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FARMWORKERS AT MEETING, BUT ISSUE TAKEN OFF AGENDA

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About 150 farmworkers and their children packed the Metro- Dade County Commission chambers Thursday afternoon to have their say about a controversial proposal to relocate farmworkers while permanent housing is built for them in South Dade. But they didn't get a chance to speak. Even though the issue was on the agenda of the Community and Economic Development Agriculture Committee, County Manager Joaquin Avino pulled the item at the last minute, said Commissioner Larry Hawkins.

Farmworkers felt snubbed. "They should be ashamed of themselves," said Fernando "Chappy" Pro, a board member of the Everglades Community Association, which sponsored the plan to have farmworkers relocate to Royal Colonial Trailer Park in Leisure City. "They knew what was going on. It isn't fair."

Avino could not be reached for comment Friday. Hawkins, who chairs the committee, said the item was pulled because the county manager was discussing an alternative to the ECA plan with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is funding the multimillion dollar project. He said he learned that the item had been pulled Thursday morning.

More than \$20 million in federal funds has been allocated through the USDA to build 257 homes for the farmworkers at 19400 SW 376th St. But if the work doesn't begin by Oct. 1, the USDA could lose the money. In the last month, controversy has arisen around where to relocate the farmworkers -- who now live in a trailer park southeast of Florida City -- while the permanent housing is under construction. ECA proposed to move 250 trailers to Royal Colonial Trailer Park in Leisure City -- a plan approved by the County Commissioners four months ago.

The project stalled when residents of Naranja and Princeton complained to Hawkins at a town meeting April 18. Since then, Hawkins has been searching for an alternative to the Royal Colonial site. Hawkins said he is looking out for both the interests of the residents of Naranja and the farmworkers. "We are talking about making sure that the grant comes down and possibly doing it another way so that it doesn't disrupt the farmworker neighborhood or anyone else's neighborhood," Hawkins said.

Steve Kirk, executive director of the ECA, said the county is sticking its nose where it doesn't belong. "We're the ones that are going to be holding the mortgage," Kirk said. "They have no right to negotiate our loan." Jan Shadburn, Florida's director of USDA's Farmer's Home Administration, which is overseeing the project, said he is meeting with county and ECA officials Thursday to discuss alternative plans and the funding deadline. Despite the recent controversy, Shadburn said he has hope that the plan's problems will be resolved. "We have the money committed," Shadburn said. "We have approved the plan and what we are waiting for is for the parties to work out the lease so we can begin construction."