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Advocates for Celery Fields given until July 14 to hone proposals for development on county-owned land

April 26, 2018 by [Rachel Brown Hackney](#), Editor & Publisher

County commissioners ask county administrator to lend staff assistance to Fresh Start Initiative

Outdoor Sports Complex



The YMCA has proposed a sports complex on one of the county-owned parcels next to the Celery Fields. Image courtesy Fresh Start Initiative

After devoting almost exactly 57 minutes to the issue on April 25, the Sarasota County Commission voted unanimously to give a citizens group about three more months to fine-tune proposals for two county-owned parcels adjacent to the Celery Fields.

On a motion by Commissioner Alan Maio, seconded by Commissioner Paul Caragiulo, the group will have until July 14 to return to the board with refined recommendations.

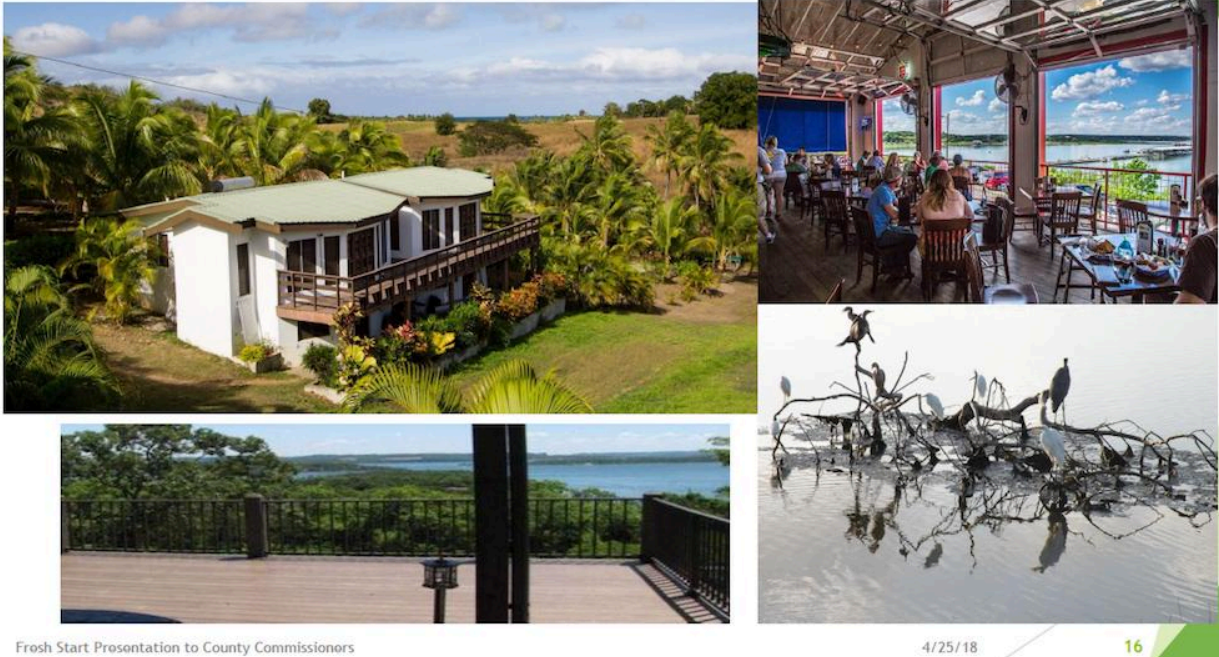
During their April 25 presentation to the commission, representatives of the [Fresh Start Initiative](#) focused on two parcels out of the four county staff and the commissioners call “the Quads” at the intersection of Palmer Boulevard and Apex Road in the eastern part of the county.

For the Southeast Quad, which comprises 12.7 acres, a weighted voting process conducted earlier this month settled on a top priority that would combine a multi-use community pavilion and a buffer/visitor center. The alternative is an eco-tourist lodge with the option of a restaurant.

For the Southwest Quad, which encompasses 10.6 acres, the weighted voting heavily favored an outdoor sports complex, which the Sarasota YMCA had proposed. The second-place recommendation was for an Old Florida-style center with shops and “fooderies,” second-floor apartments and a boulevard design that would create a walkable community atmosphere in the area.

County Administrator Jonathan Lewis initially told the board members that if the representatives of the [Fresh Start Initiative](#) provided their report in writing to him by July 1, he could try to rearrange the board’s July 11 agenda to include another discussion.

