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Proponents of zoning change take tour of Tropical Acres

By PAUL CATALA



Even the garden of Joey Even's home off Gordon Drive is a salute to the industry from which many of neighbors earn their livelihoods.

In a front-yard planter, flowers and shrubs encircle a retired bumper car, an example of what some Tropical Acres residents want to be stored legally on their property.

At issue is whether to allow multiple properties across Balm-Riverview Road north and south of Rhodine Road to be rezoned as a show business overlay. If the application is approved by the county zoning hearing master, the storage and maintenance of carnival equipment and mobile homes would be permitted on about 40 properties in the neighborhood.

Overlay zoning is a land-use regulatory tool that creates a special district over an existing zone with

specific provisions.

During a two-hour tour for county planners and staff last week, Richard Bennett, a land-use consultant representing the property owners, pointed out what he called "unique" group rezoning change for multiple properties not physically connected to each other.

Using a private van, Bennett was joined on the tour by Hillsborough County community development senior planner Isabelle Albert; executive planner J. Brian Grady; Judy James, an attorney representing property owners; Joe Moreda, county zoning administrator; David Hey and Melissa Zornitta, county planning and growth management department; and Joey Evan and John Arnold of Arnold Amusements.

As the group rode around the neighborhood of between 500 and 1,000 lots, Bennett pointed out entertainment equipment and items not associated with the carnival business parked in backyards of the agriculturally-zoned area. Those items included boats, semi-trucks, storage containers, food wagons and game booths.

"There are a lot of things here that have nothing to do with show business," said Bennett of Bennett Properties Realty Inc. of Brandon. "But they are here and comparable with the type of things you have in show business."

Bennett told the group that most people opposed to the zoning overlay don't live in Tropical Acres, but in surrounding, newer, deed-restricted subdivisions one to two miles away and wouldn't be impacted if the overlay is approved. He said there is a fear the rezoning could occur elsewhere in the county.

"People can paint horror stories of what this is going to do, but it's not going to happen," he said.

Terry Flott, chairwoman of the United Citizens Action Network, a Hillsborough County group that works to ensure county leadership consults with existing residents in growth-management decisions, said her group is working with other homeowners associations to stop the overlay because it doesn't conform to the Riverview Community Plan, which was approved in 2008.

She said the zoning is usually confined to Gibsonton and ample space is left in the Gibsonton Community Plan for storage of maintenance and carnival equipment.

Even, who has lived in the area since 1983, and Arnold pointed out homes of rezoning applicants, many of whom they know personally.

"I'm trying to be legal and do it the right way so I don't have to leave," Even said.

The zoning overlay application is scheduled to be heard by a zoning hearing master Dec. 12.

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