

HardisonInk.com

4-1 vote approves hog and sheep slaughterhouse construction in Levy County, near Chiefland



Three of the five company representatives at the meeting Tuesday (Sept. 5) are seen here. They are (from left) attorney Jimmy Gooding, Rick Moyer and David Tillman.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 7, 2017 at 3:47 p.m.

BRONSON – Levy County Commissioner Lilly Rooks was the lone dissenter Tuesday (Sept. 5) to a special exception to local zoning law when a motion by County Commissioner Mike Joyner, seconded by County Commissioner Matt Brooks met with a 4-1 vote of approval.

Rooks, the commissioner who has the most experience as a member of this august board, intimated that although she heard the promises of representatives of the developer, she knew better than to believe things that guaranteed any condition will go in perpetuity.

However, this agreement does have an option for the county to revoke the special exception if the developer fails to follow the requirements in the agreement.

Given approval of requirements imposed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Suwannee River Water Management District, construction can begin. Then, after a year to 18 months, there is a probability that 50 hogs a day, five days a week, will be processed into food.

Rooks' key reason for not wanting to grant the request, from her questions posed and

HardisonInk.com

her statements, is a concern for the impact on fresh water flowing from this part of the county into the Suwannee River and then the Gulf of Mexico, and the potential negative impact it might have on clam farmers in Cedar Key – another strong economic engine in the region.

Rooks may be seen, too, as representing a number of her constituents who live in the Spanish Trace Subdivision, which is west of U.S. Highway 19 and north of Levy County Road 347 – a short distance downstream from the proposed pork and sheep meat processing plant.

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks and County Commissioner Rock Meeks are the other two men with Joyner and Brooks voting in favor of the request from Sleepy Creek Lands LLC of Auroa, Ontario, Canada, which has Frank Stronach as a principle owner.

The five representatives of Sleepy Creek Lands, or as it may also be known Sleepy Creek Farms, on Tuesday were attorney W. James “Jimmy” Gooding III of Ocala, attorney Douglas Kent “Doug” McKoy of Levy County, David Tillman of Tillman and Associates Engineering of Ocala, and Rick Moyer and Chip Bazemore of the Sleepy Creek Lands operation.



Reid Granger and Katie Granger of Spanish Trace were among the people interested in the hearing Tuesday.

HardisonInk.com



County Commissioner Lilly Rooks (left) voted 'No' to the motion made by County Commissioner Mike Joyner.



Commissioner Matt Brooks (left) and Commission Chairman John Meeks think about what they are hearing.

HardisonInk.com



Rock Meeks listens to a presenter Tuesday.



Planning, Development and Building Department Director Bill Hammond speaks about the request for a special exception.

HardisonInk.com



County Commissioner Mike Joyner points to the map and talks about wild hogs. Before he went to this map, County Commissioner Lilly Rooks went to it to show where Cedar Key exists and how water flows from the land into the Suwannee River and then into the Gulf of Mexico.

HardisonInk.com



Levy County Property Appraiser Oz Barker is happy to show the property increases in value, and it will lose an exemption for some acreage that is no longer going to be eligible for that agricultural exemption.

The special exception allows the construction of a food processing plant near the intersection of U.S. Highway 19 and Levy County Road 347 (Northwest 30th Avenue) -- about 4.6 miles south of Chiefland.

Tillman and Associates Engineering Inc., representing Sleepy Creek Lands LLC successfully petitioned for a special exception on a parcel that measures 166 acres, although only 98 acres will be used for the project area, according to records.

This is one part of the 1,000 acres of property that was bought a few years ago from the late Andy Andrews by Frank Stronach.

Stronach now owns 39,000 acres of land in Levy County, according to what was said Tuesday.

As for the property that is zoned Agricultural/Rural Residential where this special exception is granted, the owner can graze cattle and hogs without any extra permit or exception.

The representatives reminded the County Commission that this processing plant is agriculturally-based. It is not like a manufacturing plant that might import chemicals and have blast furnaces with smokestacks and the like. Likewise, the hogs are being grown right on the property next to the building.

This project promises to create about 30 new jobs, although those slots will be filled

HardisonInk.com

only by qualified applicants – such as meat cutters, and there may not be individuals in the Levy County area that are so qualified.

The conditions of approval include that all harvesting of the pork and sheep shall be conducted indoors, according to the requirements of the special exception. Solid waste is to be transported by a Florida Department of Environmental Protection certified transporter and disposed of in accordance with laws and regulations.

