

News Press May 14, 2006

Editorial: Environment

Now's the time to stand up to developers County needs to push for counter studies to oppose special interests and conserve land vital to water resources.

People who care about protecting Lee County's water resources and what's left of its open spaces, wetlands and wildlife, take notice.

A 96,000-acre swath of land in southeast Lee, designated almost 20 years ago as a place for low-density development and the protection of water, is about to get chewed up by special interests. That's unless county officials plan carefully for the use and preservation of the area's natural resources.

The hope for good management of the density reduction/groundwater resource area, or DR/GR, is for Lee County to assemble a comprehensive study of the area's value, including not only the mining and subterranean water resources already being evaluated, but also surface water, wetlands and other natural habitats.

On a separate but closely related front, the county needs to push for – and maybe actually perform itself - an independent environmental assessment of the proposed new I-75 interchange at Coconut Road in Estero.

Commissioners will be talking about these issues Tuesday. Commissioners Bob Janes and Ray Judah are pushing for wider and deeper environmental evaluations in the DR/GR before transportation and development decisions are made.

They deserve public support. As environmentalists have been urging, it's essential to understand the area's importance as wildlife habitat, as well as its possible role in future water supplies for the growing county, before deciding what to do about roads, housing and mining.

PUBLIC INTEREST

Special interests eager to open the DR/GR to heavy development have pushed through a study of the interchange proposal, funded by \$10 million in federal transportation money. Environmental impacts are supposed to be taken into account, but they will not be given adequate weight without an environmental study concurrent with, but independent of, the transportation study. We need something more than the usual cursory after-the-fact nod toward the environment when looking at the impacts of this interchange. A new I-75 interchange is needed in south county, but where would it do the most good for traffic and the least harm to the environment?

So far, the interchange issue has been driven by money and development. People need to get behind those officials who are speaking out for the public interest, including Sanibel Mayor Carla Johnston.

THREATS

The DR/GR is hardly pristine, although some parts of it would make excellent preservation land, especially linked to land protected in the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed.

Thousands of acres have used for agriculture and rock mining. The latter is creating an expanding moonscape to fuel the ravenous demand here and outside the county for fill

material. The county is trying to get a handle on the impacts and future of rock mining to figure out how that should be regulated.

Development is creeping into the DR/GR despite the current low-density zoning of one unit per 10 acres. A study done for Agripartners, the politically connected owners of 4 square miles of wetlands in the DR/GR opposite the proposed Coconut interchange, has said up to 8,300 homes could be built there. Current zoning would allow about 250. The partnership has said it has no plans for development, but the study indicates the direction developers might try to take despite the area's natural value.

The DR/GR offers a great chance to manage development wisely while protecting water and other natural resources for the public. But it is fiercely coveted by developers.

The county needs to take firm control, for the public's sake.

IF YOU GO

- . What: Lee County commission meeting
- . Where: Old courthouse, Main and Monroe streets, downtown Fort Myers .
- . When: 9:30 a.m. Tuesday

CONTACT THEM

Lee County commissioners

- . Bob Janes, District 1, 335-2224
- . Doug St. Cerny, District 2, 335-2227
- . Ray Judah, District 3, 335-2223
- . Tammy Hall, District 4, 335-2226
- . John Albion, District 5, 335-2225

Write them at P.O. Box 398, Ft. Myers, FL 33902-0398, or fax them at: 335-2143 or e-mail them via their Web site