

Article published Nov 5, 2003

Plans for four-lane SW 24th dumped The plan was scrapped because developer Clark Butler and the county couldn't agree.

A contract stalemate between the Alachua County Commission and developer Clark Butler led the board to scrap plans for a four-lane road just north of Butler Plaza.

To build SW 24th Avenue as a four-lane road, the county needed land for right of way and \$2.7 million from Butler to proceed with the \$11.2 million project, which also included constructing SW 38th Terrace to link SW 24th Avenue with SW 20th Avenue.

Butler has said he needed the wider roadway to move forward with plans for a major shopping center expansion.

Butler had until Tuesday to consent to terms approved by the County Commission in October requiring him to submit development plans for the expansion within six months and agreeing not to annex into the city of Gainesville for 10 years or pay a penalty. No such agreement came.

In a 3-2 vote, the County Commission will refocus efforts on building SW 24th Avenue as a two-lane road — something the board initially approved two years ago.

Commission Chairman Rodney Long cast the deciding vote siding with Penny Wheat and Mike Byerly who have long opposed the four-lane option because of the possibility of increased traffic in what had been expected to become a walkable, student village.

"I was hoping to hear from Mr. Butler today that we're going to move forward," Long said. "Time is moving on. Our staff is in limbo. We need to give our staff clear direction."

Designs for a two-lane segment between SW 34th Street and SW 43rd Street were about 90 percent complete when they were abandoned earlier this year in favor of the four-lane proposal supported by Butler.

Had the board not veered from its two-lane course, construction likely would have been under way by now, said Michael Fay, the county's acting director of public works. The county spent about \$200,000 on designs for a four-lane segment.

Butler ultimately agreed to put up \$2.7 million to help build SW 24th Avenue as a four-lane road. But he could not agree to terms in the contract requiring him not to annex his shopping centers into the city for 10 years or face a penalty of at least \$900,000, and also to start the anticipated yearlong process it will take to get the development approved.

Bob Reller, director of development for Butler Enterprises and the sole representative for Butler at Tuesday's meeting, characterized the potential repayment as asking

Butler to sign a "blank check."

"Who of you sitting up there would sign a blank check to any entity when you have no control of costs?" Reller asked.

Butler had requested that the county cap the repayment at \$885,000, the amount of money expected to be spent from county gas taxes to help finance the four-lane proposal. The County Commission declined the offer last week.

Commissioners Cynthia Chestnut and Lee Pinkoson held firm in support of the four-lane option, citing a bigger picture view that included the potential for creating an east-west corridor from The Oaks Mall to Hawthorne Road with the eventual extension of SW 16th Avenue east.

"A two-lane road is going to be over capacity no matter what goes in there," said Pinkoson, referring to the 100 acres owned by Butler that could be built out with superstores or apartments. "It is the responsibility of the commission to look at short-range and long-range views."

Wheat, Byerly and Long weren't buying the argument.

A traffic study sponsored by Butler and the Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization — the group made of all city and county commissioners charged with deciding how to spend state and federal road dollars — showed that SW 24th Avenue as a two-lane road could handle the additional traffic with commercial development as part of a proposed grid network of roads for the area.

And a yearlong planning process called "Plan East Gainesville," which was completed earlier this year, did not include an eastward extension of SW 16th Avenue.

"The recommendation was to improve our existing network of roads," Long said. "There was no recommendation to extend the southeast connector."

The decision reversal, however, does not mean the county won't pursue right of way across the southern edge of the University of Florida campus, a prospect opposed by some university faculty.

The county contends the land is still needed to complete a network of roads proposed several years ago to help alleviate traffic on SW 20th Avenue, SW 34th Street and Archer Road.

University officials are considering the issue, but it could be years — if ever — before a decision is made.

At the same time, the county may have to cut corners on the two-lane project in order to raise enough money to build the two-lane road without Butler's financial help. The two-lane project is expected to cost about \$7.35 million, which includes SW 38th Terrace. About \$3.2 million of that is coming from UF; another part is coming from a state grant.

Janine Young Sikes can be reached at 337-0327 or sikesj@gvillesun.com.