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Alachua County alarmed over Mill Creek Development plans, seeks to intervene

Seth Johnson

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Alachua County Commissioner Anna Prizzia speaks at a Jan. 22 meeting.

Photo by Seth Johnson

The city of Alachua has [already passed a preliminary plat for a 198-acre development](#) beside the US 441 exit off I-75, but residents and the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) worry about what's beneath: caves and direct access to the Florida Aquifer.

At a special meeting on Tuesday, the BOCC heard from county staff about where the development currently sits within the city of Alachua's development process and how the county could shape the direction of the projects.

The BOCC passed a 14-part motion directing staff to remain involved in the process and to strengthen the county's development process to avoid a repeat of the current situation.

The BOCC also said they'd want to buy a portion of the property to prevent development and to return with options that push developers towards best practices when dealing with stormwater runoff, watershed and karst geological areas.

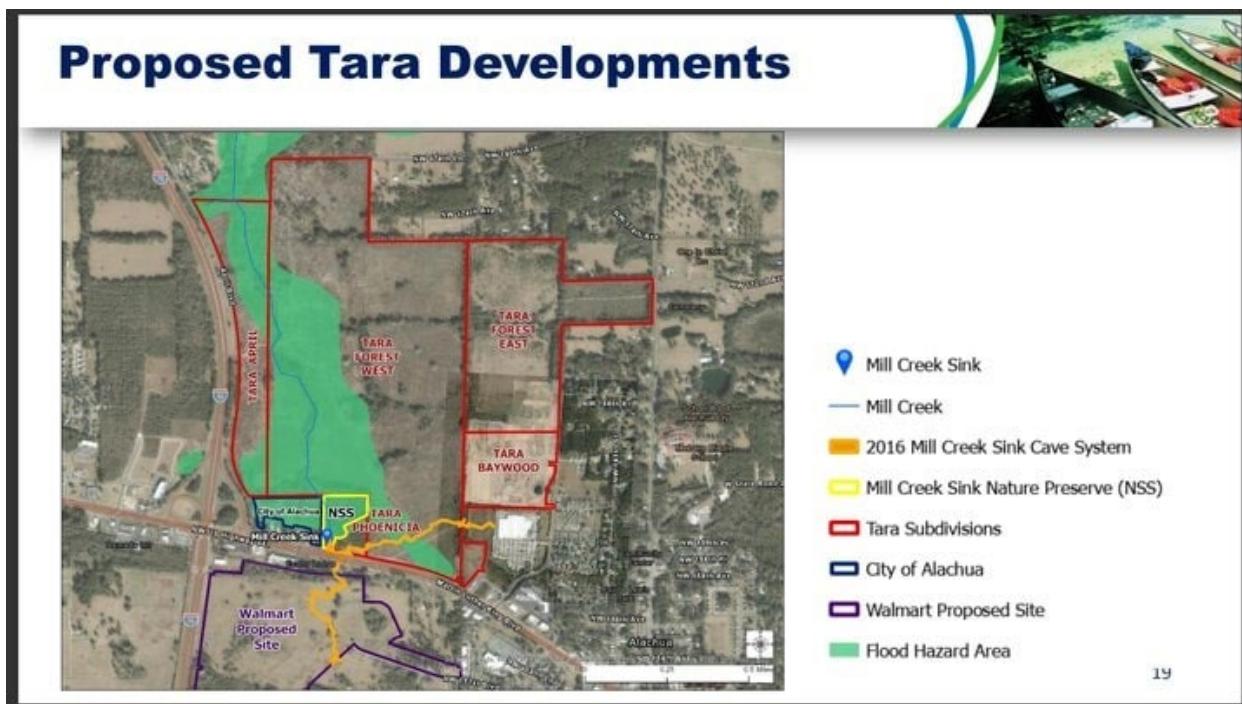
"I feel like Alachua County has voted again and again to ask us to protect natural resources and the environment, and I feel like the city of Alachua, the developers of Tara and their engineers have us over a barrel right now," Commissioner Anna Prizzia said. "And it's really disgusting and unfortunate that this is the position we're in."

The developments, backed by Sayed Moukhtara, are happening around Mill Creek Sink, a low-lying area that directly connects to the aquifer. Moukhtara owns more than 400 acres in the area that lies within the city of Alachua's jurisdiction.

The BOCC directed staff a couple months ago to seek party status when the development returns for approvals. This would allow Alachua County to speak during the meetings as an impacted entity. Two city of Alachua hearings scheduled since then have been delayed.

Past studies have shown that the Mill Creek Sink rapidly moves water across the area, with dye tests showing up in Hornsby Spring in less than two weeks—and remaining for 154 days. These environmental features make it a sensitive area with impacts across the region, a reason for the party status.

In total, there's five different developments happening in the area under Moukhtara's direction. Two of the developments have already received final approval.



Courtesy Alachua CountyPlans for a series of developments at Mill Creek.

Stephen Hofstetter, director of the county's environmental protection department, told the BOCC on Tuesday that the next development up for a final review sparked most of the community feedback and got the county involved.

Called Tara Forest West, the project is proposed to have 540 residential lots and include commercial development on a southern portion known as Tara Phoenicia.

