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Chatham Park nears final vote

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PITTSBORO With dueling choruses of critics and supporters, the Chatham Park project on Tuesday cleared the last likely hurdle before its potential approval.

More than 70 people signed up to speak at the podium of Pittsboro's old courthouse for a final public debate about Preston Development Co.'s master plan for a city-size development wrapping around eastern Pittsboro.

Unlike the November public hearing, there were no signs, no shouts from the audience and few T-shirts with printed messages. People still had plenty to say, covering topics as diverse as forest growth rates and economic distress.

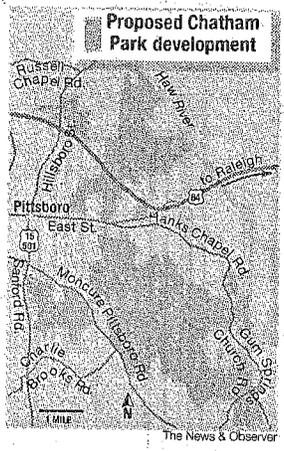
The speakers, largely consisting of residents of Pittsboro and surrounding areas, tended to argue past each other. Critics often dove into the rules and nitty-gritty of the plan, while many supporters argued for the project's broad economic promise.

Dick Winokur saw a chance for Pittsboro to establish its future.

"I've seen over and over again where opportunities like this were passed by," he said. "It gives an opportunity for our children and our grandchildren to stay in the community, work in the community and improve our community."

Cathy Holt, however, worried promises of environmental protection and sound planning could erode with time. "All these protections for our quality of life that we have here have to be down on paper, not promises," she said.

Pittsboro Matters, the most-unified voice questioning the developer, again called for further study and more information. Among its requests, the group asked:



■ That the developer pay before the project's approval to study its social and economic effects.

■ That the developer establish affordable housing.

■ That the developer study its traffic impact, with an eye toward protecting downtown.

■ That the developer robustly protect streams and sensitive environmental areas.

Philip Culpepper, a representative for the developer, questioned his critics' intentions. "That's their only goal, is to kill Chatham Park," he said in an interview. "They will cover it up with 'study, affordable housing, local contractors,' every condition they can think to do."

Culpepper said the company will look into affordable housing, but he rebuffed requiring certain units be built for people with lower incomes.

"There's not a town-wide (affordable housing) ordinance," he said. "We believe we should be treated the same way as the rest of the town, not to put the finger on us because ... they think there are wealthy people behind it."

The board has not yet scheduled its potential vote on the project.

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Project a regional game changer



Commentary

Kirk Ross

N+O

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Change happens slowly until it happens all of the sudden.

You see this principal in nature – slow budding, then pow, a flower. Also, mudslides.

Here in southern Orange County we've seen change in fits and starts for close to a decade. If you're right next to a new high-rise or a set of new houses shoehorned into a couple of underused lots, it seems like a big deal. If you look at the overall growth rates, though, we're not exactly bustling.

It may seem shocking to say so, but in terms of our economy, the lay of the land and our role as a community we're still the college town/commuter community for Raleigh, Durham and the park, just bigger and more built out.

Nothing has come along that has promised to really shake up that paradigm. Until now.

Last week, citizens of Chatham County lined up at a Pittsboro Town Board meeting to raise concerns about Chatham Park, a massive development that runs from the east side of Pittsboro to Jordan Lake. The first thing to know about Chatham Park is the scale. "Massive" doesn't do it justice.

For decades we've heard talk that one development or another would double or triple the size of Pittsboro. Even now, given that the town is still only about 4,000 people, that would be big, but not regional impact big.

Chatham Park would increase the town's population by almost 1,500 percent to more than 60,000 over the project's 30 year time span. It's the kind of growth rates we saw in Cary in the 1980s sustained for three decades. Keep in mind that major developments grow in spurts. That means we're likely to very quickly have a town nine miles down the road with the population of Carrboro within a decade and the population of Chapel Hill a decade later — 22,000 homes.

It's also massive in terms of size, about 7,200 acres, pretty much surrounding eastern and southern Pittsboro and stretching from the southern tip of Jordan Lake to the banks of the Haw River near Bynum. It's almost all of the developable land left in the area covering a total of about 7,200 acres or about 11 square miles.

Another RTP

While another town with the same number of people as Chapel Hill just a short hop down the road is going to have a major impact, the nature of this new village is what I think will change things the most.

The backers of the plan, including SAS founder Jim Goodnight, envision another tech and research park. It has the potential to be an employment center equal in draw to RTP. If their plan works out, many of those 60,000 residents of New Pittsboro will work in this new tech park. Some will commute across the lake. But given the traditional ties between Chatham County and UNC, particularly in health care, it is hard not to see a close partnership between the new community and this one. And given the natural constraint of the lake, some of the people who will work in this new giant employment center are going to find the commute much easier from north Chatham and southern Orange a much easier.

Right now, the odds are fairly good that Pittsboro will take the deal. It's hard to tell when, but with much of the land already in hand, that could mean a fairly quick start when it does happen.

The time for Orange County communities to take a hard look at the consequences of that decision, its impact on our community and on our neighbors. If we get ahead of the curve in planning for this change we can avoid the transportation and planning nightmares we saw in the later half of the last century. And I pray we can avoid turning 15-501 south into a strip mall infested corridor like 15-501 north.

We're on the cusp of the biggest change in 50 years, folks. You might want to look into that.

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