

"Speaking Out" piece published Oct 12, 2003

Partners with the community

Much has been written lately about the proposed road construction of SW 24th Avenue as it connects to SW 62nd Boulevard. More important is the conversation currently occurring with regard to the SW 24th Avenue connection east of 34th Street to Archer Road.

I, as a matter of public record, communicated to the Alachua County Commission that I would recommend, through the University of Florida's Master Plan amendment process, that right-of-way be given to the City of Gainesville/County of Alachua to provide the necessary land to connect SW 24th Avenue to Archer Road. The operative word here is "recommend."

The University of Florida has a very involved process of amending its Master Plan to change the land-use designation to accommodate such a road. In addition to this process, the University of Florida also has appointed a representative group to determine the full impact of this possible donation of land, as well as identify any compromise or mitigation points that might lessen the impact on the Natural Area Teaching Laboratory.

The SW 24th Avenue Focus Group already has met three times to discuss this issue and plans to meet throughout the fall, determining the type and scope of every potential impact as well as what mitigation may occur to reduce adverse impacts and/or improve other natural teaching areas on the campus. We believe this is an appropriate method for a university to critically examine any project's potential impact, as well as how we make corrections as necessary and improve processes in the future.

Once the 24th Avenue Focus Group has identified the issues and mitigation proposals, if any, they will then forward that information through me for further review by the four Master Plan amendment process committees, ultimately ending up in our Land Use and Facilities Planning Committee. It is through this deliberate process that the university communicates with campus constituencies.

The University of Florida in no way is hurrying this process. In fact, currently there is no funding for this road and we have been advised that it would be many years before it would be built.

The history of this road is somewhat long and reveals that the SW 24th connector is not a new idea. The SW 24th Avenue Road has its origin in the 1997 SW 20th Avenue charette. Those community meetings and dialogues led to the creation of the concept of a grid network of roads in the southwest area that would attract developers to build the "student village" in close proximity to the University of Florida. After much discussion and prioritization, it was felt that the SW 24th Avenue road development would be the best and first phase of this road development.

Subsequently in 1999, the University of Florida committed \$3.5 million for this construction from its campus development funds, as allowed by provisions of the university's Campus Master Plan. In the SW 20th charette, it was envisioned that SW 24th Avenue would extend eastward to Archer Road. Subsequently, the City and County commissions adopted that extension in the Gainesville Metropolitan Area Livable Communities Reinvestment Plan, which was passed in the year 2000.

Clearly, the improvement of SW 24th Avenue and its extension across the southern boundary of the campus is not a new issue, nor is it an issue that has just been surfaced by an individual developer.

It is because of this history and this commitment to make Gainesville a better place that the University of Florida is proposing the donation of this very small piece of land on the southernmost tip of the university property. While we do not wish to unsettle or upset this very pristine piece of property, we do believe that we must be community partners and assist where we can have the most impact.

We believe that the rationale for this road has been fully justified as an east-west connector, an access for a student village, a limiting factor on urban sprawl and, perhaps most importantly, an improvement in pedestrian and vehicle safety at one of our most dangerous intersections - Archer Road and SW 34th Street. It is for these reasons that I, as UF president, have supported the donation of this land, but with the full understanding we are committed to the Master Plan amendment process in a dialogue with our campus and our community and to protecting and replacing vital teaching and research areas on the campus.

Charles E. Young is president of the University of Florida.