

North Hutchinson developer gets commercial zoning

Old Radisson site can now be used for proposed hotel

By Donald Rodrigue
For Hometown News

FORT PIERCE — The St. Lucie County Commission unanimously approved commercial zoning Nov. 3 for a 12-acre site on North Hutchinson Island so Las Vegas developer Phil Ruffin can build a 400-room hotel on the former Radisson property.

The public hearing had previously been rescheduled from the Oct. 6 meeting at the insistence of seasonal Hutchinson Island resident Otto Robinson. An attorney from Scranton, Pa., Mr. Robinson told the Commission during that meeting that he had discovered an error in the public notice mailed to the neighboring property owners on the island and wanted to ensure that all area stakeholders could participate in the process. County Attorney Dan McIntyre subsequently asked commissioners to postpone the discussion until the Nov. 3 meeting, during which Mr. Robinson continued to oppose the rezoning of the land.

Planning and Development Services Director Leslie Olson opened up the latest discussion, saying that the proposed project met all the requirements of the county's land development regulations and had "considerable" support from the public.

"Staff has received an additional comment this afternoon submitted by the neighboring Seahorse Bungalows, where they provided a letter of support for the redevelopment of this previously developed resort hotel site," she said. "In general... there is support for the concept of a commercial resort, and the residents will be following the process closely to ensure that a site specific application be sensitive of its surroundings and be in keeping with

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the appropriate scale and intensity of the neighborhood."

Mr. Robinson refuted Ms. Olson's recommendation to approve the requested commercial zoning, saying county staff had incorrectly compared the land to the nearby Grande Beach mixed-use development.

"I find the staff analysis to lack any balance, and I find it difficult for this body to reach a fair and correct decision today partly because the written staff analysis is wholly biased in favor of the proposed changes," he said. "No drawbacks are listed."

Fort Pierce land planner Dennis Murphy of Culpepper and Terpening represented Ruffin Properties and said the zoning request had properly satisfied the 21 questions of the county's land use amendment package. He reminded commissioners that the property had been rezoned residential from its previous commercial status for a former property owner who subsequently failed to develop the land.

"The areas west of us are currently classified per the aspect of zoning basis for commercial use," he said, referring to a convenience store and commercial

neighborhood retail plaza. "The only way to get the commercial resort zoning is to have the commercial land use."

Both Ms. Olson and Mr. Murphy concurred that the county's mixed use land designation of the Grande Beach property is the "most intense" land use and so comparable to the commercial designation being sought by Mr. Ruffin. Mr. Robinson insisted that comparison was erroneous.

"Which is the greater use, certainly the proposed hotel," he said. "Were this to be approved, it would constitute spot zoning."

Mr. Murphy argued that the potential developmental nature of mixed-use zoning could be more intense than the proposed resort property.

"In our assessment of this particular property, the reclassified area of Grande Beach was commercial at one time," he added. "When you look at the specifics of that particular property from a land use point of view, the MXD [mixed use zoning] was equal to, or greater, than our site. You can have an intensity of 15 units per acre and even a layer of commercial development."

The Commission subsequently voted unanimously to change the future land use on the property to commercial and rezone the land as commercial.