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Dock rift moors in Tierra Verde

An eight-slip dock for the Estancia townhomes has won over the county, but not some neighbors.

By PAUL SWIDER
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TIERRA VERDE - About to break ground on upscale townhomes in this already upscale enclave, a Tampa developer is meeting resistance to an accompanying dock because neighbors fear harm to manatees and property values.

"It seems like developers always get things passed in their favor," said Cheryl Shay, the immediate neighbor to a 141-foot, eight-slip dock Pinellas County approved in December to accompany the eight townhomes of Estancia on the northwestern edge of Tierra Verde. "I can see why people hesitate to get involved in political things with the county."

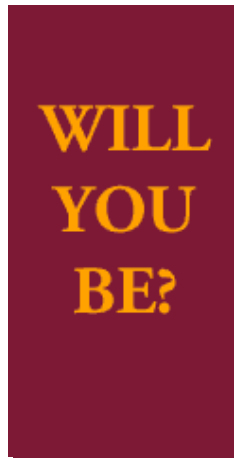
Shay said she fears that the dock will block her views and reduce her property value. She said she already hired an attorney to fight the developer to keep the building away from her home, but having won that battle, she thought the county would protect the waterway for her. Because Shay and others protested the dock, the county is reviewing its approval.

The developer, Ativas Development Group, says the new complex, with units starting at \$1.4-million, will greatly improve property values in the area because it is replacing an old motel that had been renting \$500-a-month apartments. The dock is being built the way it is not in defiance of regulation but to meet it.

"We do not do this by choice," said Lokesh Khusial, in charge of the project for waterfront specialist Ativas. "We'd much rather put this in closer, but we're doing this because of the sea grass."

Khusial said the county asked him to not build over a large bed of sea grass near the seawall of the Estancia property. That pushed the project farther into the busy Pass-a-Grille Channel, even though it would cost Ativas more money.

Shay said the Estancia dock would be almost 100 feet longer than her



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own, at which she no longer keeps a boat because of what she considers dangerous traffic in the channel. Another objector, John Adams, said the wide slips at the proposed dock will attract huge boats that will surely harm the manatees he watches swim in the area.

"You can't have big boats that close," he said. He particularly fears that the new owners will house powerful cigarette boats that already ply the waters and make it harder for him to moor his own small boat in the chop they stir. "I don't think they should have a dock there at all."

At a public hearing concerning the dock, county staffers told county commissioners that the dock proposal includes a 21-foot-length variance because of the grass beds but that there are other docks in the 100-foot range in the vicinity. The grass limitation curtailed a more creative inshore design for the already allowable eight slips. Furthermore, though the dock would be 35 feet longer than any other in the channel, it would not likely cause the navigation hazards that critics fear because the channel is some 2,000 feet wide at that point, staffers said. "We didn't feel this was unusual, compared to what's already permitted in the area," said Environmental Management Director Will Davis.

Shay told commissioners she'd rather the developer build within existing guidelines, which would still have allowed up to a 120-foot dock. At that dimension, Ativas might have only fit six slips.

"Eight boat slips for eight units seems like an excessive amount," Shay said, noting that the developer plans to sell the slips for \$75,000 each. She said there are already vacant slips in the area, so she fears that these will not sell and will then be rented, creating a traffic and parking problem near her home.

Khusial said townhome buyers are demanding slips and will likely back out of the four sales he has made so far if slips are not available. He said he wouldn't spend money to build the slips if he didn't think he could sell them. He also said he doesn't think there are grounds for the county to overturn its decision on the dock when the staff recommends in February whether commissioners should reconsider. "We're going by county guidelines," he said. "We're not out there to break the rules."

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