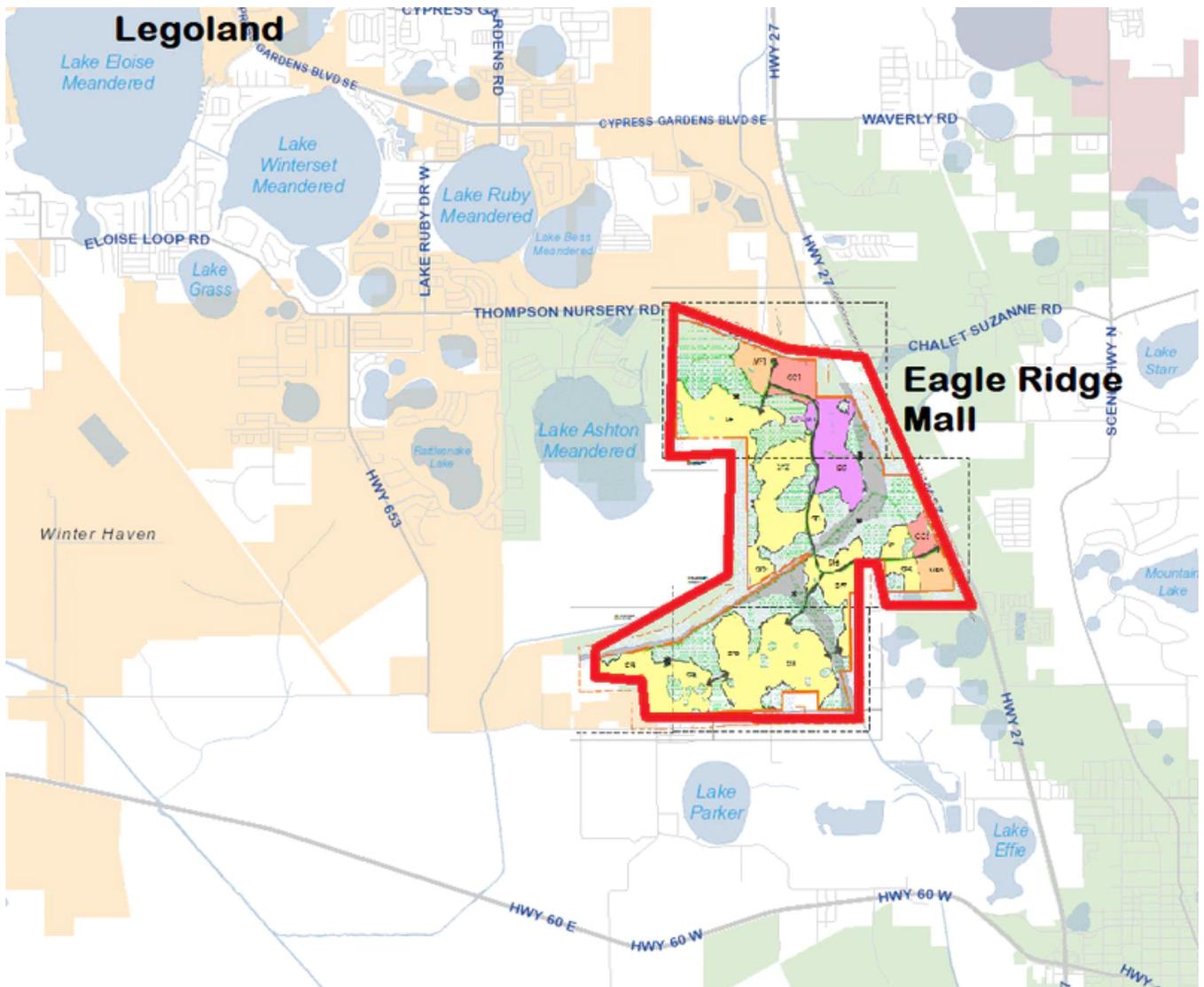




New “gamechanger” project in Lake Wales would double city’s population (updated)

By J. KYLE FOSTER
GROWTHSPOTTER | JUN 21, 2021



The developer is proposing a mixed-use planned development with up to 6,000 homes near Lake Ashton at the southwest corner of U.S. 27 and Thompson Nursery Road. (Stantec)

A sprawling mixed-use development won approval Tuesday from the Lake Wales Planning & Zoning Board for a master plan that could add 6,100 residential units and 725,000 square feet of commercial, office and assisted living space to the city.

