

COMMENTARY

Florida county officials try to eliminate public comment on development

As Lee County planners propose blocking the public from having any say over communities' future, residents laugh them to scorn.

CRAIG PITTMAN SEPTEMBER 17, 2026 12:05 AM



 Pine Island is a coastal area in Lee County that retains a rural flavor and lots of natural beauty, but developers want to change that. (Photo by Nadine Slimak)

“Reader’s Digest” always claimed [laughter was the best medicine](#). In Lee County, laughter has also become a resistance tactic for people who want to keep their community free of ugly sprawl.

“There were no boos when a cadre of Lee County planners presented their re-write of an

element of the Lee Plan to a packed house at the North Fort Myers Rec Center on August 25,” the [Fort Myers News Press](#) reported recently. “But there was laughter.”

Every time county planners touted the superiority of the proposed pro-developer changes in the plan, the crowd laughed them to scorn.

The comic capper came when one planner acknowledged that developers would no longer be required to hold a public hearing when they want to change part of the plan. Any such hearing would be voluntary.

“That statement was apparently the one the crowd found most humorous,” the paper reported.

One county planner invoked the compassionate spirit of the late, great Dolly Parton, and begged the crowd, “Y’all be nice!”

But I think even Dolly would be [hee-hawing like Minnie Pearl](#) at the absurdities that the Lee planners put forward.

The excuse for changing a system that’s been in place for 40 years is “streamlining” the process. That’s for the benefit of developers who want to change things. There was no mention of protecting the people who want to save their slice of paradise.

Eliminating public input on land-use changes has been [a major goal for developers](#) in recent years. That’s especially true in places like Lee County, where [rampant growth set the stage for Hurricane Ian’s mayhem](#) and a lot of residents are still trying to rebuild.

“It’s so ridiculous,” said Nadine Slimak, a public relations expert from Bokeelia who has emerged as a leader in fighting back against the Lee County move. “They were going to do this and not tell anybody about it.”

This week, the cackling crowd got the last laugh.

Saving ‘real Florida’

Lee County, I’m sorry to tell you, is named for traitorous Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and not for someone cool like, say, famed ecdysiast [Gypsy Rose Lee](#).

Despite that, it’s a marvelously diverse place with beaches, farms, forests, swamps, orchards, ranches, mobile home parks, and fishing villages. In other words, it’s full of lots of things that developers would love to replace with towering condos and sprawling subdivisions.



📷 Nadine Slimak via subject

The Lee County Commission has long supported such uglification. That's why, in the 1970s, [a trio of retired CIA agents living on Sanibel were inspired to launch an incorporation drive](#) for the island. They wanted to block the county from allowing condos to wall off their waterfront.

Three county commissioners who opposed the Sanibel incorporation were later busted for, among other things, [taking a boat ride with prostitutes](#), courtesy of the county's sewer contractor.

In 1985, then-Gov. [Bob Graham prodded the Legislature into passing the Growth Management Act](#). The law required new growth to pay for itself, demanded that the roads, sewers, and water supply be adequate for new residents, and gave citizens tremendous power to object to development.

Developers hated it.

But [Wayne Daltry](#), who used to be Lee County's smart growth coordinator when Lee County believed in smart growth, pointed out that allowing for public involvement just made sense.

"People would like to have an opportunity to have a word about the things that are going to affect their community, their traffic, and their property values," Daltry told me.

In 2011, a pro-development, anti-regulation Legislature, pushed by former Gov. Rick Scott, repealed the law and all but shut down the state agency that [served as a watchdog on growth](#).

Fifteen years after removal of the guardrails on growth, our 23 million residents are facing [increasingly clogged](#) roads, [overloaded sewer systems](#) that give way under the strain, worsening [water shortages](#), and other signs of major malfunctions.

Only the places with strong local growth plans have been preserved.

