

Okatie Village doesn't exist yet, except on paper. But that doesn't stop me from wanting to live there. A mixed-use, transit-oriented, walkable community, situated between Beaufort and Hilton Head Island? Count me in.



This new town, Okatie Village, would be situated on the east side of the Okatie Highway, along SC 170 in the Cherry Point area. For those of you unfamiliar, that's down the road from Oldfield, kind of across from Malphrus Construction and Pearlstine Distributors.

The village would pretty much engulf Okatie Elementary School, which is a focal point in the community. And which is already full. But that's another story.

The new development would stretch down SC 170 for a long way, from the road that has my favorite road name of all time, Heffalump Road, all the way past Cherry Point Road, past that business park called Riverwalk and almost to Okatie Landing Road.

The Okatie Village project is made up of three PUDS (planned unit developments) called Okatie Marsh, Osprey Point and River Oaks. Osprey Point and River Oaks are relatively recent proposals. The Okatie Marsh PUD, though, has been in the works for a while now. There was a proposal for that project several years ago, but it did not move forward. The original plan veered too far from what Beaufort County officials had in mind for the area. So the land planners who work for the developer went back to the drawing board and re-imagined the whole thing.

Last year they came back with a new-and-improved Okatie Marsh plan. It was well received but needed just a little more tinkering. So the developer's planners planned some more. And the developer's lawyer sat down with the Development Agreement Subcommittee of the Land Management Committee of Beaufort County Council to talk about money.

There are three county councilmen, each of whom is a member of the Land Management Committee, on the Development Agreement Subcommittee. This subcommittee has one job, and one job only, and that is to make sure Beaufort County taxpayers don't get screwed.

The reason taxpayers could get screwed is that Planned Unit Developments are, according to some people, the devil's handiwork. There is a perception, on part of some of the more cynical members of the public, that the sole purpose of a developer in creating a PUD is to take a parcel of land and wrench from it as much value as possible. These demon-developers squeeze hundreds of houses onto tiny parcels and bushhog all the wax myrtles and turn the place into hell on earth. Then they make off in the middle of the night carrying bags of money, leaving us, the taxpayers, with the burden of paying for roads, schools, emergency medical services, fire services, solid waste disposal, law enforcement, correctional facilities, mosquito control, animal control, parks and recreation, and, at the end of everybody's list these days, libraries.

And actually, for a long time, that's kind of how it worked.

In the 1990s South Carolina lawmakers decided that PUDs were worth a try. The brave people of Beaufort County were the first in the state to take part in this grand social experiment. Now, as we near 2010, we have a growing population that will require hundreds of millions of dollars worth of services over the next few decades, and we don't have any mechanisms for generating the revenue needed to pay for those services. Oops.

Yes, we learned the hard way that large-scale residential development does not pay for itself. And because of this unpleasant historical precedent, our current Development Agreement Subcommittee was very mindful about the need to make developers pay their fair share. The hardest part, though, was deciding what a "fair share" is. So month after month, the subcommittee negotiated with the Okatie Marsh people until they came to an agreement about

all the money stuff.

Then things got weird.

Two more projects, Osprey Point and River Oaks, entered the planning pipeline. These PUDs were also on SC 170, right next to Okatie Marsh. If it were business as usual, the county would approve the three PUDs, each on its own merits. The developers of each would work separately on their own projects, each PUD a world unto itself. And because there would be no interconnectivity, each PUD would offload traffic onto SC 170.

That meant something as simple as a trip from your house to the grocery store would involve getting out onto the highway. SC 170 would be a mess.

But it wasn't business as usual. County officials asked the developers of Okatie Marsh to make a sacrifice. Would they postpone seeking approval for their own project - which was imminent, and likely --and work with the other two PUDs to integrate the three communities into one coherent, interconnected whole?

They agreed. The result, the Okatie Village Master Plan, represents an unprecedented cooperative effort between county planners and developers. This is not your father's PUD: a financial free-for-all, crammed with houses, one way in, one way out, with a guard at the gate.

This is PUD 2.0, and it pulls together all of our notions about the things that make up a healthy community: connectivity, creativity, public access, mixed commercial/residential use, diversity, sustainability, affordability, cradle-to-grave living, and respect for nature.

Okatie Village will not be perfect. Even though it was thoughtfully and strategically designed by a team of talented planners, there will be unforeseen impacts. There always are.

But what would be worse is to get more of the same old haphazard, piecemeal development. We already know what the consequences of that are.