



EDITORIAL

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All bets are off on DeBary horse track

Among the people who packed a special Saturday meeting of the DeBary City Council, some were paid to be there -- representing both sides of a controversial proposal to build a luxury hotel, horse track and gambling venue on 67 acres.

But most of the 600-plus people in the audience, wearing shirts of red or green to show how they stood on the issue, were DeBary residents. And many of them let the council know: They don't want this kind of development in their town.

City leaders listened, and a majority voted wisely. As proposed, the development -- once known as DeBary Downs, then "rebranded" as the DeBary Town Center and Equestrian Park -- had the potential to drastically change life in the "River City." The main attraction of the new development would have been its card room -- and the potential for expanded games of chance if pro-gambling forces succeed in battering down the legal barriers to full-fledged casinos in Florida.

The three City Council members -- Mayor George Coleman and Councilmen Norm Erickson and Lenny Marks -- voting against the plan voiced valid concerns with the project. It's inconsistent with the city's comprehensive plan, which calls for residential development of the proposed racetrack site. Developers wanted swift action from the council -- a likely response to experiences in other parts of the state, where public opposition mounted as the development-approval process moved forward. But Marks, Coleman and Erickson said they didn't appreciate the rush.

DeBary residents should be disturbed by the comments of Councilmen Jack Lenzen and Vice Mayor Chris Carson, who said they supported the race track because they feared the alternative. Lenzen raised the specter of what he dubbed "low-income housing" and that a gambling venue would be the "lesser of two evils."

Lenzen's suggestion that affordable housing is somehow "evil" deserves a sharp rebuttal. DeBary home prices are above average for Volusia County, but there's no evidence that adding multifamily residential units would hurt property values. Expanding the city's housing inventory is likely to attract young families to the area, diversifying the city's tax base and providing long-term economic benefits.

But if affordable housing is that disturbing to Lenzen and Carson, they should work with property owners to find an alternative use for that property -- one that's not associated with higher crime rates, increased family strife and other social ills that usually accompany expanded gambling. DeBary residents deserved better reasoning from their leaders. Fortunately, the majority of the council understood that.