

Property owners propose mining zone

The 2,000 acres is part of the county's Farmland Preservation Area

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A big chunk of Marion County's Farmland Preservation Area could double as its limerock mining preservation area - if a plan recently put before the County Commission comes to fruition.

Last week, a group of property owners in northwest Marion, including a northern California wine mogul, proposed designating 2,000 acres as a mining zone.

But that could grow. A second initiative could triple the amount of land within the Mineral Resources Overlay Zone, as the section would be known in the county's comprehensive plan.

The County Commission did not take action on the request. The Planning Commission is expected to hear it today and make a recommendation. It would then go before the County Commission on Thursday for a decision on whether to forward the idea to state planners for review.

The creation of the designated mining zone would not automatically green-light such projects, the county's growth manager said.

Any specific proposals to open a mine would still face vetting by county officials.

The purpose of the designation would be to establish an area that the County Commission deems suitable for quarries, as well as a location to direct new mining companies to.

The proposal was offered Thursday during the board's opening public hearing on annual revisions to its comprehensive land-use plan, or comp plan.

The mining zone, as outlined in county documents, would cover nearly 2,500 acres situated just west of County Road 329 and fronting County Road 318 to the south.

In letters to the County Commission, Ocala land-use lawyer Steve Gray, who represents the handful of landowners behind the concept, apologized for dropping the plan on the board "mid-stream" of its annual comp-plan review, but explained that one critical participant only recently came on board to solidify the deal.

That was Jess Jackson, a Californian who owns one of the largest wine-producing companies in the United States as well as the 1,028-acre Stonestreet Farm, a thoroughbred operation in northwest Marion. In his horse-racing ventures, Jackson was the lead investor in a group that

owned Curlin, the 2007 Horse of the Year, and was the owner of 2009 Preakness Stakes winner Rachel Alexandra.

Gray noted in a letter to Commissioner Mike Amsden that Jackson's farm was vital for its frontage along CR 318, the likely entry point into the mining zone.

Gray, in the letter, noted there was "re-emerging interest" in limerock mining in Marion County partly because of a push made last year to locate a quarry on 167 acres at Northwest Gainesville Road and 100th Street in the community of Martin.

Commissioners unanimously rejected that application in 2009 and again this past May because it was incompatible with the community, which includes nearby horse farms.

The property owner of that site, CB Three LLC, a partnership of local roadbuilder Steve Counts and developers from the Boyd family, have asked a judge to reverse the County Commission's ruling and order that it approve the permit.

In his letter, Gray predicts that the county will receive more applications for limerock mines because of "substantial changes" in the heart of the market in South Florida, and that it would be easier for local miners and residents to have a large site set away from densely populated areas.

And that uptick in requests, Gray indicated, might occur as soon as the board approves his proposed mining district, which is home to "substantial limerock assets."

"The property owner and potential limerock mine operators would be much more likely to expend the considerable sums of money that are required to process a Special Use Permit application for a mine if the locational issue ... has been determined as acceptable by the County," Gray wrote.

"In fact, within this Overlay Zone there would be an interest in pursuing a Special Use Permit for a mine if the County Commission had signed off on the site through approval of the Overlay Zone."

Gray added that identifying the site before that rezoning process begins makes things "more politically workable" for the board than the current application method.

That's because other landowners would know in advance that the county has found this area to be suitable for mining.

"If the County had a 2,500-7,000 acre Overlay Zone in place it would be much easier for the County to direct applicants to that area, or alternately to consider not approving applications which are submitted in areas that are more urban, or would have more impact on adjoining property owners."

The high end of Gray's acreage estimate is attributable to the fact that he has a second project in the works.

Gray suggested in his correspondence that other clients are seeking a second overlay zone, which would sit 10 miles west along CR 318.

That site spans 2,720 acres, according to Gray, and the landowners are weighing whether to include an adjoining 1,300 acres.

Gray's draft of regulations governing an overlay zone notes that, if approved, such an area would contain at least 1,000 acres, have frontage on an existing, paved county road and need all property owners within it to consent to its designation as such.

Marion County's dispute with CB Three's case exposed what some saw as a flaw in the county's planning process regarding mining.

The case eventually went before a special magistrate empowered to render a nonbinding recommendation.

The mediator, Jean Bice, offered that the county should approve the permit partly because the comp plan says the county can approve new quarries, regardless of governing land use, provided a special-use permit is obtained, buffering is installed and state environmental regulations are followed.

Consequently, commissioners asked Growth Management Director Jimmy Massey to draw up new regulations for permitting mines.

On Monday, Massey said his staff was still working on that as well as reviewing Gray's proposal, which came as a surprise to county planners last week.

The Farmland Preservation Area stretches westward from County Road 200A, or Northeastern Jacksonville Road, just east of U.S. 441, to the Levy County line and southward from the Alachua County border to the State Road 200 corridor. There are several active mines in that area now,

The Farmland Preservation Area was created to ensure that much of rural Marion County, especially the part that gave rise to the thoroughbred industry, remains rural. It does so by restricting more intense development.

Massey, however, said it was debatable whether mining does that.

"Some people can say it is incompatible, but the emphasis in the Farmland Preservation Area was restricting high-density residential development, or something unrelated with agricultural activities," he said.

"Someone else could say, 'Where else could you put it, if not in an agricultural area?' "

Gail Stern, a leader of the Marion County Citizens Coalition, a nonprofit group dedicated to preserving farms and rural lands, responded in an e-mail that "the comprehensive plan and

Amendment 4, property rights versus the right to quiet enjoyment and not having your property devalued by a new neighbor by incompatibility of land use - all needs to be addressed, publicly, with advance notice.

"Asking a community how it wants to grow or not grow results in a tapestry, not fragments. It is sad, too. A comp plan should be written for the people living [under] it, not by attorneys for special interests. Our County should always put its people first."

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