

# Ebenezer Road development saga ends with no fanfare

Revised plan for subdivision receives approval

The City Council approved the Sweet Apple subdivision at its Aug. 21 meeting. The development was an updated version of a proposal that caused controversy a little over a year ago. joe parker/HERALD

MILTON, Ga. — When the Milton City Council approved the Sweet Apple subdivision at its Aug. 21 meeting, there was no public comment on the development. Councilmembers engaged in no debate and asked few questions of city staff.

With no real fanfare, the council approved the development unanimously, 5-0.

The approval ended one of the most controversial issues the city has faced

in its short history, one that brought about standing-room only meetings, a veto by Mayor Joe Lockwood, a recused councilmember commenting and so many motions councilmembers lost track.

First presented to the City Council in April 2016, developer Brightwater Homes sought to rezone 63 acres along Ebenezer Road from its current agriculture designation to a Community Unit Plan that would allow higher residential density. The rezoning would accommodate plans to place over 50 homes on lots smaller than the 1-acre minimum required under agriculture zoning. The Planning Commission had unanimously recommended denial a month earlier.

Many residents spoke against the proposal, saying the developer was cramming all of the homes into a small portion of the parcel because much of it was believed to be unbuildable.

Residents packed the council chambers for the April meeting. While most in attendance spoke in opposition to the development, others argued it would create a close-knit community and provide homes for empty-nesters.

Both sides would witness perhaps the city's most unusual council meeting, a session that lasted well over six hours.

One councilmember recused herself due to a conflict of interest, but spoke up during discussions on the issue. Two councilmembers appeared to be negotiating with the builders during the meeting, creating confusion among other council members as to what they were actually voting for or against.

After the confusion and deliberations ended, the council voted 4-2 approving the development.

But citing the unusual nature of the meeting, Mayor Joe Lockwood vetoed the decision just over a week later.

Lockwood issued a statement saying his veto had to do more with the "less

than optimal" procedures of the meeting than whether he was opposed to the development.

"My veto is much more focused on procedure and perception than on substance," Lockwood's statement said. "In the days since the April 25 meeting when this zoning was approved, the city has received multiple citizen complaints regarding the meeting procedure and, relatedly, perceptions that some participants at the meeting were given undue advantage."

The development was back before the council in late June, with nearly 100 residents packing the old City Hall and over 85 giving public comment.

The second meeting would also go beyond midnight, but the earlier approval was reversed 4-2, with council members Joe Longoria and Rick Mohrig switching their votes.

Longoria said casting a vote on the development was one the most difficult decisions he has had to make, and he had to do it twice. He said he chose to change his stance after Mayor Lockwood's veto allowed him time to better understand the details of the proposal, and the discrepancy between what the two zoning designations would allow.

Though it was presented by the same developer on the same parcel of land, the proposal approved at last Monday's meeting was far different from the plan that generated all the controversy a year ago.

The new Sweet Apple proposal called for 21 homes on 38.25 acres with a trail system and ample greenspace.

Longoria said he was pleased with the new development.

"In terms of what we passed last Monday, I thought that was a great example of how a developer can utilize property in a green way," he said. "There was a lot of thought put into where the homes, roads, nature areas and trails would

be, and I was happy with that. It was a different decision to not support the plan they had proposed last year, but I was very happy to see something that fit the current zoning."

Strongly opposed to the original 2016 plan, candidate for City Council Laura Bentley said she is also pleased with the end result of Sweet Apple.

"The Ebenezer Road rezoning was, in my opinion, was one of the most dangerous rezonings in the history of our city because it was going to allow less than 1-acre lots and a density bonus to the developer," she said. "Fifty homes in a rezoning versus 21 homes under AG-1 is a huge win for the community."

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