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Port-related expansion seen aiding effort to get two large industry parks


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Twenty thousand new industrial jobs.

That's what could eventually come to Baker County if two mega-industrial park projects — one east of Macclenny and another west of Sanderson — become a reality.

County officials and a number of land developers have been pushing the state to understand Baker County's potential for industrial growth and approve a variance to allow more traffic on I-10 to accommodate it.

Lake Butler developer Avery Roberts of Roberts Land & Timber Investment Corp. just got some more ammunition for that effort in the form of an opinion from a New York City economist on the demand for distribution centers and logistical support industries west of Jacksonville.

Mr. Roberts hopes to build an industrial park on 1500 acres near the intersection of I-10 and US 90 in the west county. The idea is for what County Manager Joe Cone has called an "inland port," or a place where containers from the Jacksonville port can be stored before being trucked to other locations across the southeastern United States and Florida.

The opinion on the need for such facilities came from Doug Rubin, a senior economist with the maritime engineering and goods transportation consulting firm Moffat & Nichol in New York.

"Since much of the natural 'hinterland' or serving area for the movement of containers through JaxPort will be toward north and central Florida, the positioning of distribution support industries along I-10 and US 90 west of Jacksonville is geographically logical," states Mr. Rubin.

To back up his opinion, Mr. Rubin cites two million more containers expected to come out of Jacksonville as a result of the port's growth into the Asian shipping market.

He estimates those additional containers will require another 33 to 100 million square feet of warehouse space and distribution centers that will, in turn, need between 2800 and 8400 acres of land devoted to industrial development.

"Much of this development will and should occur west of Jacksonville towards Baker County," wrote Mr. Rubin.

Multiple projects, more jobs

In addition to Mr. Robert's Olustee project, another 1225-acre industrial park is being planned east of Macclenny by the Texas-based Jackson-Shaw Co. and the owner of the property, La Buena Farms Inc. owned by the Knabb family.

That project stretches from the eastern county line west to Macclenny and from US 90 and the railroad tracks south to I-10.

It's envisioned to include 710 acres of industrial development with six million square feet of floor space, 40 acres of commercial development and 475 acres of conservation lands. Plans also foresee a new I-10 interchange as a vital element to the project.

Furthermore, Mr. Rubin says almost three jobs, 2.85 to be exact, are created for every 2200 square feet of space in a distribution center.

At that rate, the Jackson-Shaw site, with six million square feet of industrial space, could translate into more than 7700 new jobs. Add that to the Olustee industrial park with roughly 10 million square feet of industrial space, and under the formula more than 20,000 new jobs could be on the way to Baker County.

The snag

A major hurdle to industrial development in Baker County has been the state's adopted level of service designations for I-10 here, which correlate to how much traffic is allowed on the road before developers are forced to pay for its improvement.

For instance, in Duval County, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) adopted an urban level of service (LOS) designation "D" for I-10, meaning heavier traffic on that stretch of interstate is allowed.

But from Baldwin to Baker County at CR 228, the state has adopted a rural LOS of "B," which means there are fewer homes in the area, and therefore, less traffic is permitted on that part of I-10.

However, massive industrial parks here would add much more traffic to I-10, presumably dropping the road's available capacity below the available capacity for a road designated a rural LOS B.

That triggers mitigation on the part of developers, most likely, the expense of adding more lanes to I-10 to maintain the rural LOS designation of B.

To solve the LOS problem, and make Baker County more attractive to industrial development, the county has requested that FDOT change the existing levels of service in Baker County from B and C to D.

The request was made by submitting a variance application to the state, which County Manager Joe Cone said was paid for by a number of developers interested in building here, including Jackson-Shaw and Mr. Roberts.

Mr. Cone said there are a number of reasons that FDOT's LOS designations for I-10 in Baker County should be changed.

First, he said, it seems rather arbitrary that the LOS jumps up from a D in Duval County to a B in the thin Nassau County strip through to CR 228, and then back down to a C between CR 228 and CR 125 in Glen before going back up to a B from Glen to the western county line.

"You can't add or take cars off the interstate because there's no exits," he said of the section between Baldwin and CR 228. "There's no reason to increase it at the county line."

If the LOS change is granted, and I-10 in Baker County has an adopted LOS of D, then when industrial growth adds more traffic to the interstate, traffic counts will match the adopted LOS and developers won't have to pay to widen the road.

"Typically, DOT's response is driven more so by traffic counts and roof tops," said Mr. Cone. "What we're saying is, 'Forget that. It's the economic development we're pursuing as a result of the port expansion...' It's going to happen. It's not a what if. The contracts have been signed."

Lobbying Tallahassee

To that end, Mr. Cone, county Planning Director Ed Preston and Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Darryl Register were in Tallahassee July 18 to lobby FDOT Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos on the LOS matter.

"It was a really good meeting — real good," said Mr. Cone. He said he was able to explain that there's a new dynamic at work in North Florida that's unlike development pressures in central and south Florida where it's usually neighboring municipalities competing for growth and new jobs.

"If we can't provide these (industrial) sites in north Florida, they're going to go to Georgia, but they are still going to use the Florida transportation system," Mr. Cone said.

He also argued to Ms. Kopelousos that new jobs in Baker County would mean that some of the roughly 5000 people that commute on I-10 to Jacksonville for work everyday could stay here.

"I told her, 'I trust you'll share this with the governor so the jobs don't go to Georgia,'" said Mr. Cone. "I think (now) DOT has seen the light."

FDOT response coming soon

The county submitted the variance application last January and the state is required to respond within 90 days.

However, since the 90-day deadline last April, the state has asked for two subsequent 30-day extensions, which the county granted.

But, Mr. Cone said he expects a response on the variance, either yes or no, by the end of the month and that no more extensions will be given. If FDOT denies the variance, the county can appeal the decision at an administrative hearing.

"It's a stroke of a pen and it's fixed," he said of the variance.

One condition of approval that FDOT has already shared with county officials will be a mechanism to ensure the additional traffic capacity, if granted, will not be used for more residential developments like the Cedar Creek DRI (development of regional impact). "They don't want to give us additional traffic on I-10 and have us give it to a DRI," said Mr. Cone.

How that would work is still under negotiation, but he said the county would likely be responsible for tracking projects and denying building permits for residential projects at the proposed industrial sites.

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