



# THE NEWS-PRESS

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FORT MYERS

## Midtown discussion extended

Council to reconvene Aug. 17 for more talks on historic growth plan

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The biggest growth plan in Fort Myers history will have until the middle of August to answer public questions, City Council members decided Monday night after hours of public input.

The council voted 7-0 to delay a decision and will reconvene on Aug. 17.

The great haste came through loud and clear as the city's planning consultants urged the midtown plan be approved for state review, and a standing-room-only crowd pushed back.

Midtown, in its simplest terms, attempts to gin up city tax revenues by taking all the future density the city's utilities can support and giving it to developers, not as a bonus, but as a right. If successful, it could double the downtown area and tax base.

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## Fort Myers midtown planning area

A black boundary line shows the midtown planning area encompassing downtown Fort Myers south and the City of Palms Park neighborhood.



SOURCE: City of Fort Myers

GOOGLE MAPS / GOOGLE EARTH

# Midtown

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Midtown developers would no longer have to negotiate for bonus density, height and other extras through a legally binding planned development. Their projects can be approved by staff, without public hearings. And the contributions they used to make for parks, parking and affordable housing would only be required of 'super' developments seeking unlimited density.

With three property owners wholly in support of the plan known as midtown, and over 40 testifying against, many as affected parties, residents urged with one voice that the city hold more public workshops before voting midtown into law.

Through an overwhelming number of concerns, consistent themes emerged:

### More public input needed — this is 'a done deal'

Several residents noted that not only did the city hold only two public outreach meetings, the only people notified about them were in downtown or midtown.

"The comp plan and the smart code are the left hand and the right hand," resident Ann Pierce said. "You can't look at them separately."

Approving such a ginormous density increase in the comp plan, without having worked through the codes that would make it harmonious and controllable, is opening "Pandora's Box," Pierce and others said.

"The plan virtually says let the developers do anything and not give anything in return," resident George Mitchell said. "It feels that way to me."

Despite the city's information meetings, so generalized was the angst and confusion over midtown that two west Dunbar residents joined the speakers asking for public workshops for her community.

"They're looking at gentrification that will move us out," Dunbar's Crystal Johnson said. "People have not been properly informed about the future plans and the effect on their community."

As others elaborated, it became clear it wasn't density or height they feared, but the haste with which the city is pushing them through without discussion, understanding and more specific developer controls.

### Who will pay for parks, parking and workforce housing?

Downtown attorney Terry Nelson, who worked on a Miami-Dade County comp plan, said, "I hope you take your time. Density is not everyone's friend. It's a quality of life issue."

Nelson and others warned that giving away so much density without a bonus plan in place to pay for public amenities would leave taxpayers to pay for them.

Under the midtown plan, parking, parks and workforce housing would depend entirely on a community fund that developers can pay into if their projects require more density than the midtown increase allows. But with so much density being given away, how many will contribute, many asked.

What used to be negotiated in a PUD (planned unit development) process — the big-ticket items — is gone," Pierce said. "Developers don't have to provide their own parking. The burden will fall on taxpayers. Workforce housing — \$150,000 a unit — is not on the list."

Millennial Sara Burke noted \$18.4 million of downtown developments that have been built with tax increment rebates (taxpayer funds) that have resulted in housing she and her teacher husband can't afford. "There is a mismatch," Burke said. "Midtown is inappropriate."

### 'We want what you want'

Katy Eck, a millennial and Dean Park resident, tried to explain the lack of planning she and other residents feel midtown has had, especially with citywide public input.

"It's easy to listen to us and denounce us as antidevelopment kooks," Eck said. "We want development. The right kind."

### What's next

The public hearing will be continued to Aug. 17 to air further issues and clear up concerns.

If approved, midtown goes to the state where it will get an expedited review, agency by agency, each addressing any concerns. Their feedback will then come back to the city to incorporate, and a final public adoption hearing will be held.

If that hurdle is cleared, the public would have 31 days to file objections before the plan becomes law.

Mayor Randy Henderson and City Manager Saeed Kazemi promised more public workshops and input as the smart code that implements the plan is hammered out.

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