

# County officials development approval lacking public input

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(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Hendry County, Florida may become the nation's monkey breeding capital since officials approved the development of two new facilities—SoFlo Ag and Panther Tracts—that would raise thousands of macaques destined to be sold to the biomedical research industry for vivisection (animal testing). County officials have called these approvals routine but one major aspect was missing from them: public input.

Residents weren't given a chance to weigh in on the subject—setting a dangerous precedent for locals and their ecosystem. Instead, Hendry County officials approved the permits for the facilities in backrooms with developers, without any public notice whatsoever, violating Florida's open government law—commonly referred to as the “Sunshine Law.”

This law was put in place to protect people's right to know what is going on with their local and state government in their hometown. Under this law, residents should have been notified of the permit applications for these facilities and residents should have been able to address the probable drop in property values, due to these new unlikely neighbors.

Having one of these facilities in your backyard doesn't only come with knowing that animals are being bred under cruel and inhumane conditions, but also with the potential for these animals to carry diseases like Ebola, Herpes B, tuberculosis, and parasites. Monkeys have escaped from breeding and testing facilities in the past. Long-tailed macaques were responsible for an outbreak of the “Reston” strain of the [Ebola virus](#) at a Virginia research facility and a tuberculosis outbreak.

The potentially biohazardous waste produced at these facilities also has the potential to devastate the local environment, including the fragile ecosystem of the Big Cypress National Preserve—which is adjacent to the Panther Tracts facility.

The [Animal Legal Defense Fund](#) (ALDF), the nation's premier legal advocacy organization for animals, has a vested interest in exposing animal use and abuse that is being deliberately hidden from the public. The traditional lack of transparency in animal breeding, slaughtering, and animal byproduct-centric businesses can have devastating ramifications on public health, worker's rights, and animal welfare, to name a few.

Earlier this year Animal Legal Defense Fund overturned Idaho's “[Ag-Gag](#)” law, which criminalized undercover investigations that document animal welfare, worker safety, and food safety violations at an “agricultural production facility,” thus “gagging” speech that is critical of industrial agriculture, including speech that advances significant public interests in protecting safety.

In an age where transparency is touted by government officials, backdoor policymaking, such as the improper approvals of the SoFlo Ag and Panther Tracts facilities cannot be tolerated.

By granting permits for these facilities to operate without first notifying residents and holding a public hearing to consider necessary zoning changes, Hendry County violated state law. It would be a dangerous precedent to set to allow these illegal permits to stand. ALDF is challenging the approval of these facilities in court and demanding that their permits be revoked until a public hearing can be held on the issue—because the victims of these facilities won't just be the monkeys bred for the sole purpose of experimentation, but local families, businesses, communities and the democratic system that holds it all together.

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