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nt to be identified, es- daphne_duret@pbpost.com

Activists critical of elephant center plan

Groups seek a public hearing on the proposal.

By HENRY A. STEPHENS
TCPalm.com

FELLSMERE — Animal-rights groups Friday called for a public hearing on the National Elephant Center's breeding and retirement ranch, proposed for 225 acres south of the C-54 Canal.

In a statement Friday, the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County referred to the center going before the St. Lucie County Commission last year when they were looking at a 326-acre area on the Okeechobee County border. St. Lucie approved the project, but added conditions that sent center officials looking elsewhere.

"While the residents, government officials, humane and environmental groups of St. Lucie County were afforded a public forum when the keeping of elephants was proposed for their community, the residents of Indian River County have had no opportunity for open discourse or to explore the issues brought up in St. Lucie County," the Humane Society statement said.

City Community Development Director Mark Mathes said he reviewed and approved the National Elephant Center's proposed site plan Friday, one day after project consultant David Tom submitted it.

And the St. Johns River Water Management District staff issued a surface-water permit Aug. 30 for the project after a two-month review.

The Sunshine State Wildlife Conservation LLC, formed in September 2010, is leasing the land from Fellsmere Joint Venture and renting it out to the National Elephant Center.

"Despite the enormity of the elephant center plan, it is being rammed through the permit process under a shroud of secrecy that should be raising a huge red flag," Don Anthony, spokesman for the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida, said in a statement.

But Ed Garland, spokesman for the water district's Palm Bay office, said the center's application was "pretty routine stuff," with drinking water ponds for the animals.

"Elephants don't have anything to do with what we reviewed. It was just like any other surface-water management issue," Garland said.

Rick Barongi, chairman of the National Elephant Center and director of the Houston Zoo, said the center is intended to provide space for retired zoo elephants, training for solitary males and breeding for babies bound for zoos.

The Humane Society's position, its statement said, was that such activities "are more suitable and humane" in an animal's natural habitat.

The National Elephant Center is a collaborative effort with the support of 73 zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

The center won't be open to the public. But City Manager Jason Nunemaker said he stressed allowing access for school groups on an educational visit.

Barongi said he hopes to begin construction later this year and bring in the first eight or nine elephants sometime in 2012. The center could eventually house "up to 40" elephants, he said.

Nunemaker said he hopes to incorporate the center into the city's greenway, so hikers and bicyclists could see elephants at the end of their trek.



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Sep 26, 2026

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