

LOCAL

Packed house pans proposed Lee County growth management plan changes



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There were no boos when a cadre of Lee County planners presented their re-write of an element of the LeePlan to a packed house at the North Fort Myers Rec Center on August 25.

But there was laughter.

Planner Becky Sweigert quoted the late Dolly Parton asking the well over 100 concerned residents jammed into a meeting room for patience.

“Ya’ll be nice,” she entreated.

No questions accepted at county presentation

The planners did not engage with the residents, choosing instead to lay out their proposed changes and accept written questions. They assured residents they would have opportunities to offer their opinions when county committees consider the proposals, but county commissioners could vote to send the changes to Tallahassee for review within a few weeks.

Sweigert attempted to “clarify” a few things she said she saw on social media. The proposed changes have been a topic generating much mention – and anger.

Sweigert pointed out that the meeting that packed the rec center was not required by the LeePlan process. She insisted the protections currently in the community plans would remain, but in different parts of the voluminous plan.

“Several elements in the plan include the protections you guys say we’re losing,” she said. “You might want to look at the entirety of the plan.”

The staff report with the overview of proposed changes is 16 pages.

The attachment that explains the details of the changes is 130 pages plus attached maps.

Crowd well-behaved, but clearly distrustful

Brandon Dunn, long-range planning manager for the county, praised the expertise and experience of the planning staff. He said the Future Land Use Element of the plan, the piece proposed for amendment, governs the “orderly and balanced development of Lee County.”

That statement was one of a few that drew laughter from the crowd.

“The intent is to make it clearer and simpler to use without increasing development in Lee County,” he insisted.

The changes would also be reflected in the Land Development Code, the set of rules that implements the LeePlan. Planner Adam Mendez said that there is much duplicate language within the code, as well as sections that are obsolete and no longer enforceable because of changes in state law.

Mendez said that the changes allow no development density increases and retain the protections built into the community plans while improving the predictability and consistency of the plan.

More laughter.

Sweigert also explained that a required public meeting that developers must currently host when they propose changes in community plan areas will now be voluntary.

That statement was apparently the one the crowd found most humorous. The ensuing laughter caused Sweigert to repeat her earlier Parton-esque admonishment.

As they did when the county recently sent a slate of changes affecting southeast Lee residents clearly feel blind-sided.

When Lee County was adding specific plans for 17 communities to its Comprehensive Growth Management Plan between 1989 and 2011 commissioners told residents it did so because of the unique and special characteristics each of the communities possesses.

Those community plans are listed for elimination. Planners claim the protections built into those plans would remain, but they would be moved into more

appropriate subject matter sections of the plan.

The county says it posted a notice on its web site – actually it was on the Department of Community Development page and it said nothing about the elimination of the plans or about the subject of the meeting - on August 14 and to have run a legal ad in the News-Press on August 17.

The plans on the chopping block are currently in place for 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.

John Gardner has been a member of the North Fort Myers Community Planning Panel – charged with overseeing the community plan there – for 20 years. He was set up to collect signatures from members of the other panels during the meeting, but was disappointed.

“A few,” he said. “Not enough.”

“Nobody knew about it,” Gardner said. “The community has lost its voice with this.”

“If you’re not at the table you’re on the menu,” he continued. “They didn’t engage with any of the 17 panels. They say they’re not changing, but they are.”

In 2025, after a spate of hurricanes, the Florida Legislature made it illegal for local governments such as Lee County to make any land use changes that make it more difficult for developers to get what they want.

It is little wonder that locals are questioning – and challenging – the proposed changes.

The new law prohibits local governments that were declared disaster areas – including Lee County - from making changes that are “more restrictive” or “burdensome” on developers looking to re-build.

The prohibition runs through 2027.

Changes not required - update not due until 2028

The county is required to update its Comprehensive Growth Management Plan – the LeePlan – every seven years. That Evaluation and Appraisal Report was last done in 2021, so it is not due until 2028 – after the state prohibition ends.

Changes being proposed through a county commission edict to remove “inefficiencies and redundancies” would see the elimination of 17 different community plans. Those plans, created mostly through community action, were created and added to the county plan between 1989 and 2011.

Those plans are currently in place for 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.

Dunn observed that some of the plans date back to a time when fewer than 400,000 residents lived in Lee County. There are now almost 850,000.

The proposal comes on the heels of commission approval of a slate of amendments for Southeast Lee that commissioners say are designed to allow limited commercial development to serve thousands of residential units already approved.

County planners and commissioners say they will reduce drive time for residents of those already-approved new homes and will not impact the extensive habitat

and other protected lands in the area. However virtually every environmental organization in south Florida opposes them

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expected to receive the reviews of state agencies within 30 days, after which they will address the reviews and consider changes or making them part of the plan.

Residents can still weigh in

The new changes will be reviewed by the Local Planning Agency on August 31. They will also go to the Executive Regulatory Oversight Committee and the Land Development Code Advisory Committee.

All three committees are appointed by county commissioners. All three are dominated by development interests.

EROC will meet at 2 p.m. on Wednesday September 9. The LDCAC will meet at 8:30 a.m. on Friday September 11.

Commissioners could consider the amendments as soon as September 16.

“Fast-tracked,” offered one attendee.

Do you have an opinion about this topic? Write a letter to the editor and send it to letters@naplesnews.com and/or mailbag@news-press.com. Keep it to 250 words or fewer and include your contact info. Have more to say: Send a guest column of no more than 600 words.

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