

# St. Petersburg Times

## Landowner talks of growth near ranch

Robert Thomas' family has owned the pastures and forests of Hickory Hill ranch for nearly three-quarters of a century. On Monday, Thomas sent his 85 Spring Lake neighbors invitations to meet with him privately in less than two weeks at a local hotel to discuss "preliminary plans" for the property.

The letter addresses "dynamic growth" close to the Hickory Hill area and says the Thomas family has spent the past several years planning for Hickory Hill's "ultimate future."

Thomas has teamed up with powerful Tampa developer Bob Sierra, known for his exclusive gated golf communities, which boast million-dollar mansions like Avila in Lutz. Thomas declined to confirm plans to develop a golf community and said he was merely meeting with his neighbors.

A large golf community in the Hickory Hill area would be the first of its kind for the east side of the county, much larger than Ridge Manor West.

Owned by the Thomas corporation, Two Rivers Ranch Inc., the land extends down Lockhart Road and crosses I-75, and is worth about \$10.3-million, according to the property appraiser's office.

"We're looking toward a broad range of possibilities," Thomas said. "We haven't ruled anything in and haven't ruled anything out. It's purely a conceptual process at this point."

But, Thomas has made no secret that he has been looking to develop the land into some kind of subdivision, according to the Hernando County Planning Department staff, as well as many of Thomas' closest neighbors.

"This is going to be a very high end development that will be just top of the line, first-class-type thing, as nice as the nicest developments in the Southeast," said Steve Melton, whose family owns abutting land and leases some of the Hickory Hill ranch for cattle. "If it has to be, I'm resigning myself that it's the best thing it could be."

Melton said he has been told such a development would be at least five years away.

Thomas has talked to the Hernando County Planning Department about building a low-density residential subdivision, although he has not filed anything formal with the county, said chief planner Jerry Grief. In discussions, the homes have ranged in size anywhere from 5-acre estates down to small villas.

Given the size of the Thomas' land, any development would likely go through a development of regional impact process, which requires stricter state scrutiny than other types of rezoning plans.

The east side of the county could handle such a grand scale development with water and sewer service.

"My guess is if we don't have the capacity now, we've got the area and expandability for the capacity," Grief said.

Thomas' letter to local residents boasts how his partner Sierra has developed several prestigious golf communities nationwide with golf legend Jack Nicklaus. The letter stops short of saying Thomas and Sierra plan to build a golf course on the Hickory Hill ranch, but several local residents who have talked with Thomas say they expect a golf course.