Wastewater generated from the harvesting process is to be stored on-site and then hauled to an off-site facility; however, domestic wastewater generated at the site will be sent to a septic tank and drain field.

The hours of harvesting operations are set at from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. While it is not spelled out, there was a verbal indication that this will be on weekdays only. Extension of hours may occur if there is an emergency – such as a power failure in the middle of a process.

Processed meat products will NOT be available for public sale at the harvesting facility. The reason for this is that the facility is not a retail outlet. That would require a different zoning designation.

The operators, too, have no desire for more public visitation than necessary to avoid contaminating the site, company representatives said.

The pigs are to be pasture-raised, with no genetic modified feed, with no hormones and with no antibiotics added, attorney Gooding said.

Also among the listed conditions is that "The County may, at any time, inspect the Subject Property and investigate any complaints regarding the harvesting facility. Should the County determine that any conditions exist that could adversely affect the public health, safety, or welfare, the County may declare the Applicant to be in non-Compliance with this Order."

Levy County Development Director Bill Hammond introduced the proposal. The Zoning Board unanimously recommended approval, Hammond said, having conducted a previous public hearing in April, and given that the landowner abides by the conditions of approval that were required, according to records.

As he began the presentation for the applicant, attorney Gooding said the County Commission has a voluminous amount of information as a result of Levy County development staff's work.

Gooding said the first harvesting facility will be 4,490 square-feet in total. There is a potential expansion of 4,493 square-feet in the future, he said, although that is not being proposed at the moment.

He reminded listeners that meat processing happens in Levy County already. It is just not to the level that requires the USDA to observe it. That meat cannot be sold in retail stores.

All processing at this facility, however, will be supervised by United States Department of Agriculture certified inspectors, Gooding said.

The applicant's representative noted that this group has a beef processing facility in Marion County and a small chicken processing plant in that county too. Both of those are said to be state-of-the-art plants that keep odors inside and then the smell is treated by "scrubbers" before that air is exhausted.

Attorney Gooding noted that all of the conditions for the special exception were "vigorously negotiated" by Levy County staff members, including County Attorney Anne Bast Brown, to protect the public health, safety and welfare.

HardisonInk.com

This state-of-the-art facility takes hogs and changes them into pork food products through a modern, humane method, Gooding said. The company's founder is said to be an animal lover, and he asked himself about killing animals to eat.

He decided that this is an acceptable practice. He exceeds mandatory minimum requirements for safety and care.

Representatives of the company answered County Commissioner Rooks' questions to show they knew the flood levels of the area as well as the direction of the flow.

Rooks said she has been looking at this area and Long Pond since 1994. She sees this property as being flood prone.

Gooding said Tillman is the best storm water engineer in Marion County. The developers indicated that they are familiar with the historic water levels in the area.

One bottom line for the community is the probable positive economic impact for Levy County.

Levy County Property Appraiser Osborn "Oz" Barker asked questions to help people understand the economic impact beyond the 30 employees that are projected to work there.

Construction costs for the facility alone are estimated in the \$800,000 range.

The total investment for this is estimated between \$7 million and \$8 million, according to representatives of the venture.

Barker said the 100 acres will lose its agricultural exemption, because no hogs, sheep or other livestock will be raised in the building, holding pens or other facilities in that special exception zone.

Barker made a quick and rough estimate of \$128,000 a year in added tax revenue to Levy County from this meat processing facility.

"God knows Levy County needs some industry of some sort here," Barker said.

He expressed his opinion that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Suwannee River Water Management District would monitor water quality to assure public safety in that regard.

Katie Granger of the Spanish Trace Subdivision said her neighborhood borders on Long Pond, which is west of this site.

She said the heavy rains last year flooded the area to be developed, and that water flowed through Long Pond all the way to cross State Road 345 near Dead Man's Curve (the sharp corner on SR 345 going south and west out of Chiefland).

Granger said that she and many of her neighbors felt the land is too low for a processing plant.

Rooks said the clamming industry in Cedar Key since 1990 has created 261 spinoff businesses.

Moyer said this processing plant will be more careful with its impact on water than any other farming operation. Even without the special exception, this property is zoned for livestock and other agricultural uses.

He sees it as an environmental benefit rather than any form of degradation. There is not a likelihood of any negative impact on water quality at this site or downstream, according to what the developers have said so far.

The current estimated for the structure to be completely built is between 12 and 18 months.