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PLAN TO PUT FARMWORKERS IN TRAILER PARK DEFENDED

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Proponents of a plan to provide permanent housing for South Dade farmworkers are not backing down from a key part that has come under fire in the last week. The housing plan developed by the Everglades Community Association includes the purchase of a trailer park in Leisure City that would provide temporary housing for about 1,500 farmworkers.

Metro Commissioner Larry Hawkins is blocking the purchase, but ECA board members are standing their ground. "We're ready for a fight," said Steve Kirk, executive director of the ECA. The housing plan involves buying the Royal Colonial Trailer Park, 14850 SW 280th St., to house residents of about 250 trailers that would be moved from the Everglades Farmworker Center. Crews could then begin construction of permanent housing at the center, 19400 SW 376th St.

Even though the Metro Commission unanimously approved the purchase of the Royal Colonial three months ago, Hawkins changed his mind after residents of Naranja Lakes complained during a town hall meeting two weeks ago. After the meeting, Hawkins asked county administrators to consider other options. Proposed alternatives included buying another site or extending the completion of the project so farmworkers could live at the center during construction of the permanent housing.

Kirk said neither plan is practical. Searching for another site would cause a two-year delay in the completion of the project, he said. And even if farmworkers could live on site during construction, the ECA would be able to accommodate no more than 150 families over a three-year period. After taking a second look at several South Dade trailer parks, county administrators agreed. "Royal Colonial appears to be the best option," said Diana Gonzalez, director of the county's Department of Development and Facilities Management.

Despite the recommendation, Hawkins said he has identified an alternative site. "I think we will be able to accommodate the ECA as well as the neighbors in the Princeton Naranja area," he said. Hawkins did not identify the site, but he did say it was not one that was previously reviewed.