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Land swap would jeopardize Ag Reserve

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GL Homes wants to exchange 1,600 acres of land in the Indian Trail Groves area in northern Palm Beach County to build homes on 540 acres of preserved land in the Agriculture Reserve just west of Boca Raton. This proposed land swap is a bad idea.

Supporters claim the 1,600 acres is worth \$90 million and that the land, located in an area with limited access and no infrastructure, is of equal value to land in the Ag Reserve. We all know this is not true. Supporters also talk about a \$10 million boost in tax revenue from the new homes in the Ag Reserve. What they don't mention is the \$11.8 million in required services needed to accommodate the new residents.

It seems the commission is putting the cart before the horse. They appear focused on getting the 1,600 acres but have no meaningful idea what they would do with it.

Before jeopardizing the Ag Reserve's survival, the commissioners first need to take a breath and identify specific water projects, their timing, costs and benefits. Only then will they be in position to make an informed decision.

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The Palm Beach Post estimates GL Homes will earn an additional \$500 million building homes in the Ag Reserve, compared to the Indian Trail Groves site. It's a great deal for GL Homes, but the county appears to be getting very little in return. The developer cannot build on 1,068 acres of their north county parcel, 66% of the land it is offering the county. How much can it possibly be worth to the county?

If commissioners approve this dubious swap, it will set a precedent that opens the door for

further development on preserved land within the entire Ag Reserve. In a few years, the 13,000 acres of preserved land would be paved over.

This land swap comes at the expense of good public policy and revokes a promise commissioners made to the public to protect preserved land in Ag Reserve. It would be a breach of public trust and would have a detrimental impact on commission credibility.

Joe and Barbara O'Donnell own Irish Acres of Florida, a 60-acre horse farm in the Agriculture Reserve. They are members of Save Agriculture Reserve for Agriculture, a group of farms and agricultural businesses working to preserve the Ag Reserve.