

Will a \$1.6 billion highway save Central Florida's Wekiva River or doom it?

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Wekiwa Springs State Park river. Credit: Wikimedia Commons. [Ebyabe](#) licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-[Share Alike 3.0 Unported license](#).

The new and extraordinary superhighway conceived as the savior of the imperiled Wekiva River has begun to reveal itself to environmentalists as the threat they had feared all along.

Completing the \$1.6 billion Wekiva Parkway was a marathon, spanning decades of tough talks and compromise.

Road builders and developers crusaded for the road to complete the 111-mile beltway around Orlando. Environmentalists and [rural residents](#) warned it would rip a destructive gash across the Wekiva and pump cookie-cutter housing into the region's most cherished and valuable wild place.

Today, the parkway, about 20 miles north of Orlando, stands as a tribute to environmental correctness. It features enormous wildlife underpasses, extensive fencing to hold black bears from harm's way, a city's worth of bat houses and a trio of bridges that soar over the river without touching its currents of spring water.

Despite the apparent accomplishment, a proposed and controversial development of nearly 2,000 homes is now stirring fears about what's in store for the fragile river and its surrounding landscape.

The parkway, completed in January, churns with a rising count of nearly 80,000 vehicles daily, outpacing pre-construction projections significantly.

Near one of its exits and eight miles west of the river is a 466-acre tract in Sorrento, a Lake County community of about 300 homes. Its owners are proposing to add 1,725 new homes and 350,000 square feet of commercial space, a development called Hillcrest.

Hillcrest's justification, according to its application for Lake County's

approval, is the "pressure for growth in this area" caused by the Wekiva Parkway.

Environmentalists aren't trying to stop the Hillcrest development, but they are trying to modify it. They regard the current proposal as a highly visible and precedent-setting attempt to dodge development safeguards embedded 20 years ago in the celebrated agreement authorizing parkway construction and river protections.

Audubon of Florida and Friends of the Wekiva River contend that Hillcrest's plans portend a flood of loosely regulated and badly done development that could put a death squeeze on the serpentine Wekiva and its adjoining springs and wetland forests.

"Death by a thousand cuts," said Friends of the Wekiva board member Cindy Newton.

To a remarkable degree, the Hillcrest controversy centers on [public trust](#) and echoes the angst arising over Split Oak Forest, which is southeast of Orlando's airport and targeted for an expressway.

Both call into question how much and for how long government officials can be entrusted with protecting natural lands, particularly those facing sprawling growth and the roads that come with it.

"Apparently the half life of a conservation area is about 20 years, when few elected officials remember why it was important to protect an important resource," said Clay Henderson, an environmental lawyer, writer and member of many public and private conservation organizations. "Here's an important state resource now open to the whims of local officials."

The scale and intensity of Hillcrest aren't remarkable for Lake County,

where the winds of development are at gale disruption.

Among Florida's fastest growing counties, Lake's population has nearly doubled in the past two decades, pushing to 390,000 residents and triggering backlash over ugly traffic and loss of charm.

"There's this perception that if the area behind your house is woods then it's always going to be woods," said Laura Jones Smith, a member of the Lake County's planning and zoning board for the past decade.

"Unfortunately, that's almost never the case."

Her concern for the Hillcrest proposal was that it initially lacked specifics and commitments. "That wasn't helping surrounding residents understand what to expect," Smith said.

Ultimately, Hillcrest's developers were able to craft their proposal to receive a recommendation for approval from the planning and zoning board. But when the development proposal advanced to county commissioners in April for initial consideration, it met a buzzsaw of opposition that continues today.

Some residents resent that commissioners are poised to betray their longstanding belief that Sorrento would grow with mom-and-pop shops and perhaps hundreds of homes rather than more than 1,700.

Sorrento and neighboring Mount Plymouth are still sleepy places along County Road 46, a state road prior to the parkway, where drivers slow somewhat. Back streets are skinny, paved and rutted dirt, passing horse pasture, a goat ranch, sinkholes, vacant and wooded lots, ranchettes, some tumbledown dwellings, tidy bits of suburbia and a few mini mansions.

