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Local Viewpoint

Save the Econ River from development

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My Word columnist

There is a memorable quote from the movie “Star Wars: The Last Jedi,” in which Rose explains to Finn, “That’s how we’re gonna win — not fighting what we hate, saving what we love.”

In Seminole County we are depending on our county commissioners to save what we love — our beautiful natural areas. When commissioners review the River Cross development proposal on Aug. 14, they need to say no, for environmental and financial reasons.

I recently hiked in the Econ River Wilderness Area, a place of startling beauty, where the dark and mysterious Econlockhatchee River meanders past gnarled oaks, soaring pines, blueberry bushes and wildflowers. Did you know this natural area, protected by Seminole County, is directly across the river from the nearly 700-acre site that River Cross developers want to stuff with 520 single-family homes, 270 townhouses, 500 apartments, 80 estate homes, and 1.5 million square feet of commercial property?

Without a doubt, the wetlands on both sides of the river are important to preserve. In fact, according to the National Wetlands Inventory, the River Cross area has a higher percentage of wetlands than the currently preserved area.

Rather than approve irresponsible development, Seminole County should purchase the two parcels on the west side of the property and add them to the Econ River Wilderness Area. These parcels are about 75 percent wetlands, and heavy devel-

opment in this area would cause irreversible harm.

The costs to Seminole County would be minimal. The two parcels by the river have a combined market value of about \$1.7 million, according to property appraiser documents. Seminole County could either purchase the property or negotiate a land swap, using abandoned or unmaintained property within Seminole’s urban area.

In comparison, the financial cost to allow River Cross to proceed would be enormous. Seminole County would instantly be liable for a \$30 million-plus bridge over the Econ River, with the additional costs of providing water, electric, fire, police, schools and more in a rural area where these services do not exist. To put the impact in perspective, Chuluota has 2,843 residents. River Cross would have an estimated 3,836 residents — the population of Chuluota plus nearly 1,000 more.

Where would the money for infrastructure come from? Because the developer has promised to make 15 percent of the residences affordable housing, some have suggested that Seminole County would pay for the bridge using federal affordable-housing funds. To say the least, this misuse of funding is unacceptable.

The bottom line is that River Cross would be a financial and environmental disaster. But this isn’t just about saying no to River Cross. It’s about saving something we love — the beautiful Econlockhatchee River.

Seminole County should take steps now toward purchasing the two parcels next to the river so that this environmental jewel is permanently protected.



Deborah Poulalion lives in Longwood.



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Rose to Finn, “Star Wars: The Last Jedi”

