

REAL-ESTATE

Maya Lora: A new Lake Wales project will contribute to over 8,500 new residential units



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The Ledger

Published 6:01 a.m. ET Jan. 23, 2022

Lake Wales just added 600 homes to its long-term plans for explosive amounts of growth.

On Tuesday, Lake Wales city commissioners unanimously approved a preliminary subdivision plat and a special exemption permit for a new residential project called Hunt Club Grove North. Special exemption permits are how planned developments are approved in the city.

The project will add 600 homes to Lake Wales. It is planned on 130.38 acres just west of Hunt Brothers Road, and south of State Road 60 and the East Gate Shopping Center, according to the city, generating a density of 4.6 units per acre.

"This is really excellent," Deputy Mayor Robin Gibson said at the commission's Jan. 12 work session. "This is a good example of what we're trying to accomplish."

By the way: Polk votes down \$2.5M request for biz incubators

More: Developers propose "pocket neighborhood" in Lake Wales

And: Lake Wales approves development that could double its population

The land-use changes approved for the project still need to be approved by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. And then the site plan will need to be approved by city commissioners. But if given the final green light, the project will be one of six in the Lake Wales area under the belt of developer David Waronker.

Those 600 units will make up just a fraction of the 8,539 residential units that have gotten at least zoning or site-plan approval from the city, including the 6,100-unit project that could double the size of Lake Wales when completed.

"We recognize growth is coming," Development Services Director Mark Bennett said. "It's best to deal with it head on and control it instead of wishing it away and hoping for the best."

What is Hunt Club Grove North?

Hunt Club Grove North will consist of 448 detached single-family homes and 152 townhomes. Waronker said Florida-based builder Lennar has been contracted to build all 600 homes. Each home will be a minimum of 1,200 square feet but will sit on either 40, 50 or 60-foot-wide lots.

"We're excited because we've been looking forward to a mix of housing types," Development Services Manager Autumn Cochella told commissioners at the Jan. 12 work session. "I don't know of any other townhome projects in the city, ever. So these will be our first townhomes."

According to the city, there will be multiple entrances into the site: one on 11th Street South, five on Hamlin Street and two on Hunt Brothers Road.

Waronker estimates that construction will start this summer on the new units; Bennett's estimate was much more conservative, placing start of construction 12-18 months away after all permitting is completed.

The development will be constructed all at once rather than in phases at a pace of 300 homes per year, Waronker said.

Additionally, there will be a second phase of the development to the south of the outlined property. Bennett said preliminary plans indicate that phase will have 455 detached single-family homes and 102 townhomes on just over 100 acres, generating nearly 1,200 residential units across both phases of the development.

Waronker said the southern phase of the project is about two months behind its northern counterpart. He expects construction to start in August or September.

The homes will be "very affordable for the area for new construction," Waronker said. He expects the townhouses will go for prices in the \$200,000 range and the single-family homes will range from the high end of the \$200,000 price point to somewhere around \$400,000.

The development is located in close proximity to two major shopping centers. Situating new residential development adjacent to commercial use is one of the ways cities avoid urban sprawl when approving new developments. The effects on traffic are lessened when residents can walk to the grocery store rather than having to hop in their car "and drive five miles to get a gallon of milk," Bennett said.

"I can see Winn Dixie having to buy more shopping carts because I can see people who will literally be able to walk to Winn Dixie and take their shopping carts home," Bennett said.

On the north side of Grove Avenue near where this new development will go in, there are gaps in the sidewalk network left behind by a previous home builder, Cochella said.

Waronker is going to install sidewalks in those areas and complete the sidewalk network, which will enhance walkability throughout the area and connect to nearby commercial uses. The existing pedestrian network will connect to State Road 60.

Mayor Eugene Fultz said the enhanced pedestrian use is "outstanding."

"I think this is going to be good for the area," Fultz said.

The development also highlights recreation, with 36% of the site set aside as open space. Bennett said in the middle of the project there will be a neighborhood park and two retention ponds, which combined take up 17.5 acres. For reference, Kiwanis Park on North Lakeshore Boulevard is 12.5 acres.

Developer has ambitious plans

Both city staff and commissioners emphasized that part of the reason the city is comfortable moving forward on the large new development is their faith in Waronker as a developer.

"This developer, you guys, they have been so easy to work with and negotiate with and they really want to do what the city wants," Cochella said. "We're really proud of this one."

Bennett said Waronker was willing to work with the city and make adjustments to better fit staff's vision, such as moving retention ponds from behind houses to the designated open space to create large public areas.

