

# County officials give favorable review to bottled water plant petition

By [Bill Thompson](#)

Staff Writer, Ocala Star Banner

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After recently discussing plans for a new business park along Interstate 75 and turning Silver Springs into an ecotourism site, Marion County commissioners next week will entertain a different kind of economic-development initiative.

The owners of a 12-acre site near Salt Springs seek a permit from the county to establish a bottled-water plant in east Marion, just off the shore of Lake George.

According to the application submitted by Larry and Anna Moody of Ocala, the plant would create 60 new jobs — 20 for each of three shifts at the 28,800-square-foot facility.

Creating those jobs also could mean diverting 90,000 gallons of water a day — or almost 33 million gallons a year — from the underground artesian aquifer that feeds the lake.

The plan has received favorable reviews from county officials, despite Marion County's past resistance to bottled-water facilities.

Some concerned residents from the Lake George Manor community, however, are working to protest the permit's approval.

Bob Rogers, an engineer in Ocala who represents the Moodys, explained that unlike the spring-fed parts of the aquifer that require a submersible pump to pull water to ground level, this unique artesian system naturally shoots the pressurized water to the surface.

The Moody project will capture that output as it percolates up. And in contrast to "pump-and-run" outfits that serve as negative stereotypes for the bottled-water industry, the Moody plant would use the same process and the same 4-inch well as the neighboring homeowners do to tap the same water.

"It's no different than any home in that subdivision, and they are literally side by side," Rogers maintained.

"We can't suck it dry when it's gushing to the top of the surface."

Lawren Moody, who is heading up the project for the family, said their interest is in capitalizing on the rare artesian system as well as the water itself.

The aquifer in that part of Marion County emits natural mineral water, he said.

Mineral water differs from natural spring water — and is regulated differently — because it contains greater concentrates of natural, beneficial substances such as magnesium, potassium, sodium and calcium.

And that, Moody said, would open Marion County to a market dominated by imported European brands such as Perrier and Evian.

"I think we can go toe to toe with the big boys," said Moody, who added the 90,000 gallons would be a maximum. The initial amount would likely be much less. "We don't want to start a fight with our neighbors, but I want to start a fight with this 14-percent unemployment rate. It's a clean industry with very little environmental impact. I'm ready to put some people to work."

County planners have recommended conditional approval for a 15-year permit, outlining limits for buffering, traffic, lighting and the size and activities of the plant.

They also note requirements for heightened stormwater and wastewater treatment, since the land is in a county-designated environmentally sensitive zone.

As for employee vehicles and the 40 semi-tractor trailers the applicants say will come and go from the facility each day, county officials noted increased traffic will have a "negligible" impact on State Road 19.

Trucks from nearby logging operations and other activities already generate 11 times the estimated volume of trucks that would serve the bottling plant, they wrote.

Thus, the proposal fit the "general character" of the surrounding area and would not adversely affect the public interest, staff planners indicate in their report.

Last week, the county Zoning Commission backed that finding.

The advisory committee voted 5-1 in support of the staff's recommendation in forwarding the proposal to the County Commission. Andy Kesselring, a former county commissioner known for votes friendly to environmental causes, dissented.

The entrance to the horizontal flag-shaped property is located along SR 19 in Ocala National Forest, just north of Forest Road 54.

The proposed bottling plant would be located about a half-mile off the state highway, bordered primarily by federal land and other properties owned by the Moodys as well as two adjacent campgrounds that sit to the south and west, respectively.

The planned facility also would be north of the Lake George Manor subdivision, a mixed area of single-family residences and vacant lots that has expressed some opposition to the plan. One

resident appeared at the Zoning Commission hearing bearing a petition with 14 signatures in opposition.

Brian Suciu said the neighbors are worried most about the effect on their wells. But they also don't like the idea of the noise and the truck traffic accompanying the plant.

"There's not an industrial plant anywhere around here," he said. "If they want to have that, then move to a city somewhere."

The County Commission will consider the application at the Feb. 15 zoning hearings.

If approved, the plant could be running in about a year.

Contact Bill Thompson at 867-4117 or [bill.thompson@starbanner.com](mailto:bill.thompson@starbanner.com).