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Buc-ee's drops plan for mega gas station in Orange County. 'Just not the right fit.'

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Byline: Tammy Grubb and Mark Schultz

Texas-based Buc-ee's has dropped plans for a mega gas station and commercial development in rural Orange County.

Stan Beard, director of real estate for Buc-ee's, notified the county of the company's decision in a letter to the Orange County Planning Department.

"Please accept this letter as notice of our decision to withdraw from consideration the above referenced rezoning application," Beard wrote in the Friday letter.

"The Orange County Board of Commissioners meeting on January 19th and your followup letter dated January 26th have lead (sic) us to conclude that Orange County is just not the right fit for Buc-ee's," he wrote.

The company wanted to build a 425,000-square-foot development on a 104-acre site at Interstates 85/40 near the Alamance County line. It would have been anchored by a 64,000-square-foot [Buc-ee's Travel Center](#) with 60 dual-sided gas pumps.

The county estimated that the \$40 million project could create 200 full-time jobs and generate up to \$1 million in local property and sales tax revenues in the first phase and more later, The News & Observer previously reported.

Jared Cates, one of the residents leading the opposition to the project, cheered the news that Buc-ee's was moving on. The next step is to build bridges with those who supported the project, he said, and take another look at the 2006 Efland small area plan.

"We really are poised in western Orange County to be an attractive place for development, and we don't have to say, oh, we've been abandoned for so long, whatever comes along, let's just take it," Cates said. "With the sewer and infrastructure in there, we're set up to bring something that could be innovative, something that could be a gateway to Orange County."

Cleanest bathrooms in America

Efland would have been the first North Carolina gas station for Buc-ee's, which has a fan following and has won awards for the [cleanest bathrooms in America](#). The project also could have added a hotel, office, retail and restaurants in the future.

Only the travel center was prohibited under the current zoning, which allows up to 2 million square feet of office and manufacturing land uses. The county already spent \$4 million in sales tax revenues to bring water and sewer to the site.

But after some community opposition, as well as support, the [Orange County commissioners voted 5-2 last month](#) to give Buc-ee's Ltd. officials a list of conditions before a possible county board vote Feb. 16.

Commissioners Chair Renee Price said she thanked Beard in a letter Friday morning for his company's interest in Orange County.

She was among those with concerns about the size of the project and the potential environmental effects of fuel spills, Price said. The project also was inconsistent with the county's small area plan for the Efland community, she said.

Other companies have opened or expanded in the nearby Buckhorn Economic Development District over the last several years, she said, including ABB, Morinaga and Medline, which is providing hundreds of jobs. The Buc-ee's site is a prime location on the highway and hopefully the county can be creative in attracting other businesses, she said.

"I think that's the type of business that will want to locate here, because we've established certain values here that we want," Price said. "We're sensitive about our environment and that includes people. We want walkable communities, we love our parks, our greenway systems. We want to attract travelers who want to come into Orange County, tourists, not just people traveling through, because we have a lot to offer."

Fewer gas pumps, smaller sign

The commissioners asked the company in a Jan. 19 conversation to consider a smaller travel center with fewer gas pumps, The N&O has reported. Commissioner Amy Fowler asked the company to consider a 24-foot sign that meets county rules, instead of the 80-foot sign it proposed, The N&O reported.

The commissioners also wanted a guarantee the station would open with 10 electric vehicle charging stations, and asked for more details about water usage, solar potential and what else could be built.

Commissioner Earl McKee appeared to be the lone commissioner in support of the project. He was still trying to learn more about the decision when reached by phone Friday, but he expressed dismay at the rumors and "outright lies" about the project.

While critics of the project had good points, he said, others “went over the top,” including with a claim that the Efland Volunteer Fire Department was taking a \$30,000 bribe from Buc-ee’s. Efland’s Fire Chief Kevin Brooks addressed the alleged bribe in a public hearing, noting that “it’s offensive to the men and women at the fire department to say that.”

That money represented the fire taxes that Buc-ee’s was going to pay, McKee said, but the biggest loss was the jobs, which would have paid \$15 an hour with three weeks paid vacation, insurance, a 401(k) program and paid breaks.

“The sad part about all of this is the number of people that I heard stand and say \$15 job with benefits ... is a dead-end job that only qualifies you to clean bathrooms,” McKee said. “That is privilege, and that is a really sad commentary on where we as a society have gotten to where work for a reasonable starting wage is no longer a respectable job.”

Racial divide on the project

McKee also had pointed out the racial divide reflected in residents who opposed and supported the project. Efland native Leo Allison was among Efland’s Black residents who spoke at nearly every hearing and advocated for the project in the community. They remained outnumbered, however, by the white residents in opposition.

On Friday, Allison said by phone that the commissioners had “missed a golden opportunity to add to our tax revenue” and bring in people who were going to spend money building and shopping in Orange County.

The environmental issues cited during the public hearings wouldn’t have been a problem, he said, because the county has strict rules to protect its water quality.

“I think Buc-ee’s is going to put that somewhere in North Carolina, and I can’t think of a better place than where we tried to get it in Orange County,” Allison said. “That spot is perfect for it, very little impact on the local community physically, just off the interstate, and I think that they could not have picked a better spot in North Carolina.”