

Florida Times-Union Nassau Neighbors

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Commission halves the required buffer between wetlands, homes

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YULEE -- The Nassau County Commission cut the required distance between development and wetlands in half Monday.

The commission's vote to reduce minimum buffer width from 50 feet to 25 feet in the county's comprehensive plan settles years of controversy.

Commissioners tried in 2002 to reduce the buffers to an average of 25 feet in its land use regulations, but the Florida Department of Community Affairs officials said that violated the county's comp plan. A 50-foot buffer was included in the comp plan in 1992.

Proponents on both sides of the buffer-width issue have haggled since.

Developers and builders, represented by the Northeast Florida Builders Association and the Nassau Builders Council, favored 25-foot buffers, the minimum width required by the St. Johns River Water Management District.

Environmental advocates, represented by the Sierra Club, said 25 feet isn't enough to protect waterways against pollutants.

"It's all been said, over and over again," Commission Chairman Tom Branán said Monday. "We just need to vote."

Branán said those advocating 50-foot buffers failed to provide scientific proof the larger buffers make any difference in water quality protection. Branán said a special data-gathering meeting Monday morning did nothing to change that.

"When people were up here talking for their 15 or 20 minutes, it was, 'We're not absolutely sure of this,' and 'We're not absolutely sure of that,'" Branán said. "Well, we're not absolutely sure of anything in life. I don't see anything that



With a Nassau County Commission vote to reduce buffers between wetlands and houses, developers can now build homes closer to marshes and waterways.
KEVIN TURNER/Staff

suggests that 25 feet, if we subtract it, would hurt us and the environment. I feel very comfortable in what I'm doing, recommending it to be 25 [feet]."

Commissioner Ansley Acree cast the lone vote against reducing the buffers.

Acree said Tuesday the county never asked the St. Johns River Water Management District if that group would assist the county in enforcing wider buffers. She added Hurricane Katrina's destruction along the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts was worsened by a lack of wetland buffers protecting homes.

Acree said the county should have funded a hydrologic study to determine how wide the buffers should be.

"Doing hydrology is a scientific task, not a guess," she said Tuesday.

Prior to the vote Monday, Branan and Commissioner Jim B. Higginbotham bristled at audience suggestions they were kowtowing to developers who contributed to their 2004 election campaigns.

"I took money from developers; I'll be the first one to admit," Branan said. "But I'll tell you this: They didn't want the \$6,000 impact fee for the school system, and I stood up here and voted for that. As far as I'm concerned, it's a safety issue. I wouldn't put my children and my grandchildren in jeopardy over 25 feet if I didn't think I was doing the right thing."

"I used to argue about the 50-foot back when I was on [the commission] the first time," Higginbotham said. "I'm not changing my policy and my conviction of what I believe in."