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TALKING BACK

The best plan for Gainesville

In a recent column, University of Florida President Charles Young praised the SW 20th Avenue charrette, an exhaustive community planning process, as the basis for his support of plans to four-lane SW 24th Avenue and extend it across UF's Natural Area Teaching Laboratory. Regrettably, Young neglected to mention that what he's endorsing is not the charrette plan.

The charrette plan was the result of the participation and endorsement of the Gainesville City Commission; the Alachua County Commission; the professional planning staffs of city, county, Florida Department of Transportation, and Regional Planning Council; and all citizen and professional advisory committees. The plan Young is championing is an alternative plan recently proposed by developer and UF benefactor Clark Butler, which conflicts with the intent of the original plan.

On the surface, this appears to be a simple choice between constructing SW 24th Avenue as either a two-lane or a four-lane. However, the known consequences of these two alternatives have been critically missing from The Sun's ongoing coverage of this issue.

SW 24th Avenue is now a dirt road, and Butler's land adjacent to this road is primarily zoned residential. If the road is two-laned, that land will be developed as student housing. Butler wishes to four-lane the road because this would allow him to rezone to commercial, and then expand Butler Plaza to twice its current size.

The size of the road will control how the area is developed. There are profound differences in the impact these two alternatives would have on the community.

First, since the area is adjacent to campus, the original plan called for the area to be developed as a student neighborhood. Students could easily walk, bike, or bus to campus. This would alleviate the expansion of student rental housing into the established neighborhoods surrounding UF and west of I-75, and also reduce traffic on the roads leading into downtown.

The two-lane/residential alternative would implement this plan. Butler's four-lane/commercial alternative would replace housing for several thousand students with the Butler Plaza expansion. This housing would then have to be located elsewhere in the community; it's not clear where.

Second, Butler has repeatedly stated (and The Sun has uncritically passed along) that his four-lane/commercial alternative would reduce traffic congestion in the area. This is untrue, and Butler's own traffic study clearly demonstrates this.

The two-lane/residential alternative would generate from 11,000 to 30,000 new car trips per day, depending upon the density of the housing. The four-lane/commercial alternative would generate 41,000 new car trips per day. In other words, a four-lane road would result in 11,000-30,000 more new car trips than a two-lane, yet a four-

lane is only able to carry 10,000 more cars than a two-lane.

The difference is actually much greater than the standard formulas of the traffic study suggest, however. The car trips for the four-lane/commercial alternative will approach the area from surrounding roads, many of which are already badly congested. The car trips for the two-lane/residential alternative, during peak drive times in particular, will primarily shuttle back and forth along a short, direct line between the neighborhood and campus.

In addition, the study's formulas don't take into account that the two-lane/residential alternative housing would consist almost entirely of students, many of whom don't own cars, and many more of whom would be walking, biking and busing rather than driving given the proximity to campus and the shortage of parking.

The upshot is that, even if SW 24th Avenue is envisioned to facilitate east-west traffic flow through Gainesville, highly questionable given the location, the two-lane/residential alternative would better serve this role than the four-lane/commercial alternative, given that the four-lane would generate additional congestion and require more traffic signals.

Lastly, there is a huge difference between the two alternatives in the cost to the public. Estimates of the cost of completing the entire proposed four-laning project conservatively start in the low \$30 millions. The two-lane project is less than half that. This is a terrible mismanagement of resources, given the large number of road

priorities elsewhere in the community that could be completed with that much money. Butler (and The Sun) refer to his funding offer of \$2.7 million as a "contribution," creating the false impression that this is a magnanimous, voluntary gesture that will save public money. In fact, Florida law requires that developments of this size pay for their share of new road projects if the development itself creates the need for the new roads. Butler's true share for the project could be determined if the necessary development review, called a Development of Regional Impact, were done, but Butler has thus far refused to initiate that process.

A 3-2 majority of the Alachua County Commission has committed itself blindly to Butler's plan, ignoring its own community charrette and bypassing all the normal studies, professional reviews and public involvement associated with a project this size. By the time the DRI ultimately reveals the true price tag, it will be too late to turn back, and the public will be left to clean up the mess.

Mike Byerly is an Alachua County Commissioner.
