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Pasco says yes to huge mall

In a meeting room packed with environmentalists on one side and business boosters on the other, Pasco County commissioners Tuesday night approved what eventually would be the largest shopping mall in the Tampa Bay area.

Despite complaints that Cypress Creek Town Center would pollute Tampa's water supply and clog Interstate 75, commissioners approved the project by a 5-0 vote, saying it was economically necessary for a county long reliant on jobs and stores in neighboring Hillsborough County.

"There are lots of people who feel it will improve their quality of life," said mall planner Georgianne Ratliff, who called it a victory for suburban residents tired of driving long distances to shop.

The 1.3-million-square-foot mall, planned for the explosive New Tampa growth corridor near the Pasco-Hillsborough border, is ambitious even for mall-laden West Florida.

To be built along a simulated Main Street, it comes with a promise of more than 100 stores, a multiplex cinema, 4,000 jobs and more than \$10-million a year in taxes. Tentative opening date is October 2007.

But the unanimous vote Tuesday failed to end concerns about the project, most of them environmental.

The 500-acre retail site abuts Cypress Creek, a specially protected waterway that feeds the Hillsborough River. The river provides most of Tampa's drinking water.

The Richard E. Jacobs Group, the mall's developer, received tentative permission to uproot about 57 acres of wetlands that drain into the Hillsborough River.

Developers say the mall's retention ponds will filter out motor oil and other pollutants washing from the mall's parking lots.

Environmental objections were summarized by Sierra Club spokeswoman Denise Layne, who argued the site was inadequate to handle a huge mall. She said the swamp and creek network in Pasco is the third biggest in the state. The biggest is the Everglades.

"We're trying to put a 500-pound frog on a 6-inch lily pad," Layne said to applause from dozens of antimall people, some wearing stickers reading "No Mall" and "Too Big."

Mark Nagel, a Land O'Lakes homeowner about a mile from the mall site, mocked the need for more shopping centers in a state dotted with empty shopping centers. He

worried most about overloading Interstate 75 and State Road 56, an interchange already stressed during rush hour.

"You're talking about attracting tens of thousands of shoppers," Nagel complained to the commissioners.

Judith Potts, who lives down the road from Nagel, argued the construction of the mall amounted to one county dumping on another county.

"Do we, Pasco County, have the right to interfere with the drinking water of our neighbors farther south?" she asked.

The mall will serve a region flooding with thousands of suburban families a year.

Pasco has approved the construction of almost 6,000 homes this year, most in Wesley Chapel and Land O'Lakes, two bedroom communities of Tampa.

Capturing those potential customers, rather than letting them drive 20 miles south to malls in Hillsborough, was among the main arguments in favor of Cypress Creek Town Center. Supporters predicted a wealth of riches from the mall, most from sales and property taxes.

Jennifer Seney, an environmental activist who supports the mall, said one large project guided by a reputable company like Jacobs was preferable to parceling out the property to "Al's Auto Body and 7- Eleven."

"Do not reject this project based on emotion," Seney told the commissioners during the two-hour mall hearing in Dade City's Historic Court House.

The vote Tuesday concluded three years of government scrutiny. But the issue is not closed. The Sierra Club is among the groups expected to sue to stop the project on the grounds Pasco bent its development rules to accommodate it.

Tenants have yet to be confirmed - retailers have waited on governmental approval before fully committing - but developers describe the mall as Westfield Shoppingtown Citrus Park "without the roof."
