

Poinciana residents divided on becoming city

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Within the vast area proposed to be the new city of Poinciana, residents find themselves entrenched in a debate over projected city revenue and taxes and possible services the proposed city could provide, from developmental improvements to a governmental voice for the geographically disjointed community. The first of several presentations of a study that analyzed the feasibility of incorporating 52,611 acres in southwest Osceola County and northeast Polk County was held Saturday morning at Palmetto Elementary School. Representatives from the University of Central Florida, contracted by the Association of Poinciana Villages to conduct the study, explained to about 80 residents that the possible city of Poinciana could provide services equivalent to those in the city of Deltona, but likely didn't have the tax base to make it similar to the cities of Kissimmee or St. Cloud.

The detailed presentation explained both the financial possibilities of the city as well as the governmental system a committee of residents had proposed in a draft charter. During a question-and-answer session, many residents spoke against incorporation, attacking the methodology of the study and even the qualifications of UCF professors themselves.

To become a city, the state legislators representing the Poinciana area have to submit a bill proposing incorporation by early December, 90 days before the Legislature meets. If the bill is supported, residents within the proposed boundaries would vote on the issue in November 2010.

Many of the residents living in the retirement community of Solivita and those from the outlying communities north of the Poinciana villages are upset that they were included in the proposed city limits, which encompasses an estimated 74,099 residents. Opponents fear, and supporters of incorporation guess, that the majority of the 67,000 residents living in the Poinciana villages would vote for the new city should the issue ever reach the ballot. If that were the case, the outspoken opponents living in the outlying parts of the proposed city would be far outvoted.

They're hoping to convince their respective legislatures that the incorporation of Poinciana is a bad idea before it ever reaches general voters.

"They're trying to stop progress. Eventually it's going to become a city," Jose Claudio, a resident and volunteer with the elementary school who watched the presentation, said. "It benefits us, the people that live in this community. Villages between one and seven have nothing. We need to become a city so we can get all these benefits."

Keith Laytham, representing Poinciana Residents for Smart Change, said the group felt residents should decide their own fate. The vast majority of those living in the villages weren't yet as emotionally involved as the opponents to incorporation, he said.

"They're raising families at this point in time, hoping they can keep their jobs in many cases," he said. "So I don't think they've got the time to focus on this, that people like myself, a retiree, do, which again I think is the reason this thing should be allowed to take its natural course."

Many of those working families are Hispanic, as well, too shy to speak out or impeded by a language barrier, Fernando Valverde, an advocate for incorporation, said. The disparity between those for and against incorporation is class-oriented as well, he said.

During the question-and-answer portion of the presentation Saturday, a resident from outside the Poinciana villages questioned the possible future city's capacity to employ qualified administrators.

"They think we're cockroaches," a frustrated Valverde said.

Resident Lili Patrick said she joined the 14-member charter committee still undecided about whether incorporation was a good idea for Poinciana. Since the completion of the study, she said it would be good for residents at least, adding that she needed more information on how the new taxes would affect the business community.

Patrick said she understood why those living in the "outparcels" of Poinciana don't want incorporation.

"They already get everything, but we don't. They're already paying extra money to have what they want. I think that's why it's so divided," she said. "But what about the other 60,000 of us who would probably benefit?"

She said those who supported incorporation were the ones who were most involved in the community and could see the need for improvement.

"You can live in your little Solivita, but you've got to step out sometime," she said, adding that without drastic measures to improve Poinciana, "maybe this place is going to start looking like the Bronx ghetto."

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