Eco-Tourist Nature Lodge with Optional Restaurant



An alternative proposal for one parcel is an eco-tourist lodge. Image courtesy Fresh Start Initiative

However, Maio indicated that that was not necessary. “At least for me,” Maio said, waiting until late August, after the commission returns from its summer break, would “not be the end of the world.” No other board member disputed that.

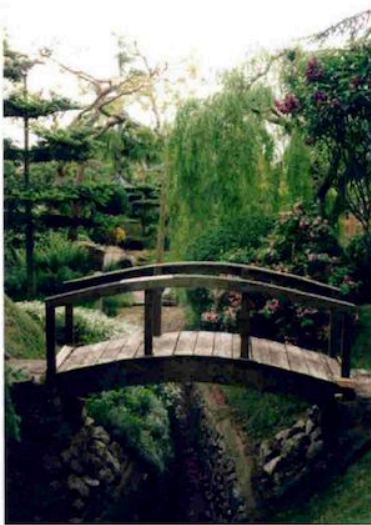
Waiting until later in the summer “would surely help us,” Marguerite Malone, vice chair of the Board of Directors of the Sarasota Memorial Health Care System and one of the Fresh Start Executive Council members, responded. Many of the leaders of Executive Council have regular jobs, she pointed out.

In the meantime, the commissioners also asked that Lewis ensure that county staff members work with the Fresh Start representatives to figure out the potential revenue that could be generated by the proposals and to undertake research on possible developers. Commissioner Michael Moran was the first to offer that recommendation. Chair Nancy Detert concurred

with Moran. She told Malone and Executive Council member Tom Matrullo, "You shouldn't have to do this on your own."

Detert added of the Fresh Start leaders, "They're not planners; they're not [zoning experts]. They're average citizens trying to come up with a vision."

Buffer/Visitor Center



Fresh Start Presentation to County Commissioners



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Participants in the Fresh Start Initiative's process to winnow community proposals settled on a visitor center/buffer, along with a multi-use pavilion, as the top choice for the Southeast Quad. Image courtesy Fresh Start Initiative

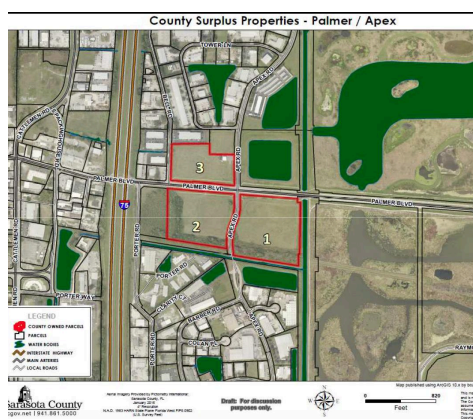
Additionally, Commissioner Paul Caragiulo suggested the Fresh Start leaders undertake more outreach to owners of property in the immediate area other than residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. "That's a voice that should be heard and should be given weight." He likened that process to the county-mandated planning guidelines calling for all property owners within a certain proximity of a proposed development be notified formally about the project.

Malone did tell Caragiulo earlier in the discussion that Fresh Start Executive Council members had talked with owners of businesses in the area near the Quads. “We had people canvass that area,” including the section on Old Packinghouse Road, she said. Additionally, flyers about Fresh Start’s efforts were sent to the businesses.

Malone promised to provide the commissioners with copies of the records Fresh Start had kept about its outreach. “We have very systemized, organized data” about those visits, she added.

Finally, as part of his motion, Maio asked the group’s leaders to provide updates to the commissioners prior to July 14. He acknowledged earlier that, because of the state Sunshine Law, the Executive Council members have to meet one-on-one in separate sessions with the commissioners. Nonetheless, he asked that they make the effort to interact with all the commissioners.

During their presentation, Fresh Start Executive Council members explained that, after a months-long vetting process, they had winnowed 41 suggestions down to four potential uses of the Southeast and Southwest Quads. The land is adjacent to the county’s Celery Fields stormwater project, which has become an internationally known bird-watching preserve.



A graphic shows the three ‘Quads’ parcels (outlined in red) originally under consideration for sale. Image courtesy Sarasota County

The Quads were part of the property the county purchased in 1993 in preparation for the stormwater undertaking, but the land was not needed for that effort. Instead, the goal was to sell the four parcels.

In recent years, the Northeast Quad has remained off the market because it is the site of a stormwater retention pond. On April 25, Commissioner Maio suggested that parcel could be

incorporated into a plan for the area adjacent to the Celery Fields, as well, as long as a proposal passed muster with the county's Public Utilities staff.

