

Special Hearts Farm for special people deserves support | Commentary



Special Hearts Farm co-founder Jennifer Elliott helps Cameron Meena and Deanna Blitch water the garden at The Special Hearts Farm. (Rich Pope, Orlando Sentinel)



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You only have to spend about five minutes with “special farmers” at the [Special Hearts Farm](#) to want them to succeed.

In a barn stall, a group of teens and young adults is gathered around a couple of goats. Their chore: deworming the animals.

The task isn’t anyone’s idea of fun. (Certainly not the goats.) Yet the special-needs teens couldn’t be happier. Because they’re working at a place created especially for them.

Special Hearts is a unique place where teens and adults with autism and developmental disabilities are welcomed with open arms, given paid jobs and told every day that they matter.

Yet the fate of this unique nonprofit will be on the line Tuesday.

That's when Orange County commissioners are slated to decide whether Special Hearts can move from its cramped, three-acre plot of land in Winter Garden to 18 acres in rural west Orange County where they can have a bigger farm, a better place to sell their wares and even housing for this special population. The housing is crucial, since some of the special-needs farmers are as old as 50 and live with their caretaking parents who worry about what happens when they pass away.

"That's every parent's worst nightmare," said farm co-founder Kathy Meena. "That there won't be a place for their kids after they are gone."

By this point in time, you might be thinking: *Well, God bless these people for what they are doing. Who could possibly object?*

Neighbors. Twice now.

Three years ago, Special Hearts acquired a piece of property near Zellwood where they hoped to fulfill their expansion dreams, only to have a neighboring farm raise objections.

That's when a local benefactor stepped in — Orlando businessman and philanthropist Craig Mateer, who read about the farm's plight and wanted to help. Mateer offered to swap land he owned — an unused equestrian center on even more land in rural West Orange County — for the less valuable land near Zellwood.

"It was a godsend," Meena said.

But then it was *déjà vu*. Neighbors began objecting to plans for the new plans as well, asking commissioners to deny the rezoning for the cottages that would allow residents to live on the land they work.

No matter where these "special farmers" tried to go, neighbors didn't want them.

This is where the story gets a little more complex. Because it would be easy to portray all of those objecting to the latest rezoning as run-of-the-mill NIMBY-ists — people who moved into a community and then decided they didn't want others to do the same.

There may be some of that. But some residents also have understandable concerns. They're residents of a designated "rural settlement" — full of rolling hills, horse farms and plant nurseries — who worry that, if the county allows this multi-person housing, it will pave the way for more development.

I understand the fear. It's the story of Orange County — one development leading to another, especially when cheap land and big profits are available.

But the members of Orange County's planning and zoning board listened to the residents of Lake Avalon Rural Settlement. So did the owners of Special Hearts. Planners recommended 19 conditions that make it clear this would be a one-time rezoning for a one-of-a-kind project. Staffers said the conditions and on-the-record statements will ensure other developers can't use this approval as justification to build apartments or nursing homes down the road. That should be good enough.

After all, this project won't involve massive housing. We're talking about five cottages with six residents apiece, tucked deep inside a property the size of Lake Eola Park.

And the residents won't generate any kind of daily traffic congestion. "These kids are never going to drive," Meena said.

The organization does plan to hold events, including farmers' markets where the residents can sell the eggs they harvest and crafts they create. But it's hard for me to get terribly worked up about the potential evils of a farmers' market.

And quite simply, there is a greater good here. The world is full of so much ugly news. This is a story of hope and love.



Deanna Blich holds a sign made and sold at Special Hearts Farm. (Rich Pope, Orlando Sentinel)

These “special farmers” don’t even harvest any of the animals they raise. The pot-bellied pigs will never become bacon. The turkeys they chase will never end up as anyone’s Thanksgiving dinner.

“Oh no,” Meena said. “Death does *not* go over well here. We call ourselves farm-to-no-table.”

This is about giving an underserved segment of society a chance to work and live and thrive in a place they can’t find anywhere else.

Planning board member David Boers — a resident of the rural Gotha community who understands the desire for rural protections — put it best when he said: “There’s not enough people in the world doing these kinds of things.”

The planning board unanimously recommended the rezoning last month. County commissioners should follow suit next week.

District 1 Commissioner Nicole Wilson said she wants the farm to succeed, but also to assure residents that this rezoning won’t lead to big development. County attorneys say this deal will do just that. So it’s time to make it happen.

In fact, while I was driving back from the farm Monday, I found myself thinking about something said by Dr. Matt Walter, the large-animal vet who was helping the teens deworm the goats that morning.

Walter could obviously do his job at the farm a lot quicker if he wasn’t slowing down to answer all their questions. But he’s happy to do so — to do whatever it takes to make them feel valued, saying: “They need all the advantages and help they can get.”

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