

‘Why did you lie to us?’: Florida community outraged after golf course they live on was quietly sold 2 years ago — and now the new owners are facing a \$70K tax penalty

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Residents of a golf community in Pinellas County, Florida, are fighting to retain their property rights after discovering the land was sold two years ago without anyone's knowledge.

After an investigation by Tampa Bay's News Channel 8, it was revealed that the Tarpon Woods golf community — which was previously owned by the charity, Jan Stephenson's Crossroads Foundation — had been quietly sold for \$1.65 million in 2022 to a limited liability company (LLC).

The sale was so hush-hush, in fact, that even Pinellas County Property Appraiser, Mike Twitty, noted that it was never recorded, claiming he never received a transfer of property form.

"I just first found out about the unrecorded deed about a week ago," he told the news outlet. He added that, while new owners don't have to record a deed, property owners are still required to complete a "change of ownership" form.

Now, the new owners, a company called Tarpon Woods Properties LLC, are still getting a property tax exemption even though it's no longer owned by a non-profit organization, Twitty said.

"It's a 50% penalty on that tax lien plus 15% annually," he explained. "It's a stiff penalty, and it's designed to be such." He added that the tax lien is now at more than \$70,000.

While a spokesperson for the new owners claims they will remedy "any mistake that may have been made related to the deed," the future of the property is still in question.

How property is transferred in Florida

The spokesperson for Tarpon Woods Properties LLC said they want to turn the golf course into a wetlands preserve, but concerned residents are worried about the year-long construction, any future residential properties, and their home values.

"It's going to completely disrupt and destroy the ecosystem [and] increase demand on our infrastructure that's already over-taxed," said resident Bill Nobles, organizer of Save Tarpon Woods. "Why did you lie to us? Why did you go this route?"

Under Florida law, the transfer of a non-homestead property (meaning: a property that isn't the primary residence of the owner) means:

- The sale or foreclosure of the property;
- The agreed-upon legal or beneficial title in equity to another person; or
- A transfer of control, or of ownership of more than 50%, of the legal entity that previously owned it when it was last assessed

In the Tarpon Woods situation, a bill of sale isn't enough for a property to legally change hands. *
Either the previous owners must file a change of ownership form with the Florida Department of Revenue, or a new deed must be recorded with the county's clerk of the court.

In a follow up by News Channel 8, Twitty, the Pinellas County Property Appraiser, said the correct paperwork still needed to be filed. Because the forms are still outstanding, the new owners are now facing a tax lien for back taxes due and penalties.

The process of changing property ownership from one entity to another — and researching who owns what properties — differs from state to state. However, deed histories are public record and are available to research with the appropriate office.

To look into the ownership history of a certain property, start with the office in your county responsible for real estate transactions. Some of the offices who handle real estate may include the recorder, assessor, register of deeds, clerk of courts, or land records office.

What recourse do the residents have?

Because real estate is a matter of public record and zoning laws, any proposed changes to a property must go before a local government agency for an open hearing.

After holding a public developer's meeting within the community, Tarpon Woods Properties LLC are now waiting for the next step in the process, which involves approval for the wetlands preserve.

Homeowners in the area claim that, if the alleged development plans move forward, they could lose between 20% and 30% of their property values. However, the spokesperson for the new owners said their main focus is on the wetlands mitigation bank plan.

Before a final decision is made on the fate of the property, it must go through several rounds of public hearings through the Southwest Florida Water Management District, the Pinellas County Development Review Committee, and ultimately the county commission.

In a situation like this, where residents are concerned about neighborhood changes that could impact their properties, it's important to go to the appropriate agency meetings to voice an opinion on future developments.

Just as property records are public records, agency meeting agendas must be provided to the public before a meeting is held.

An agenda will outline when a property issue will be discussed, and outline how those affected can have their say before a final decision is made.