Commissioner Detert also pointed out on April 25 that when the board held its Nov. 28, 2017 budget workshop, the commissioners agreed to take the Southeast Quad off the surplus lands list. Nonetheless, Commissioner Maio suggested then that advocates for the Celery Fields offer suggestions about how the land could generate revenue for the county.

The board also voted that day to sell the Southwest Quad, but only after the advocacy group had six months to come back with proposals about uses on the land that would be compatible with the Celery Fields. That six-month deadline prompted the presentation this week.

Comments and questions

During her April 25 opening remarks, Malone explained, "Fresh Start is a community story. It's a *happy*community story. It's an *involved*community story. It's a passionate community story."

After the Nov. 28, 2017 commission decisions about the two Quads, she pointed out, the core group of Fresh Start members began working on the best approach to gain the views of people who live and work in the area around the county property.

The Celery Fields Area



Feasibility Economic Viability Compatibility with the Area Utility to Neighbors

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A graphic shows potential for compatible development near the Celery Fields. Image courtesy Fresh Start Initiative

One of the first steps, she continued, was getting the 50 homeowner associations in that area to participate in the process.

After the Executive Council received the initial 41 proposals, Malone said, the council asked the members of an advisory council to vet them with an emphasis on four criteria: feasibility, economic viability, compatibility with the area, and utility to neighbors.

A roundtable session followed on April 10, Malone pointed out. "A lot of the homeowners associations were represented there."

Executive Council member Tom Matrullo told the commissioners that Fresh Start recommends that they use the results of that process as the foundation to develop Requests for Proposals for the Southeast and Southwest Quads.

"Fresh Start is willing to facilitate further community interaction and support for this project," he added.

Commissioner Charles Hines was the first to commend the group for its work. "We could have just sold [these parcels] without any control," he pointed out, but "the community didn't like that [idea]." He added that he supported the process Fresh Start had undertaken.

Nonetheless, Hines cautioned the group that the county would not put "more public dollars ... into something that we've already identified as surplus lands."

He preferred the eco-lodge proposal for the Southeast Quad, he said. The board could set parameters for use of the land, he continued, but private money needs to go into the development.

Malone told him that Fresh Start's plan throughout the process was to develop ideas that would bring revenue to the county.

HOA Signatories to the Fresh Start Initiative

Aberdeen Pines	Lake Sarasota
Bent Tree I	Laurel Lakes
Bent Tree II	Laurel Meadows
Bent Tree III	Laurel Oak
Bent Tree IV	The Legends
Cedar Hammock	Meadow Walk
Cedar Hollow	The Meadows
Chatwick Court	Misty Creek
Coffman Manor	Newburn Village
Deer Hollow	Palm Oaks
East Richardson	Palmer Glen
Eastpointe	Palmer Lake
Enclave Pinetree Mash	Palmer Reserve
Enclave Pinetree Ponderosa	Peaceful Vista Homes
Enclave Pinetree Spruce	Pine Valley Ranches
Forest Creek	Pleasant Acres
The Founders Club	Racimo Ranches
Fox Creek	Regent Lake
Gator Creek	San Palermo
Georgetowne	Sarasota Golf Club Colony
Greystone	Southpointe Meadows
The Groves	Swartz Subdivision
The Hammocks	Vereda Verde
Heritage Oaks	The Woods
	Wyndham

The homeowner associations for these neighborhoods are participants in the Fresh Start Initiative. Image courtesy Fresh Start Initiative

"I'm completely impressed by what I saw today," Commissioner Moran told Malone and Matrullo. "We represent taxpayer dollars ... I'm super glad you recognized it and made it a priority."

Moran especially liked the sports complex proposal, he said, and he suggested that the Fresh Start leaders meet with an international lacrosse star [Casey Powell](#), who has moved to Sarasota. "People describe him as literally the Michael Jordon of lacrosse," Moran added.

The complex would be a good complement to the county's Nathan Benderson Park and IMG Academy in Bradenton, Moran said.

As the discussion drew to a close, Commissioner Detert said that, with the approval of County Administrator Lewis, "We lend you our professional staff [so you can] work with what you've heard in the community and here today."

After the commissioners unanimously approved Maio's motion, applause broke out among supporters in the audience.

"I'm even allowing clapping today," Detert said laughingly, referring to public hearings when she has to gavel down such action. "It's worth clapping for," she added of the Fresh Start Initiative's work.