



## Travel center approved for SR 207

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One of the state's most popular truck stop/travel centers is adding a new store in St. Johns County.

Busy Bee, which has 18 locations in Florida and Georgia, received approval Tuesday by the County Commission to open a store off State Road 207, just west of Interstate 95.

Despite the prospect of a retail store of 35,000 to 40,000 square feet in close proximity to several neighborhoods, there was little debate or public comment at Tuesday's hearing.

That's in stark contrast to the public response to a proposed Buc-ee's at the World Golf Village exit off I-95. That would be a 52,600-square-foot convenience store with 104 gas pumps.

While that project hasn't gone before the Commission because the owner there isn't seeking a change in zoning or land use or seeking a variance, it has regularly drawn the ire of area residents. Many have spoken out against the project at Commission and Planning and Zoning meetings during public comment periods — mostly citing traffic/safety concerns and incompatibility with the surrounding neighborhoods.

The county is still waiting for a traffic study, but the company has submitted a commercial construction plan for staff review.

In an interview with The Record, Busy Bee president and CEO Elizabeth Johnson Waring said the advantage of her company's S.R. 207 project is that there aren't as many traffic concerns. (It will also be a smaller store, although it will include semitrailer fuel pumps, which Buc-ee's would not.)

"I think what they (Buc-ee's) are used to in Texas is having a lot of access and a lot of room for people to get on and off (the highways)," Waring said. "For our area, it's going to be an easier place because it's just right off the interstate. You're not in the congestion of the neighborhood."

But there is one traffic issue for the Busy Bee: a traffic light that would allow vehicles, including semitrailers that Busy Bee serves, to turn left onto S.R. 207 so they could return to the interstate.

Commissioners said they could only support the Busy Bee if there was a signal added. The proposed site for the signal is at Deerpark Boulevard, which is directly across from Cypress Links Boulevard and could also serve Cypress Lakes residents.

Busy Bee ownership says it wants the light as badly as the county and has agreed to pay for it. However, the light must be approved by the Florida Department of Transportation because it would be on a state road.

Waring said the light was “essential” to the project.

County Administrator Michael Wanchick said that based on traffic counts in the area, the county had “a high level of confidence” that a light would be added.

Other than that issue, the commissioners expressed great excitement for the project, which would add about 100 jobs by the time the Busy Bee opens.

“The Busy Bee name has a huge positive following,” Commissioner Jeb Smith said. “It is a very clean facility and is not a stereotypical truck stop. I’m excited that you want to do business here.”

Waring said the company has considered St. Johns County as a potential location for years. She and her late brother Jay Johnson, the company’s former president who died in 2015, were even close to a deal for the S.R. 207 location much earlier.

Opening a store here became an increased priority when she moved to the county about six years ago with her husband, Lucas.

“Because we live here, we wanted to have a Busy Bee here,” she said. “We love it and there’s such a great potential for growth.”

- In other business Tuesday, the Commission voted 3-2, with Smith and Paul Waldron dissenting, to approve a 150-home development off of U.S. 1 North called North Creek.

The approval came despite the objections of several residents of Eagle Creek, which is directly south of the 73-acre Planned Unit Development. The residents were concerned about traffic and that the increased density would exacerbate flooding issues.