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About four years ago, when my wife Julie and I were approaching retirement, we decided to allow our property on State Road 16 to be developed. We had purchased close to 600 acres in 1994, with the purpose of enjoying recreational activities such as quail hunting and fishing no more than a one-hour's drive from Jacksonville. We groomed the property for wildlife and operated a quail hunting preserve for more than 10 years.

As the surrounding open land underwent extensive development, we set out to find a developer who would agree to make our land and its magnificent oak trees the highlight of any project. Out of three national and local finalists who presented formal proposals, Southeast Development Partners clearly stood above the others in their understanding of what we wanted to do with our land. They were committed to building a development around the trees, lakes, and wetlands and avoiding the destruction of this wonderful habitat. In fact, the proposed development conserves essentially all of the grand oaks, impacts less than two acres of wetlands, and enhances the lakes for recreation and fishing.

In our opinion, this is "development done right." My business career in healthcare proved to me that the best possible outcomes of any endeavor required a "win-win" approach. In the case of Grand Oaks, the environment, the oaks, and the wildlife benefit from the rigorous land planning and the preservation of habitat, and the residents of St. Johns County also benefit in several ways.

Most importantly, Southeast Development Partners have a plan to significantly aid traffic congestion in the area with a proposed widening of almost 5 miles of State Road 16. Grand Oaks will also increase the tax base in this region, helping to bring necessary funds to the county for future priority projects.

All of these factors add up to make Grand Oaks a win-win for St. Johns County. Julie and I are in complete support of Southeast Development Partners and their plans to create a community that will bring a number of positive benefits to the region, while preserving much of the unique attributes of the beautiful land that we hold so dear.

Dennis Smith