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People protest against dairy's requests *Commission rejects requests 4-0*



Stephen Smith, speaking on behalf of the North Florida Dairies of Bell, explains what the dairy wants to do.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © March 7, 2023 at 3 p.m.

TRENTON – A request by North Florida Dairies of Bell to place pipes across Gilchrist County Road 232, and across Southwest 50th Avenue at Southwest 10th Street, to transfer wastewater for use on crops was denied Monday night (March 6). Before the Gilchrist County Board of County Commission voted 4-0 to deny both crossings, County Commission Vice Chairman Darrell Smith (Dist. 3) said he cannot vote due to a possible conflict of interest.

Gilchrist County Attorney David Miller “Duke” Lang Jr. confirmed that Commissioner Smith knew Smith must file a certain form within 15 days stating his inability to vote due to the possible conflict.

Commissioner Smith was, however, able to speak about the matter.

Stephen Smith, speaking on behalf of the dairy, and Mike Holloway, P.E., a consulting engineer, provided insight concerning recent improvements to the dairy.

Stephen Smith said the dairy is under new ownership as of January. The new owner’s goals, he said, are to rotate crops and work closely with the neighbors.

The dairyman shared with listeners that North Florida Dairies of Bell employs just over 100 people. It paid \$189,000 in ad valorem property taxes to Gilchrist County last year, he added.

Without these pipelines, he said early in the meeting, the dairy must then use manure tankers to transport the wastewater – which it is using to fertilize crops naturally.

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Consulting Engineer Mike Holloway explains the science applied to improving conditions at the dairy. The room was packed with people, even to the point of standing across the back wall.

As for the engineer helping the dairy with the proposed project, Holloway is experienced in industrial waste permitting and design in Georgia and Florida. Facilities include large agricultural operations such as dairy, beef, and poultry operations, milk and juice plants, water bottling plants and domestic sludge operations. He is an expert in nutrient management plans.

In addition to Vice Chairman Smith, the other members of the Gilchrist County Board of County Commissioners are Chairman William “Bill” Martin (Dist. 2), Sharon A. Langford (Dist. 1), Tommy Langford (Dist. 4) and Kenrick Thomas (Dist. 5).

Holloway explained that the new pivots are about two feet above the ground and drop the wastewater down, rather than shooting it into the air, as was a previous practice.

He also spoke about ponds being increased in size to allow the wastewater to sit longer before being distributed via pivots.

This improved method provides for a more uniform distribution of this natural fertilizer to the crops, Holloway said. All of the dairy operations in regard to wastewater management are regulated and monitored closed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), he said.

“That’s what we’re trying to do,” Holloway said. “We’re trying to improve water quality. We’re not trying to increase profits.”

He said this revised method is an improvement. Instead of putting tons and tons of manure in an area over five days, the dairy is trying to evenly space it out like the crops need.

Holloway added that the pivots will be irrigating with other water as well as wastewater.

The new pivots are being added, Holloway said, to allow the dairy to grow food for the cows closer to the dairy. Reducing the truck traffic from hauling silage and from hauling manure is the plan, Holloway said.

The point of these new pipelines and pivots, he said, is to help the environment. The goal is to effectively and evenly, and efficiently spread the cow manure – just as farmers do with commercial fertilizer.

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The two road crossings for pipes were somewhat consolidated when the County Commission heard from the people – for hours -- although they were separated. The messages from the general public were the same. People said they like agricultural ventures, except when they are too close to residential dwellings for the people to tolerate the smell, the flies and the possible water contamination with nutrients.

During the very long discussion, Smith said every head at the dairy number just under 9,000 cows.

In regard to crossing CR 232 (which is Southwest 10th Street, when it is west of U.S. Highway 129), was sought to be crossed approximately one-half mile east of U.S. 129, according to records.



Shawn Hutto, a lifelong Bell resident, is among the many, many people who oppose the request. Here, he tells the County Commission why he opposes it.

As for that crossing, Shawn Hutto of Bell was the first to speak. He said he and his wife June built their home in 2008 and have lived in the area near the dairy since then.

He and his wife are lifetime residents of Bell. Hutto said he admires the hard work of farmers, and that they are taking a risk when they invest in their farms and ranches.

