

# OSCEOLA NEWS-GAZETTE

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## **Destiny showcased**

### **Not everyone favors 'eco-sustainable' 41,300-acre project**

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Staff Writers

It is still an idea, but those involved with the proposed Destiny project have already begun revealing details of their plan to Osceola County leaders and the community. Planned for a location in Yeehaw Junction in the southern part of the county, Destiny is being called by its developers the first eco-sustainable city in the United States. And while today the area is seen as a rural ranching community, developers see it as a community that will eventually house more than 100,000 people and include a series of waterways and its own electricity grid.

Landowner Anthony V. Pugliese III said that he, along with business partner Fred DeLuca, purchased the land because of its location and potential. Pugliese's wife, Laura, said she coined the name of the city because she saw it as Central Florida's destiny.

"That gives us the opportunity to create something from scratch with such a large parcel," Pugliese said.

More than 41,000 acres of land near Florida's Turnpike and State Road 60 are set to house Destiny and an expanded road system. Along with hospitals, public safety, retail centers and schools, the community will use the ecosystem as infrastructure, Destiny Chief Operating Officer Randy Johnson said. A "longevity center" for residents will include doctors, and an "eco-technology hub" in the city will be developed to attract green companies, and conduct environmental research.

"This has the potential to change the face of Central Florida," he told an audience of approximately 550 at an event Wednesday showcasing Destiny to the public at the Gaylord Palms resort.

With the improved infrastructure, a strengthened property tax base that will be able to help support the county will follow, Osceola County Tax Collector Patsy Heffner said.

For Osceola County leaders, Destiny is being painted as the ultimate economic opportunity, and a chance to not only create jobs, but also bring industries to the area. "This is going to give us a clean slate to bring in those high-tech high-wage jobs," Maria Toumazos, the county's economic development administrator, said.

According to Johnson, companies are already committing to relocate to Destiny, and the chief executive officer of a large, publicly traded company Johnson declined to name has already committed to bringing his company to Osceola County. Johnson added that Destiny also would have its own economic development department.

The county's comprehensive plan is currently being amended to include new rules to allow for the development of certain types of rural lands.

Pugliese and Johnson said without local support, Destiny will have a hard time succeeding and coming to life, and holding events like Wednesday's unveiling are way to educate local leaders.

"Anyone who's going to have to vote on the project has to be knowledgeable of what we're doing," said Pugliese, who's been a frequent contributor to the campaigns of local candidates and public officials both individually and through the numerous companies he controls. "It's important that we have their support and they know what we're planning to do."

Destiny planner Bob Whidden, whose Kissimmee-based company serves as consultant for Destiny, said what makes the proposed city unique from other developments is its reverse order of development where, instead of housing being the first phase of construction, it is employment opportunities that will first be built.

"We're starting by bringing the jobs first, and with those jobs come those employees that are relocating," he said. Whidden said the Destiny project has come with some bumps on the road, due to concerns about the size, but if the county wants to take advantage of its transportation potential, the project needs to be big. "We need a certain size to be able to develop enough critical mass to do really state-of-the-art mass transit solutions," he said.

Apart from Whidden's company, Destiny also will team up with worldwide designers and land consultants Arup, who designed the Bird's Nest and Water Cube buildings for the Beijing Olympics.

Environmental organizations like Audubon of Florida are not fully endorsing Destiny, but say they like the developer's plan to set aside the largest part of the land's acreage for permanent conservation.

"It can't be a promise and a smile," Charles Lee, director of advocacy for Audubon of Florida, said. "It has to be a meaningful and legal commitment."

County Commission candidates comment on Destiny. Last week, County Commission district 5 Republican candidate Fred Hawkins Jr. expressed reservations about the project while admitting that it at least "sounds good."

"I cannot say if I am in favor or against at this time. I would like to hear more than one side of the proposal," Hawkins said prior to the luncheon/presentation. "Additionally, I think it would be important to speak to the local residents in the area surrounding the project to see how they feel."

But following the nearly two-hour presentation, Hawkins' tune changed to the positive. "It was a great event for Destiny. I brought about 15 residents from Kenansville with me so they could be informed and they all seemed very positive after the luncheon," he said. "I guess my thoughts are everything sounds great and I am glad at the thinking and in-depth concepts that are being proposed."

Another encouragement for Hawkins was the accountability factor.

"What will help me is now that all of this has been laid out; we will have something to hold the developers accountable," he said. "And I do believe they will do everything they have said they would."

Jonathan Harrell, Hawkins' Democratic opponent in the upcoming election, however, is not at all convinced of the brimming good in the Destiny project, although earlier this month he praised the project's efforts in creating a viable energy garden to explore fuel options.

Harrell called the development “dangerous” after attending the presentation.

“Our community’s concerns over the Destiny development are real,” he said. “This attempt to further deregulate our county’s new comprehensive plan to approve this development sets a dangerous precedent and weakens the growth boundary that our community has established to protect itself from this type of excessive, unplanned development.”

Harrell said he believes going ahead with the project would not be prudent nor in the best interests of the county’s residents because of serious conflict with the county’s comprehensive plan. “This time our local government can legally say ‘no’ and stand firm on the very comprehensive plan that was created to safeguard our community and construction industry,” he said. “Now is the time that local government can prove that we don’t have an Etch A Sketch comprehensive plan. It is not in our community’s best interests for our local government to change the rules in the middle of the game in an attempt to build this ‘clean-slate’ society.”

Harrell added that the Destiny project would do little, if anything, to help residents with the dilemmas they are facing now. “We cannot hit the reset button and just turn our backs on the problems facing the residents that live here now. We cannot afford to add another 40,000 homes to an already excessive and exhausted housing market while being held hostage by the promise of jobs,” Harrell said. “Local government does not need to bite at the first shiny object that goes zipping through the water by rubberstamping this comprehensive plan amendment. We must put our community first by exercising good judgment and discernment by not allowing radical changes to our comprehensive plan.”

Ken Shipley’s take Osceola County Commission Chairman Ken Shipley, who will not be serving on the commission when the final vote is cast for the Destiny project’s approval, said he has been watching it develop very closely and has met with the developer.

“I have met with Mr. Pugliese and I looked him straight in the eye and asked him if Destiny would be a contributor to the county tax base or a taker. He assured me the project would contribute to the county.” Pugliese’s further explanation of the project to Shipley served to seal the commissioner’s personal approval of it.

“I think it will be a big, or rather, substantial benefit to this community,” he said. “They have some major corporations working with them on this and a lot of significant developments should come out of it.”

Osceola County, he added, would be leading the way with the concept of this project.

“It will be a showplace, and something the rest of the nation will look at and follow,” Shipley said.

The commissioner also said any future developments within the county should also be held to some of the same criteria as the Destiny project.

“If the DCA and the commissioners hold their feet to the fire, any new developments need to be contributors to the community,” Shipley said. “That (Destiny) will be a city that is self-contained and it must be a contributor to the Osceola County tax base.”