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Developers pitch senior-living projects in Agricultural Reserve

By Skyler Swisher

Developers are eyeing a protected farming region in Palm Beach County as an ideal home for assisted-living facilities.

Two projects are in the pipeline for the [Agricultural Reserve](#), a 22,000-acre conservation area west of Boynton Beach and [Delray Beach](#). Intended to be a place for less dense, more rural-like development, thousands of homes have been built there as growth has boomed in South Florida.

Commissioners are set to consider those proposals May 2, and county staff is also developing guidelines for future senior-living projects in the Ag Reserve.

The proposed assisted-living centers have drawn concerns from neighbors who say the developments will be an eyesore and create more traffic. Developers, though, say there is a strong demand for assisted-living housing given the area's aging population.

"The need is definitely there for this use," said Jeff Brophy, a representative of one of the proposed developments, Poet's Walk, adding the Ag Reserve is home to a large number of people 55 and older. "In fact, the U.S. Census shows the Ag Reserve has the highest concentration of people 55 and older [in Palm Beach County]."

Allegro Senior Living wants to build a 235-bed community on Clint Moore Road near Florida's Turnpike. Poet's Walk is pitching a development with up to 186 beds at the northeast corner of Lyons Road and Linton Boulevard.

Peter Sachs, a resident of Horseshoe Acres near the proposed Allegro development, said a three-story, senior-living center wouldn't be compatible with a neighborhood that has no high-rises or commercial development near it.

"It is not your function in my opinion to shoehorn projects in to help specific private interests to the detriment of thousands of residents," he told county commissioners.

Palm Beach County voters signed onto to the Ag Reserve conservation effort in 1999 when they overwhelmingly approved spending \$100 million to purchase 2,400 acres in the farming region for

preservation. The county also created tougher building rules for developers, limiting the density of new construction and requiring preservation land to be set aside for each acre developed.

Over the years, commissioners have loosened development rules, making it easier for small agricultural land owners to sell their land for commercial development.

Meanwhile, suburbia has marched into an area where farming dominated. More than 7,000 homes have been built in the Ag Reserve, along with schools and a hospital.

One controversial proposal by GL Homesthat has been withdrawn would have added 2,420 more homes.

County staff has proposed new guidelines that would allow assisted-living facilities to be built in the Ag Reserve, provided the developments be a minimum of eight acres with another 12 acres purchased for preservation. The preservation land could be purchased elsewhere in the Ag Reserve.

Martin Perry, an attorney representing the Poet's Walk development, said the preservation requirement could make it cost-prohibitive to build assisted-living facilities in the Ag Reserve with land costing \$300,000 an acre.

"If we had to go buy another 10 or 12 or 14 acres in order to do this site, we couldn't do it," he said. "It's not going to happen."