Essentially, Hutto said he is pro-agriculture, but he is against spraying wastewater in his backyard. He expressed his concern about possible health hazards and potential reduced value of property that is near to the dairy.

Brad Smith, a Realtor, said he does not have quantitative proof regarding property value affected by being next to a dairy. Smith said he opposes pipes being allowed to cross the road for this dairy to use wastewater for crops.



Stan Griffis, who bought a house in the area about 18 months ago, tells why he strongly opposes the dairy's requests.

Among the many other people expressing their requests for the County Commission to deny the requests was Stanley Howard "Stan" Griffis III, an attorney who is a former circuit court judge, where he served for seven years.

Griffis said he lives near to CR 232 off of U.S. 129, about a mile north of "The Field of Dreams" baseball field, which is on the west side of U.S. 129 just north of Trenton.

He said his father was a well-driller and he is familiar with well drilling and water treatment. At his previous residences in Alachua County and Levy County, the water took less treatment than at his current residence, Griffis said.

Griffis said the pipelines are part of what appears to be a desire by the dairy to expand the area it sprays wastewater on.

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The attorney said he thinks Gilchrist County is a wonderful place to live, with a fantastic public school system, which he thinks is the envy of most of the state.

Griffis said he is concerned for his family's safety, as well as the water quality and the value of the home he purchased about 18 months ago. His other concerns include his neighbors, as well as how this will affect the possible future reduction of the desirability of Gilchrist County for people who may want to reside in this county.

He strongly opposes the requests of the dairy, and Griffis urged the County Commission to deny the request.

In regard to crossing Southwest 50th Avenue at Southwest 10th Street, Grace Bishop was the first to speak. She said she is relatively new to Gilchrist County, having moved there with her husband in 2012. He passed away in 2017, she said.

They bought five acres, which included some lime pits. Since moving in 10 years ago, she feels she has become surrounded by new fields that are irrigated by the dairy.

When she first moved in, the lime pits had water with fish that birds, including ducks, would eat. The ducks would swim in the lime pits, Bishop said.

The birds no longer visit the lime pits because they have 50 percent less water and are full of algae, she said.

Bishop said she is concerned for her neighbors who are mostly elderly and own their property, because the land will be unfit to sell or to leave to future generations.

"My objection is the smell," Bishop said, "and the quality of the water."

Paula Bunkley lives in the area near the dairy. She said she has lived in Gilchrist County since she was six years old.

Bunkley said that if the dairy is allowed to put the pipes under the road to feed new pivots, then more residential property owners are going to be experiencing the same objectionable smells.

After hours of discussion, Chairman Martin said he needs to see proof that what Holloway says is going to work does work in regard to reducing the smell.

Commissioner Tommy Langford said he likes milk, and he likes to eat.

"You can't do either without agriculture," he said. "I do appreciate what the dairy is doing."

Tommy Langford said he does not trust the DEP to test wells and tell the truth.

"I wouldn't want it in my backyard," he said. "I'll put it that way."

Commissioner Thomas said he has worked at dairies in Gilchrist County, and he is "all about ag, and all about the dairies."

Thomas said he thinks the dairies are good neighbors. He has seen an improvement by having fewer wagons on the road.

Thomas said he rejects the idea of letting the dairy encroach more on its neighbors, though.

If the dairy can't handle its process with the pivots it has now, then it needs to consider downsizing, Thomas said.

When given the choice to approve, deny or table the request, Commissioner Sharon Langford said she was ready to vote on it Monday night.

Gilchrist County Attorney Lang confirmed that the applicant can resubmit a request for these road crossings after 12 months, according to the county codes.

Commissioner Sharon Langford moved to deny the road crossing at CR 232, and her motion was seconded. The motion passed by a 4-0, vote with Commissioner Smith abstaining,

Commissioner Thomas made a motion to deny the other road crossing. It was seconded by Commissioner Sharon Langford and passed by a 4-0 vote, with Commissioner Smith abstaining,

Holloway let the County Commission and audience know the dairy will still need to move the nutrients. Therefore, cow manure wastewater will be moved by tankers to the same fields that have been used before.