develop at a much higher density in exchange for pricing at least half the homes within the reach of middle-income

families.

But growth has put a strain on roads and schools in the area. The county says it does not have the money to make \$13 million in needed improvements to the Cattlemen Road-Palmer Boulevard intersection, and the School Board thinks it will eventually need to build three new schools in the area.

Patterson said she would consider a 600-home development, but would not support "having a barrel of expenses dumped on the county that we can't afford."