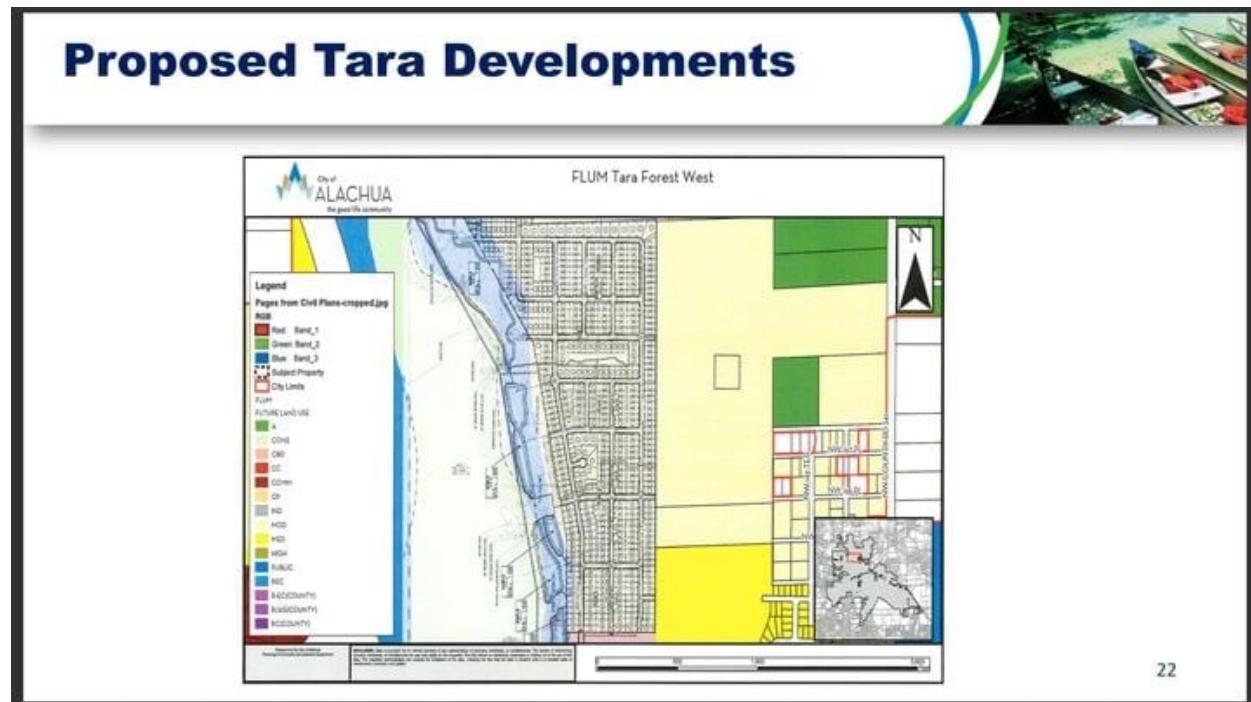
The city of Alachua controls land use decisions like zoning and density. The county only gets notified for certain types of developments or at a later phase, and Hofstetter said it's tough to track what's happening in each city with their different processes.

Alachua County does control stormwater regulations, but Hofstetter said the system in place only requires the developer to certify that they meet the requirements within 30 days of final approval, giving little heads up to respond to new developments.

Hofstetter and county staff added that while Alachua County has a manual with best practices like low-impact development, the actual enforcement mechanism is based on performance. Mainly, the code requires that the development meets nutrient level requirements, whether through best practices or not.

Commissioner Ken Cornell said the county will have to get involved at this late stage and anticipate future plans in the area.

"This, to me, is one of the most sensitive places in Alachua County," Cornell said. "And if not to protect this, then what are we protecting."



Courtesy Alachua CountyPlans for a series of developments at Mill Creek.

Mill Creek is ranked among the top sites for Alachua County's strategic ecosystems, and Hornsby Spring is ranked second. These ecosystems have been marked by Alachua County as the most important and necessary for protection.

Hofstetter said the proposed stormwater retention ponds are very large for the Tara Forest West plans, increasing the chances of a sinkhole. The development would also cluster the homes close to Mill Creek which prompted concern.

"That's crazy over a cave system," Prizzia said while holding up the development plans. "That's going to be a disaster for all the people involved, including the homeowners who are going to be buying those homes. How do we change that?"

Legal staff said the Tara Forest West development has already passed the preliminary plat. At the preliminary plat, the city of Alachua's commission makes the finding that the development is consistent with its regulations, making it tough for the city commission to then change its mind. Alachua County Attorney Sylvia Torres said it would likely take the developer's agreement at this point.

Prizzia said she the Tara developer always takes an approach that fails to look at the big picture and focuses on maximum profit. She said the developer's legacy is destroying the community and creating problems.

"Again and again and again, it always comes back to Tara projects being the projects that we use as examples of what not to do in this community," Prizzia said.

Moukhtara has led dozens of projects around Alachua County, most with Tara in the name: Tara West End, Tara Vista, Tara Larga, Tara St. Augustine. He was also involved in the plan to develop West End Golf Course with housing—a controversial concept [denied by the BOCC in 2022](#). The BOCC recently purchased the West End Golf Course.

Prizzia said she's interested in buying Tara Phoenicia. She called that development plan the worst, with commercial development above perhaps the most sensitive area.

Alachua County entered negotiations to buy sections of Mill Creek in 2018, but Hofstetter said an agreement couldn't be reached.

Cornell added to his motion that staff reach out about buying the property. His motion also directed staff to continue seeking party status in the development hearings and to meet with city of Alachua staff to discuss concerns and propose strategies to address these concerns with the existing applications.

The motion also directs a staff letter to the city of Alachua, asking the city to hold off on approval of the developments.

Hofstetter said county staff already has a meeting with city of Alachua staff on Thursday and get more information.

Cornell also hinted at future legal action if needed. He said he wants to work with the city of Alachua and developer first, but he asked staff to ensure legal financing would be available if needed.

Prizzia said she hopes the city of Alachua is as frustrated as she is concerning the developments, hoping the severity of the development wasn't on their radar when it started.