

Gas station gets county's okay

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BROOKSVILLE — A divided County Commission on Wednesday approved a new Race Trac convenience store and gas station over the emotional protests of neighbors worried about noise, bright lights, water pollution, traffic and security.

In an odd twist for most zoning hearings, Mark Bentley, attorney for the applicant, went on the offensive against the complaining residents of the Frontier Campground on Cortez Boulevard just west of Fort Dade Avenue.

Responding to concerns that the 24-hour gas station could bring unsavory people to the neighborhood, Bentley showed a list of calls to the Hernando County Sheriff's Office from the campground. The calls for service showed multiple cases of assaults, drugs and even two shootings which happened there.

Bentley said that his client, Joseph Mason Jr. 50/50 Land Trust, was more concerned about the possible dangers to the gas station posed by the people living at the campground.

The attorney also noted to the commissioners that the campground is not a permissible use of the commercial land it sits on and does not comply with the county's Comprehensive Plan.

The planned Race Trac, on the other hand, would fit with the commercial zoning all along that stretch of Cortez.

Bentley also argued that a survey of the property showed that the campsites and a concrete block building are on county-owned right of way set aside as a part of a frontage road county planners anticipate needing in the future.

A dozen nearby residents, the campground's founder and the current owner all urged commissioners to reject the rezoning, which would put the gas station a stone's throw from their homes on adjacent property fronting on Cortez and Fort Dade.

"I think we deserve better than this," said Robert McGlashen, who built the campground in 1971 before zoning was in place.

He spoke of traffic congestion and how near the business would be to residents of the campground. "I pay my share of taxes," he argued with county tax records showing a 2007 bill topping \$44,000.

For 36 years the park has maintained "quiet time" from 10 p.m. through 8 a.m. — a tradition that an open-all-night business next door would ruin, McGlashen argued.

"I really think this is wrong. ... How would you like to live 10 feet from what is the boundary of a 24-hour Race Trac?" he said.

His son Steve, who now owns the property, said he expected to have noise from booming car stereos and racing engines bombarding the campground residents.

Keith Thieryung, a neighbor to the north of the site, argued, "I don't think we need another gas station," pointing out that one across Cortez from the site closed down several years ago. He also voiced concerns saying he didn't want alcohol and

tobacco sales next door to where young children live.

Bentley pointed out that the applicant was willing to comply with all the development requirements in the county's regulations as well as conditions proposed by the planning staff and the Planning and Zoning Commission.

Commissioners had their own set of concerns about the property.

Dave Russell wanted to see a turning lane into the site and Jeff Stabins wanted to see a traffic signal there. Both are issues that must be approved by the Florida Department of Transportation since Cortez is a state road.

The petitioner said DOT had not approved a light at the site but also agreed to do a study to see if the traffic would warrant one later as well as agreeing to fund at least part of the cost of the light when one is needed and installation of a turning lane if approved by the state.

Stabins also pushed for a better buffer of plants and trees between the gas station and the residents and Bentley said he would work on that with the county staff.

While the concessions were enough to secure three votes for the project to move forward, Commission Chairman Chris Kingsley said he could not support it because he believed there were still other issues such as entrance into the gas station and the trailers in the road right of way that needed to be addressed.

Commissioner Diane Rowden also voted against the project. She voiced concerns about what could happen to the densely populated residential community of some accident would happen at the gas station "and then you've got a disaster on your hands."

She also worried about traffic and noise. "I don't believe this property is suitable for this type of commercial," Rowden said.

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