“It’s a gamechanger,” Development Services Director Mark Bennett told **GrowthSpotter**. “That project and buildout would basically double the size of the city’s population.”

Lake Wales’ current population is 16,386. City Commissioners recently amended the comprehensive plan to allow for a new mixed-use zoning category that will let **The Winter Haven Corp.** project move forward, Bennett said. It was created “with this property in mind.”

The 1,842-acre community is located on Thompson Nursery Road at U.S. 27, across from **Preserve at Lake Ashton South**.

This would be the first Mixed-Use Planned Development in the City of Lake Wales. The master plan calls for apartments and commercial uses to be built along Thompson Nursery Road. The Institutional/Residential area (purple) would include a nursing home, assisted living facility and senior housing, as well as other public uses. (Stantec)

The projected build-out date is 2040, and when completed it would include up to 2,800 single-family detached homes, 550 single-family attached “paired villas”, 950 townhomes and 1,800 apartments. It also would have 400,000 square-feet of commercial space, 125,000 square feet of office space, 50,000 square feet for a nursing home, 20,000 square feet for a library, 40,000 square feet for an assisted living facility and 90,000 square feet for public/government facilities that may include a fire station, according to the master plan created by Tampa-based **Stantec Consulting Services**.

City Commissioners are scheduled to vote on the rezoning and master plan at their July 20 meeting.

The comprehensive plan amendment is part of Lake Wales' new development attitude – a more welcoming one, says Bennett. Along with streamlined planning and building approval processes, Lake Wales is working on downtown improvements and making the city more walkable, livable and enjoyable – a place people want to be. The planning and zoning board will consider assigning the new Planned Development Mixed Use zoning to the property and approving the Master Development Plan.

The attitude adjustment – a change of mindset about growth, industry and development – has taken place in the past year with new City Manager James Slaton, who took the job as interim in June and officially by unanimous City Commission approval in October after 17 years in Lake Wales leadership positions.

POLK COUNTY DEVELOPMENTS

Lake Wales moves planned single-family subdivisions forward with 601 lots

JUN 10, 2021 AT 4:07 PM

“The city has had pretty much an antigrowth reputation for a few years now,” Slaton told **GrowthSpotter**. “I recruited some talented staff and changed that philosophy. We are pro-growth. And we have all new leadership

in our development. They are lockstep.”

Slaton brought in Bennett, who worked for the city in the 90s and has been a Lake Wales resident since 1998. For the past 8 years, Bennett served as head of Haines City's day-to-day development and building department. Together, the two men revamped the city's customer service – with permitting as a priority.

“We are number one focused on customer service and efficiency,” Slaton said. “Being flexible number one. Caring about every customer walking in the front door and their project. We see the big picture. When they are successful, we are successful.”

To that end, they garnered approval from Land Development Services to allow staff to conduct administrative waivers for items such as parking and lot size adjustments to cut down on the time developers must wait for approvals.

“Where we had over a 30-day review period, has been reduced to about 3 days,” Slaton

D.R. Horton leads trio of builders in new Winter Haven mixed-use project
JUL 15, 2020 AT 3:40 PM

said. “We’re focused on reducing waste and increasing our efficiency.”

On the building side, Bennett said “previous staff had even encouraged and directed builders and developers to hire their own inspectors. That’s still expensive. We’re reducing timelines, and they don’t feel the need to hire their own inspectors.”

Developer David Waronker told **GrowthSpotter** he concurs with Bennett’s description. “Lake Wales was an area where developers and builders avoided due to the City being antidevelopment and very difficult to do business with,” he said. “Times have changed.”

