

Growth is one hot topic this time

Surprise rule changes bring out a crowd and a debate.

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TAMPA - During a rambunctious Thursday night public hearing before county commissioners, more than 100 residents and developers jostled over how Hillsborough will grow.

Will it be dense enough to support mass transit? Or will commissioners expand the territory where development is encouraged?

Typically, these meetings are held each year to sparse crowds. Not this year.

The surge in attendance was largely because of a March 14 workshop when commissioners, without notice, removed a series of design guidelines at the behest of developers who said they made their projects unfeasible.

Out went numerous policies, such as one that encouraged more open space and another that required that residential subdivisions have recreation and civic areas, already approved by the Planning Commission.

Neighborhood and environmental groups contend these guidelines encourage responsible development patterns that avoid suburban sprawl.

"It's a master plan for smart growth," said Bev Griffiths, chair of the Sierra Club Tampa Bay Group. "In a way that benefits everyone."

Thursday night the guidelines, called the Livable Communities Element, were given a new acronym by Joseph Narkiewicz, the executive vice president of the Tampa Bay Builders Association.

"I'll call it LICE," he said as builders at the meeting laughed.

Builder David Campo joked he was "one of the evil developers."

Residents just didn't understand that these guidelines made affordable housing impossible to build. "Livable Communities prevents that," he said.

Residents wore badges with a message directed at commissioners: "You killed livable communities without my input."

Commissioners won't vote on growth guidelines for some time. They asked county planners to come up with a new set of guidelines, and will consider those over the next few months.

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