Bennett said the city also appreciated Waronker's inclusion of the history of Lake Wales in his project. The name is derived from the Hunt brothers, who used to own much of the property being developed, and some of the neighborhood's street names are taken from prominent local families.

Waronker is the president and founder of CBD Real Estate Investment LLC. He said that just over the past year, this is his 12th project in the county and sixth in Lake Wales. He's been developing in the city for the past two decades.

On top of the northern and southern portions of Hunt Club Grove, Waronker has the following projects in development:

- Robin's Run, 157 lots.

- Robin's Walk, 33 lots.

- The Groves at Orchard Hills, 620 lots.

- An equestrian ranch south of The Groves, 530 lots.

For Waronker, it's "the more land, the merrier." His long-term plans are ambitious: He wants to develop 5,000 lots in Lake Wales in the next five to six years.

"For the next decade, we have a very, very good growth area," Waronker said. "And I want to be there, [to] continue to be there."

The future of Lake Wales

Waronker isn't the only source of massive growth in the city.

The Winter Haven Corp. plans to transform 1,841 acres into 6,100 residential units, 400,000 square feet of commercial space, 125,000 square feet of office space and 200,000 square feet of assisted living and public facilities.

Last August, the project, which is located south of Thompson Nursery Road and west of U.S. 27, was projected to begin construction within 12-18 months of its approval date.

According to a list generated by Bennett, there are just over 8,500 new residential units in the pipeline for Lake Wales, including the Winter Haven Corp. project, Hunt Club Grove North, Robin's Run and Robin's Walk. If the southern portion of Waronker's project is approved, that number will rise to nearly 9,100 homes.

For reference, the population of Lake Wales in 2020 was 16,361 people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. If each new unit hosts at least two people, the population of Lake Wales could jump above cities such as Bartow and Haines City.

Here are the projects approved by the city, excluding those already mentioned:

Bundy, 142 single-family homes.

Harper Estates, 61 single-family homes.

Belle Lago, 84 single-family homes.

Leighton Landing, 46 single-family homes.

Buck Moore Heights, 100 single-family homes.

Sunset Reserve, 349 single-family homes.

Leoma's Landing, 336 single-family homes.

Parc at Lake Wales, 240 apartments.

Scenic Bluff Phase II, 55 single-family homes.

Whispering Ridge Phase II, 129 single-family homes.

Tangelo Street, 108 single-family homes.

With so much upcoming development, residents in the past have expressed concerns about the rate of growth and urban sprawl. At the Tuesday meeting where Hunt Club Grove North was approved, one resident spoke against it, calling for lower density development.

"They're allowed to have up to five houses to the acre instead of the other way around," Ben Wiles said.

Bennett said the city is combating urban sprawl in multiple ways, such as changing the rules around sewer lines to require developments further away to connect and therefore draw developments closer to existing utility structures. The city is also planning a study to evaluate what land uses it wants to see on land outside the city limits but within the city utility service area.

"We think it's better to recognize that [growth is] coming and be able to control that growth instead of not being able to control it by not bringing it into the city," Bennett said. "Then what happens if we're not in a position to control the growth is whatever happens, happens. And then the city has to deal with the impact of that growth without any of the potential benefits."

Bennett said the city is railing against the "cookie cutter approach" to home-building. The city has a preference for a multitude of home types within developments, such as the two at Hunt Club Grove North or four — apartments, townhomes and both attached and detached single-family homes — at the Winter Haven Corp. development. The city also wants to see a mix of lot sizes within neighborhoods.

Those preferences may lead to the rise of creative housing approaches, such as the proposed "pocket neighborhood."

Bennett also wants to see more apartments available in the area. He said Serenity at Lake Wales, a complex that opened last year just north of the Eagle Ridge Mall, is at capacity.

"That tells us there's a demand for more apartments," Bennett said. "We've had a couple conceptual meetings with apartment developers looking to build in the area."

According to the Florida Apartment Association, the vacancy rate for the Lake Wales and Winter Haven metro area is just 3.7%.

While Waronker is attracted to Lake Wales because it's a "pro growth town" in the "immediate path of progress," he doesn't think the city can yet support a large rental community when rates would likely be close to the price of a mortgage.

Bennett said Lake Wales has a motto: progressive vision, vintage charm. That's what he wants to see come to fruition.

"Ten years from now, I would like to see Lake Wales following the progressive vision, vintage charm model — with a larger city, admittedly," Bennett said. "And with more people brings more opportunities for more businesses and a revitalized downtown."

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