In Lee County, there are separate growth plans for 17 communities throughout the region. They are (deep breath!) Bayshore, Boca Grande, Buckingham, Caloosahatchee Shores, Olga, Captiva, Greater Pine Island, Lehigh Acres, North Captiva, Northeast Lee County, Alva, North Olga, North Fort Myers, Page Park, San Carlos Island, Southeast Lee County, and Tice.

"The different community plans developed because some areas of Lee County were still 'real Florida,'" recalled [Jim Beaver, who worked for 20 years for the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council](#). "If the Lee County government had been left without those community



📷 Wayne Daltry via subject



📷 Jim Beever via Facebook

plans, then these places would be gone – turned into bare earth and then covered with gated communities.”

Thanks to the community plans, places like Alva could remain quiet and rural, while Pine Island could stay a small coastal settlement where blue crabbers live on the water, he explained.

There were plenty of bad examples people wanted to avoid. For instance, there was [Lehigh Acres](#), where the people who laid out the lots were entirely focused on selling houses to suckers from up North, so they didn’t worry about water and sewer lines, schools, or fire and police stations.



📷 Mike Greenwell via Lee County



📷 David Mulicka via Lee County

Not everyone saw Lehigh Acres as an example to avoid. The [late Lee County Commissioner Mike Greenwell](#), a would-be developer who represented bucolic Alva, wanted to [turn it into bustling, busy Alva](#). And he didn’t like those community plans that blocked the way.

On April 1, 2025 – no fooling! – Greenwell suggested the county planning staff streamline its development rules. Another commissioner, [demolition expert David Mulicka](#), seconded the motion to demolish them.

But nobody bothered to tell the residents. They didn’t know until it showed up in a meeting notice late last month.

The notice “was done in such a way that nobody knew what it was,” said environmental activist [Sue Dahod of Bokeelia](#).

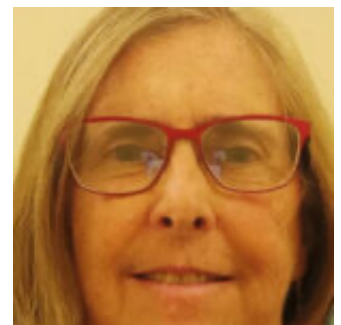
But they figured it out pretty fast.

Where the laughter started

Giving the public plenty of notice about possible growth changes has another benefit, Daltry said. It spares the commissioners from “having their fannies fried by outraged constituents who feel ambushed,” he told me.

Sure enough, when residents of those 17 communities found out what their leaders were proposing, they were ready to barbecue their [badonkadonks](#).

What outraged them even more was that the staff seemed to be rushing it through before the



📷 Sue Dahod via subject

area's snowbirds could flock back to the region and raise objections, Dahod told me.

Slimak said she learned about what was going on from fellow board members of the [Greater Pine Island Civic Association](#), who are always keeping a sharp eye out for suspicious-looking public notices. Word spread fast via Facebook, emails, and phone calls, she said.

More than 100 people showed up for what was billed as an “informational” meeting with the planning staff. That’s when the derisive laughter started, as if the auditorium were filled with clones of [Nelson Muntz from “The Simpsons”](#) pointing and going, “HAW-haw!”

The laughter was particularly loud when they learned the changes would cut the requirement for developers to hold public meetings about their proposals.

“If anything, they should go out of their way to ensure public participation,” Slimak said.

Two business days and a weekend

The next meeting, for an advisory committee to the commission, was scheduled to take place in less than a week. That left little time for opponents to mobilize.

Slimak got busy pulling together an alliance. She contacted members of advocacy groups for the 17 communities and pieced together an umbrella group called [the Lee Communities Coalition](#).

“She put it together in two business days and a weekend,” said an admiring Dahod.

At the advisory committee meeting, the opponents once again packed the meeting room. They had a lot to say, too.

“I’m not anti-growth,” [one North Fort Myers resident told the committee members](#). “I literally make my living selling real estate, but what I am against is stripping protections from established communities, calling it streamlining, and betting the public won’t read 334 pages. Bad bet – we read it.”