"Hillcrest will bring cookie-cutter development and big box stores and

apartment buildings 60-feet tall," said Barbara Morris of Mount Plymouth, who is fiercely opposing the project on social media. "What we know of Mount Plymouth and Sorrento will be gone forever."

Billy Cates, owner of Merv's Mower at C.R. 46 in Sorrento, said he went to a developer's public meeting to learn what Hillcrest would inflict on already worsening traffic.

"They were just blowing smoke up everybody's skirts," Cates said. "I left."

Hillcrest's lawyer, Tara Tedrow, said in an interview that seeking permission for the development is not a popularity contest: it's about conforming to property rights. The Hillcrest proposal meets county rules for a rural area designated for moderate growth, she said.

"I can appreciate there might be some shock value to the type of proposal we have," Tedrow said at a public meeting. "There shouldn't be because it's exactly what was always contemplated and it's there by right today."

Parsing out that right goes to the heart of a second branch of opposition to Hillcrest.

Hillcrest backers say county rules already allow a lot of development on their property. They want to amend those permissions to facilitate what they portray as a higher-quality outcome.

But the Hillcrest proposal, according to the Friends of the Wekiva River and Audubon of Florida, would jettison protections specified in the Wekiva Parkway and Protection Act, which former Gov. Jeb Bush signed in June 2004.

As required by that law, cities and counties amended their blueprints for growth, called comprehensive plans, to include Wekiva protections.

The current Hillcrest proposal would require an amendment to Lake County's comprehensive plan.

Environmentalists say the Hillcrest amendment inappropriately would allow a higher home-per-acre density, a greater percentage of impervious surface, too little open space and insufficient protection for wetlands and the underlying geology that funnels rain water to the Wekiva's array of springs.

In April, Lake County commissioners, without addressing concerns of environmentalists, sent the proposed amendment for Hillcrest to state officials for a required review.

The Florida Department of Commerce responded last month that it found no issues of concern.

But the agency also appended lengthy comments from the Friends of the Wekiva River and from Audubon, as well as from the government agencies of the St. Johns River Water Management District and the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council.

In all, those comments cast the Hillcrest proposal as running afoul of Wekiva protections.

The water district urged revisions to better protect wetlands and springs geology. The planning council said it was "not able to recommend approval" for the development.

"There was an understanding by the people who were involved in the Wekiva Parkway and Protection Act that the solution is not just to build

a well-designed road," said Friends member Keith Schue, who was active in those deliberations.

"There was an understanding that that transportation corridor was going to bring more pressure for development and when that development comes, it needs to happen in a way that's also protective," Schue said.

Where the proposed project stands now is uncertain. Hillcrest's planning consultant, Alex Stringfellow of Winter Park, said the development venture has agreed to address concerns of the Friends group and Audubon, but that there is no timeline for releasing an amended proposal.

While not knowing what's coming, two county commissioners close to the issue say they are aligned with environmentalists.

"The key is to make sure that it's done the way that the Wekiva rules mandate that it be done," said Leslie Campione, whose district includes Sorrento.

Commissioner Sean Parks, also a member of the Central Florida Expressway Authority, which partnered with the Florida Department of Transportation to build the Wekiva Parkway, said of the environmental groups' stance: "That's what I'm looking for as well."

Still, many environmentalists consider it unfortunate that local politicians have ended up as the overseers of Wekiva protections.

Charles Lee of Audubon Florida said when the Wekiva Parkway and Protection Act was passed, there was an expectation that it would be enforced by a strong and capable Florida Department of Community Affairs. Instead, the agency was gutted in 2011 by former Gov. Rick Scott and lawmakers.

In Lake County, that means the fate of Hillcrest likely comes down to a local commission vote.

"If this development is approved by Lake County in the form it was submitted it is going to ring a bell that will be heard by every other potential developer or landowner in the Wekiva area of Lake County," Lee said.

"It will basically be a signal," Lee said, "that you've got a shot at old-timey development the way you used to do it and the criteria for the Wekiva are going to get a soft look."

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