Waronker’s Celebration-based **CBD Real Estate Investment LLC** has activity in Polk County with almost 4,000 residential lots planned on property the company owns, is buying or recently sold.

“CBD Real Estate Investment is now looking to make a large splash in the city and wants to develop over 500 single family lots in Lake Wales over the next two years,” Waronker said. “Many builders and developers have now entered the city with plans going through permitting and builders such as Lennar, Southern Homes, D.R. Horton and Richmond American Homes are ready to start new projects.”

POLK COUNTY DEVELOPMENTS

CBD Real Estate working on more than \$40 million of land deals in Polk County

MAR 30, 2021 AT 4:07 PM

With its central location in the state, rail and air access, healthcare and nearby colleges, the building difficulties have clearly been holding

the city back, Slaton said.

“We’re in a good location – literally in the middle of the state. U.S. 27, state route 60. Close enough to logistics center. Our land values and prices are such that they are attractive. I-4 is just up the road. Rail access and we have an airport – one of only 4 municipalities in the county,” Slaton said.

The work is starting to pay off. In May, 4 projects totaling 601 single-family units were heard by the Lake Wales planning and zoning board.

“There were only 30 single-family building permits last year, that will be quite a change,” Bennett said.

One of those 4 projects is 80 acres of vacant grove land located at the northeast corner of Buck Moore Road and Sunset Drive, just north of Sunset Pointe Subdivision owned by veteran developers Tom Chapman and Mike Galvin. This single-family planned development project has 349 lots. C

Chapman, who has owned the land for more than a decade, said it was the change in Lake Wales planning department that got him interested in finally developing the land.

“It totally influenced me,” Chapman told **GrowthSpotter**, “because national homebuilders said they wouldn’t build again in Lake Wales. And now they are ready to go.”

Chapman said after a meeting with Slaton, Bennett and Bill Nolen – head of the building division – he saw the difference compared with previous administrations. “They are committed to treating the developers right. They are really good guys – I was really impressed. Prior to them, I don’t think I would have developed this property. I would have continued this as a citrus grove until

POLK COUNTY DEVELOPMENTS

Aldi plans for new store in Lake Wales across from Eagle Ridge Mall

SEP 04, 2017 AT 11:51 AM

something changed.”

There isn’t a timeline yet for The Winter Haven Corp. project, Bennett said. “It’s a big project so it will take some time to build out.” This month’s planning and zoning is a big step toward that development, he said. The master plan anticipates an interconnected system of linear parks and trails throughout the community and for the streets to be city-owned.

“We don’t have any development plans at this point,” Bart Allen of Peterson & Myers told **GrowthSpotter**. Peterson & Myers is representing Winter Haven Corp. as land use attorneys.

“They’ve been holding this property for a long time, and it seemed like the right time to do something,” Allen said. The Winter Haven Corp. property has been under common ownership for 60 years, and the land was annexed into the City of Lake Wales in 1995.

“The owners are committed to the execution of a high-quality, large-scale development that respects the history and character of Lake Wales,” staff said in documents for the planning and zoning board, which meets at 5:30 p.m. today.

In addition to working with The Winter Haven Corp. on this huge project, the city’s own improvement projects are underway – as are those of the Community Redevelopment Agency and **Lake Wales Connected** – all working together. Improvements include creating a walkable downtown with parking and building improvements, buildings. There are 22 murals, with the most recently completed in February on Lincoln Avenue and the NW Community – a lion to signify the future of this area.

The Park Avenue Streetscape project is set to begin construction in October to rebuild Park Avenue between SR-17 (Scenic Hwy) and Wetmore Street. The plan envisions a two-way tree-lined street. Plans are for First Street to form an intersection here as well.

In three years, Lake Wales won't look the same, Slaton said. In 20 years, it will be completely different. The city's goals are lofty - attracting and keeping residents, beautifying, creating community and bringing in more jobs and industry.

For Bennett, he wants the result to include people staying in the community.

“My two kids now work in Tampa because that's where the jobs were. I'd like to get to that point where the kids go to college and they come back to Lake Wales.”

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