

## Sarasota County to press ahead with review of hotel proposals on Siesta Key

*Timothy Fanning Sarasota, published 10:30 am Herald-Tribune Jan 27, 2021*



Siesta Key Beach in March. THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE

SIESTA KEY — Three developers want to fundamentally change long held intensity and density requirements on Siesta Key for their future hotel projects. Two want to drastically change height requirements on the barrier island.

On Tuesday, Sarasota County Commissioners approved the first phase of the process to potentially make that a reality by approving what's called an "out of cycle" review of the comprehensive plan, the county's long-range growth map.

This essentially fast-tracks a review of the county's long range planning documents because it is done outside of the county's typical review process.

The merits of the proposals — which would increase some development density, intensity and height restrictions on and off Siesta Key — will be discussed after public hearings and a staff analysis of the proposed hotels is completed.

### **High-rise hotel proposals would 'open the floodgates' on Siesta Key, opponents say**

The projects' opponents raised considerable objections over whether the county should consider an "out of cycle" review and asked that the county consider them together, given that all of the plans could have an outsized impact on the barrier islands.

While commissioners denied those requests, opponents did win a small concession: Commissioner Christian Ziegler pulled the proposals off the consent agenda — a section of the meeting typically reserved for items considered routine. Opponents feared commissioners would green light the accelerated reviews without first discussing it.

"The average person at home may be assuming that we're approving these projects," Ziegler said. "That is not the case. My vote, I want to make clear, is to get to the point where the county can make a decision."

Members of the Siesta Key Coalition, which represents several organizations on Siesta Key, argued any "out of cycle" review of the comprehensive plan should be a community-driven and county-generated process that involves lots of stakeholders. This process, they said, led to Siesta Key's 1999 growth management plan that helped set some of the very height, density and intensity restrictions that the proposals hope to be rid of.

Basically, by allowing developers to revise and customize the policies and regulations set forth by the county, for their purposes, will set a legal precedent for more than 30 acres of commercially zoned property on Siesta Key, they argued.

"Anything that is this important, and I think that it is very important, should follow the process, follow the ordinance and statute completely," said Catherine Luckner, the president of the Siesta Key Association. "This is a really big deal."

Sarasota County Attorney Rick Elbrecht noted that the county followed its procedure and that nothing mentioned by opponents is in conflict with the county's code.

Commissioner Nancy Detert said that she understood that this would be a controversial issue and noted that it would be given the proper attention it deserves. "These are going to be highly contentious with lots of public input and lots of conversation about the substance of the issue," Detert said. "But that's not what we're voting on today."

Commissioners stressed that they were only approving the first step of what is expected to be a long, collaborative process. Doing an "out of cycle" review will accommodate county staff time and its workload, Detert said.

Commission Chairman Alan Maio vowed it will be a transparent process. He noted the high interest in the projects and the public meetings to come. "A lack of transparency in this instance is just not accurate," Maio said. "It will be aired out publicly; I can assure you of that."

### **The three hotel proposals**

Gary Kompothecras wants to build a 120-room, seven-story hotel on Old Stickney Point on a little over 1 acre. He also plans to add a five-story, 203-space parking garage across the street.

On the edge of Siesta Village, Robert Anderson wants to build a five-story hotel over a three-story parking garage on about 1 acre.

Because their projects are so tall (over 80-feet), both Kompothecras and Anderson are asking for special exceptions to Siesta Key's 35-foot height limit on parcels zoned commercial general. They're also asking for special exemptions to build a hotel on their respected properties. The affect would allow Kompothecras to quadruple his allowable density for his project and similarly zoned land on Siesta Key.

Anderson is asking the county to throw out density restrictions for hotels countywide. This would allow him to increase density on his project by more than six and a half times. These changes, if approved by the county, would impact more than 30 acres of commercial zoned property on Siesta Key alone.

Mike Holderness, the owner of Siesta Key Beach Resort and Suites on 5311 Ocean Blvd in Siesta Village, wants to demolish one of its buildings, which would increase its capacity to 170 rooms. He now has 55 rooms. While the buildings would adhere to the 35-foot height regulation, Holderness is asking the county to adjust its rules for counting hotel rooms for residential density purposes. The changes would allow him to cram 170 rooms into his existing buildings.

Because there are only two ways on and off Siesta Key, residents fear that if the county were to approve these changes, it would exacerbate existing traffic issues.

### **'A real seat at the table'**

After the hearing, Mark Spiegel, the president of the Siesta Key Coalition, told the Herald-Tribune that while he was disappointed that the board agreed to move forward, he was happy to see some discussion on the issue. "Whichever way the discussion unfolds, the big thing is that transparency and the collective impact of all of these proposals need a much broader study," Spiegel said.

Spiegel said the Siesta Key Coalition and others will be proactive to ensure that the county understands the "collective impact and precedent-setting nature of these requests to the comp plan." But most importantly, "we want county planners to truly and appropriately engage with the stakeholders on Siesta Key."

"We are not anti-development; we want economic growth, but we also want to be proactively engaged in shaping how transient accommodations are developed and how they impact our barrier island," he said. "Give us a real seat at the table."