

Plum Creek Timber Company

EPAC Member Bob Palmer's Discussion with Rose Fagler, Plum Creek Community Relations
April 3, 2012

Plum Creek is the largest private landowner in the nation with approximately 6.7 million acres of timberlands in the United States. The company's core business is timber, but it also manages some of its lands for conservation, recreation, natural resources and community development. The company owns 590,000 acres in 22 counties in Florida, and is the largest private landowner in Alachua County, with 65,000 acres throughout the northern and eastern portions of the county. Nearly 24,000 of these acres are permanently conserved.

Over the past year, Plum Creek initiated the Envision Alachua project, a community planning process to discuss future economic, environmental and community opportunities in Alachua County on lands owned by Plum Creek. According to the company, Envision Alachua featured six public meetings "to help articulate a future vision for company lands in Alachua County, and provide a range of participation opportunities for county residents."

The point of "Envision Alachua" is to get community involvement and feedback at the front end of any development process. It is a costly exercise. PC was challenged several years ago by the County to develop a master plan, and Rose implied that this was ultimately a good thing in that it led to a plan that may well get broad community support. The alternative would have been to submit an application without any advance public involvement or to try to develop lands parcel-by-parcel.

Fagler discussed the company's views on the roughly 40,000 acres in the County that could be developed. PC did an overlay of their holdings vs. timber resources and County codes (i.e. strategic ecosystems) and concluded that 5,000 – 15,000 acres are suitable for development. These are sections where the value of development exceeds the value of ongoing forestry. This development could be done in a way that preserves much of the ecological value of their lands and makes the "emerald necklace" feasible. Given restrictions of 1 residence/5 acres, this could translate to 8,000 residential units, which could mean 8,000 wells and 8,000 septic tanks. Developing 8,000 units could take 20-50 years. What PC seems most interested in at this point is an economic development site (e.g. a high-tech center) rather than large housing developments. Rose said that will probably submit a significant application within 18 months.

She clearly felt relations between PC and AC-EPD are improving. She attributes this to several factors: (1) leadership at the top, including Rick Drummond and Randy Reed, (2) EPD leadership has reached out more to PC in the last 12 months. She cited in particular an offer by EPD for a joint grant-writing activity (to USDA) to clean up old rural gas stations, (3) the PC master plan has generated more acceptance and perhaps even excitement in EPD in that it offers the possibility of protecting many strategic acres, (4) the success of business initiatives like Innovation Gainesville.

She did voice a number of concerns or disagreements that PC has had with EPD over the years: (1) characterization of sources of pollutants to Newnan's Lake, (2) timely consultation with affected parties on proposed ordinances and rules, (3) opening up County conservation lands to the public, (4) characterization of sources of elevated fecal coliform levels in local waterways.

Future priorities: Rose thinks that EPD should focus on water issues and opening of conservation lands to the public. It should also continue to improve communications with stakeholders, engaging them early in the process – perhaps before ordinances and code changes are sent to the County attorney.