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## Polk County Commission Approves Mulberry CRA

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BARTOW | County commissioners voted unanimously Tuesday to approve a request by Mulberry officials to allow the city to create a community redevelopment area to help to reverse community blight.

Tuesday's hearing was required under a county ordinance that requires commission review of new CRAs.

Mulberry officials formally proposed the CRA in May and have been discussing the proposal with county officials, who have been concerned about the size of the CRA boundaries and its potential impact on future county property tax revenue.

Commissioners tabled Mulberry's request in September to allow commissioners more time for further discussion of that issue, which was primarily a financial one.

Once a CRA is created, any property taxes collected from any increase in the appraised value of taxable property within the boundary goes to the CRA rather than to the county general fund.

Mulberry City Manager Rick Johnson said they have revised the map to reduce the acreage from 2,258 acres to 1,676 acres in response to the county's concerns.

During all of the meetings, Mulberry officials argued for approval of the CRA as way to find a way to finance improvements to reverse the community's long-term decline.

"Mulberry is the poster child for the type of city CRAs were created for," Johnson said, echoing conclusions in the city's blight study, which read "It was observed in throughout the Mulberry CRA that there are a substantial number of deteriorating structures, and vacant and underutilized properties, which are contributing to conditions not supportive of redevelopment and community standards."

County Commissioner George Lindsey, who had been the lead critic of the CRA's size, moved for approval even though he said he still had some concerns.

"They need all the help they can get," he said.

He questioned why a large industrial area was included, arguing it appeared to be fully developed already.

Johnson said there are vacant parcels and abandoned buildings that could be redeveloped.

Lindsey did attach conditions to the approval, which included annual reporting, limits on the amount of the CRA proceeds that can be spent on administrative expenses and a 30-year time limit on the life of the CRA.

The next step will be the presentation of a development plan for the CRA.

Johnson said he expects to present that report for consideration by early February.

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