

## EDITORIALS

## Flagler Estates, RIP

Last rites overdue for road to nowhere

**F**lagler Estates, that soggy, sprawling subdivision of 6,400 acres in northwest Flagler County, is what the scam artistry of Florida real estate lore is all about — and there's no lore about it: It's all true.

The place was platted in the 1960s on pure speculation. There were no roads there and no services like water, sewer and electricity. There wasn't even a road leading there from the developed part of Flagler County. There still isn't. There were no county land regulations then, the kind of regulations that stop speculators today from assuming that just because they buy a plot of land in the middle of nowhere, the county will build connecting roads and the power company will extend electricity lines.

Still, quarter-acre and half-acre lots were sold to Flagler Estates buyers, sight unseen. That's how speculation works, and not only in the 1960s. Even this decade, Flagler Estates lots sold on the Internet. The lots were, literally and figuratively, dirt cheap. Buyers assumed that a growing place like coastal Florida would inevitably boom sometime.

A few years ago, the total tax value of the lots at Flagler Estates was between \$10,000 and \$12,000. Last summer the Flagler County Commission sent questionnaires to what Flagler Estates lot owners they could find, asking them if they'd want certain municipal services there, and how they'd pay for it. That speculative landowners would want services was never in question. But the mere act of sending the surveys started speculation of its own, helped in part by a plan, discussed earlier by former County Administrator David Haas, to extend a road there — through pine-land mostly owned by three timber companies. Florida pine is no longer a preferred species in the timbering business. The timbering companies would prefer to sell the land to developers. But they'd need a road first, to make the land sellable. The Flagler Es-

tates road project — once estimated at \$30 million, now estimated at possibly twice that much — would put all the pieces in place for the speculators, the developers and the timbering companies, so long as the Flagler County Commission played along, underwriting the deal with taxpayer money.

Fortunately, the commission has been resistant. There may be a benefit to very few and very specific interests to invest in the road to Flagler Estates. There's no benefit to the county as a whole, least of all to its taxpayers and its long-term development plan. Chatter about the possi-

bility of a road, however, was stimulating enough to speculators that in 2006, Flagler Estates ran up tax revenue of more than \$70,000. That led to chatter within the county administration about creating a special taxing district there. St. Johns County created a taxing district for its version of Flagler Estates (which straddles

the county boundary). But St. Johns has refused at least twice to annex the Flagler portion of the non-estates.

Had the commission carried through with creating a taxing district, that would have triggered yet another speculative boomlet in Flagler Estates, and perhaps created the momentum for building that expensive road to nowhere. But when the commission took up budgeting issues in a workshop this week, Flagler Estates was nowhere on the agenda. All but one commissioner is against a taxing district.

If that means the commission is finally ready to let Flagler Estates drop from its concerns, good. It's time to make it official. The commission doesn't owe any and every land-owner more than fair and feasible access to services. There'd be nothing fair or feasible about extending those services to Flagler Estates. Local governments shouldn't be in the business of granting special favors for speculators, nor of underwriting developers' designs at most taxpayers' expense. Let Flagler Estates finally be history.

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