She contended the protections for the 17 communities “aren’t red tape. They’re the fence between responsible growth and somebody else’s very profitable bad idea.”

Unfortunately, the best the opponents could do with the advisory committee was to draw a split vote of four to two. One of the committee members even claimed their vote didn’t mean anything. Slimak and others walked out in disgust.

But the tide was starting to turn.

Resetting the clock

The website Slimak pulled together for the new Lee Communities Coalition included a clock ticking down how much time was left before the county commission vote. Originally, the vote was scheduled to take place Wednesday.

But on Sept. 2, the 17 communities got a reprieve. [Commissioner Kevin Ruane](#) – a former Sanibel mayor – made a motion to [postpone the vote to Oct. 7](#).

“I have 300-odd pages I need to get caught up on,” he said. “Probably at least 30 constituents want to sit down and talk to me. I don’t know how I can get it all done by the 16th. It’s too much information, too many changes, and too many constituents to get to.”



📷 Kevin Ruane via his campaign website

Although they welcomed the reprieve, some people I spoke to were suspicious of the motive behind the delay.

Sometimes when local government officials are facing a room full of clamoring constituents, they beat a hasty retreat until everyone’s distracted by other events. Then they can pull a fast one.

But when the commissioners convened again this week, they voted to postpone the growth plan changes indefinitely. No more racing the clock.

Instead, they told their planning staff to come up with a new, non-rushed timeline for revisions and to include a robust public outreach so no one will think it’s being rammed down their throats.

“The community is as enraged as I’ve ever heard them before, so I don’t want anyone to feel like we’re rushing it,” Ruane said.

And the commissioner who seconded his motion? Mulicka, the same guy who’d seconded the motion to launch the rewrite in the first place.

“I never in a million years would have thought that meant deleting the names of the communities out of the plan altogether,” Mulicka said.

Not every commissioner was a fan of delaying the decision.

Commission [Chairman Cecil Pendergrass](#) told the planning staff that he thought they’d done a good job with the direction the commissioners had given them.

But he said the commissioners need to “get the true facts out there, not what somebody’s sharing on Facebook or something. ... We provide the true narrative, not the false narrative.”

Kneel for Neal?

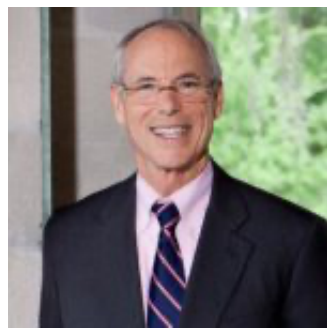
No matter who I talked to about this, both on and off the record, I asked them the same questions: Who was behind this? Who benefits?

I heard a lot of theories, with fingers pointing this way and that.

Then one person suggested I look back at [a story the Fort Myers News Press](#) ran in June. The headline said, “Major bucks flow into Lee County Commission campaigns, over \$500K so far.”



📷 Cecil Pendergrass via LinkedIn



📷 Developer Pat Neal via his website

About halfway through the story there’s this: “[Billionaire developer Pat Neal](#) has his fingerprints all over Lee County commission races.”

Neal is a former state legislator who’s built 25,000 homes in Florida, most of them in Manatee and Sarasota counties. He’s now a billionaire, according to [Forbes magazine](#).

He’s become a major campaign contributor to a lot of politicians, and so he usually gets what he wants. For instance, he wanted the 2025 Legislature to block local governments from making any changes in their development codes that would better protect people from hurricane damage. [With Senate Bill 180](#), he got what he wanted.

But sometimes when Neal tries to make a county kneel before him, he gets a kick in the teeth.

That happened last year when he tried to get Manatee County to approve a 440-home development on land that had flooded during one of the 2024 hurricanes. The commissioners [voted unanimously to tell Neal no](#).

If Neal is indeed behind what’s been going on in Lee County, sounds like he’s not getting what he wants there, either.

What’s that? You’re asking if he’ll wise up? You think he’ll give up trying to force the county to change its plan so it meets his requirements despite what the residents want? Don’t make me laugh!