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# SW Ocala: Major apartment complex near Saddlewood Elementary? Neighbors worry about traffic



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By all accounts, Southwest 43rd Court in front of Saddlewood Elementary School is a traffic nightmare in the morning just before classes begin and in the early afternoon when students are released for the day.

This narrow dead-end road will one day be four-laned as part of the 44th Avenue highway project. The road will travel north of State Road 200, from just east of the Wawa convenience store, to County Road 326 along the west side of Interstate 75.

So when a planned 320-unit apartment complex, slated to be built across from Saddlewood Elementary, was placed on the city of Ocala Planning & Zoning board agenda recently, dozens of nearby residents attended to try to block the plan.

**TrimCor:** Plan for luxury apartment complex in SE Ocala concerns Woodland Village residents

**Apartments:** Developers plan 728 multi-family units along 1.2-mile stretch of SR 200

**More growth:** Initial green light for 1,514-unit residential development off CR 42

In the end, the planning and zoning board decided 5-2 to recommend approval. The development has been on the books for many years and officials say a multi-family project would be ideal between commercial and single-family projects.

The city planning and zoning board only issues recommendations. The planned development will now go before the Ocala City Council on March 1 and again on March 15 to get final approval.

The general sentiment from the volunteer zoning board was that the project cannot be built until Southwest 43rd Court is upgraded. And officials hope to begin upgrading Southwest 43rd Court within 18 months.

The City of Ocala has acquired most of the funding for the highway and officials hope that significant road construction will begin soon.

The board decided that a traffic study will be required and conditions will have to be placed on the development before it can open. It appears, a developer representative said, that the development would not proceed until major road improvements are complete.

The property is owned by 200 Club of Ocala, LLC. If the development plan and a tweak in zoning get the green light, the developer will be Catalyst Development Partners II, LLC.

Catalyst Development Partners is an Atlanta-based firm with offices in Florida. The company focuses on "market-rate multifamily real estate development with a footprint across multiple states," including Georgia, Florida and Alabama, its website states.

Patricia Hitchcock, a city planner with Ocala Growth Management, told the zoning board that staff recommended approval, but added that much work on the roadway system must be completed before the development launches.

She said "either the road will be there or they (the developer) will have to build the improvements to make sure that that the road properly functions to support their development."

"As as a planner, I'm comfortable in saying that the rezoning is appropriate in this location," Hitchcock said. "As a planner, I take pleasure in saying that the engineers have a lot of work to do."

Fred Roberts, who spoke on behalf of the developer, said the road upgrades must happen before the apartments can open. Roberts said the road upgrades would be too costly for his client to finance alone and they must wait until the city completes the road.

## **Southwest 43rd Court dead-ends near Sonoma subdivision just north of Saddlewood Elementary**

To get to Southwest 43rd Court, a driver must head north from SR 200 on Southwest 38th Court, just east of the Waffle House, and pass by the east entrance to Sam's Club. The road makes a sweeping left turn and becomes Southwest 40th Street.

Less than a mile from SR 200 the road winds back to a four-way stop at Southwest 43rd Court. To the left, the road passes behind Cheddar's Scratch Kitchen and connects to SR 200 just east of the AT&T Store, across from Dick's.

To the right, heading north, Southwest 43rd Court passes Saddlewood Elementary on the west side and a wooded lot on the east side. It is that wooded area that will be the location of a 15-acre, 320-unit apartment complex.

If a driver continued north on Southwest 43rd Court, the road dead-ends into a line of concrete barriers where a four-lane highway has been carved, though no pavement has been completed. It is overgrown and has been for more than a decade.

Just before the road dead ends, the Sonoma subdivision is on the right. The only way out of that subdivision is to go south on Southwest 43rd Court in front of Saddlewood –Marion County's largest elementary school, with more than 900 students.

That unfinished four-lane road connects to Southwest 20th Street. The road then becomes Southwest 44th Avenue on the north side of Southwest 20th Street near Custom Window Systems, Inc., and Cardinal Glass.

Sometimes it takes 30 minutes for area residents who live north of Saddlewood Elementary to go one mile south to the Southwest 40th Street intersection. Traffic snarls at the school during dropoff and pickup times.

That's why city growth management officials say that the roadway will have to be upgraded before the apartment complex comes on line. The Ocala City Council will make the ultimate decision on the project.

## **Area residents, school officials speak before the volunteer zoning board during a Valentine's Day hearing**

Cheryl Calverley, who has a home on the west side of Southwest 43rd Court near the dead end, said many residents will be trapped.

"Our biggest thing of course, is traffic safety," she said. "And I've heard that is going to be addressed with that school there. We need to have proper sidewalks. There's nothing in that area. Absolutely nothing."

**2012:** State agencies OK controversial Sunny Oaks development

**Lawsuit:** County sued in records case involving development in Irvine

**Lawsuit dismissed:** Judge dismisses part of lawsuit involving NW Marion development

Calverley said students are now walking on the side of Southwest 43rd Court, which is in need of new pavement. It has potholes and is considered a rural road.

Another resident, who lives in the Sonoma subdivision, said the people living north of Saddlewood only have one way out.

"I just think it's premature to consider something like this when we can't even get in and out of there," he said.

Marion County Public Schools also had representatives at the meeting, including David Herlihy, Planning & Governmental Relations manager, and Dennis McFatten, Safe Schools director.

Herlihy explained that the school district is not against growth. He noted he came to the meeting to help give perspective about a tremendous amount of traffic issues in front of Saddlewood as it currently exists and about localized overcrowding.

"I am here just to raise awareness, generally speaking, and this is a really good example of what we'll see in other places in the county in terms of localized overcrowding," Herlihy said of Saddlewood Elementary,

Herlihy said more enrollment will likely mean more traffic. Even when the road is widened, it will be a divided highway and the students will likely have to be bused from one side of the street to the other.

**Apartments:** 584-unit apartment complex slated north of SR 200 on SW 60th Avenue

**More apartments:** 88-acre apartment complex along SW 7th Ave. may grow to 1,146 homes

**And even more apartments:** More apartments planned in SW Ocala/Marion County

Herlihy also stated that the district has added wings to Saddlewood and some classes are being held in portables.

"We're built out," he noted. "It's our largest in the district."

The district does have property off Southwest 49th Avenue to build another elementary school. However, because the county's overall capacity is at about 80% to 85%, the state will not fund another construction of another school.

McFatten said he is concerned about the traffic, stating: "I have been out there to direct traffic." McFatten noted that his job is to make sure schools are safe and the traffic situation at that school is already a challenge.

Roberts said the district's dilemma is localized overcrowding and he believes that school boundaries should be moved, which would be at the order of the Marion County School Board, to shift students out of overcrowded schools and into ones with vacancies.

Plus, Roberts said formulas show that the 320 apartments will only add 31 students to the enrollment. Even some of the volunteer board members suggested it may be time for the school district to enact its impact fee to generate capital funds.

Marion County Public Schools had an impact fee about 15 years ago. It was suspended when the recession hit and homebuilding stopped. In recent years, the school board has been debating whether it is time to bring it back.

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