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Approve Callery's plan after making it better

If Callery-Judge Groves' plan for 10,000 homes and a new downtown in western Palm Beach County fails, what comes next will be worse.

County commissioners, who today consider Callery's plan for the middle of The Acreage, can make the plan better by insisting on fewer homes, preservation of more marsh land to solve regional water problems and realistic assurances that home-building will not outpace job creation. The alternative would be multiple projects that replicate or exacerbate the horrible conditions that bad planning in The Acreage has created.

The biggest drawback in Callery's plan is traffic. Even if some residents work near home and fewer Acreage residents have to drive east for jobs or shopping, 10,000 homes would create an inordinate amount of traffic on rural roads not designed to handle the load. The effect of wider roads and traffic congestion would be to hasten urbanization of surrounding rural neighborhoods — many of which still rely on dirt roads.

The Callery plan, however, is distinguished by its effort to work with neighbors. As the "hole in the doughnut" amid thousands of homes but few stores, offices or industrial areas in The Acreage, Callery's 4,000 acres could solve regional problems. The landowners are proposing what amounts to a new downtown that would make the area a draw, reversing the eastward morning commute. They have offered to pay \$90 million beyond normal fees to build schools, an unprecedented offer. They have of-

In Acreage, 'new town' concept could work.

fered to meet whatever work-force housing standard the county sets. They promise 600 acres for marsh land to filter water. They propose no gated communities and offer large-lot homes near rural neighbors.

For years, commissioners have refused to let the Callery property be developed piecemeal. If they turn this plan down, that's what they'll get. As housing demand continues and supplies drop, future commissions will yield to appeals from home builders to allow density on the still-active grove. The county's lousy effort at planning the whole area, called a "sector plan," simply allows more low-density sprawl without addressing area problems.

That said, commissioners can exert more control over Callery's plan. Callery must pay to make regional roads accommodate traffic, without destroying neighbors' land values. Density can be linked to work-force housing. Commissioners can allow the first phase, as did the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, and condition future phases on traffic solutions, work-force housing delivery and job creation. More developers in Florida will be using this "new town" concept for rural areas, but it won't apply in many cases. This is one where it could.

Approval doesn't have to mean unwanted urbanization of The Acreage and surrounding rural neighborhoods. If done properly, it could mean their salvation.