

LOCAL

'People are not happy': Citizens push back on Lee planning overhaul



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Key Points

Lee County residents are concerned about proposed changes to the county's comprehensive plan and land development code.

Citizens argue the changes remove protections for unique communities like Captiva, Pine Island, and Alva.

Many residents feel the proposed "one-size-fits-all" approach ignores the distinct character and needs of their communities.

After Lee County announced what many residents described as a quiet and too-fast overhaul of its master development plan, [citizens packed public meetings](#) to

defend their communities, arguing that local protections and opportunities for public input [are at risk](#).

When the seven-member Local Planning Agency met Aug. 31, residents lined up to voice their concerns, much as [they had six days earlier](#) at a public information meeting. The board reviews proposed changes to the county's Comprehensive Plan, known as the Lee Plan, and other land-use regulations before making recommendations to the Lee County Commission. In this case, members voted 4-2 to recommend the changes move forward to commissioners.

Two days later, on Sept. 2, county commissioners [tapped the brakes](#), postponing a public hearing on transmitting the amendment. The proposal, which would eliminate all 17 community plans, was rescheduled from Sept. 16 to Oct. 7.

Here is some of what residents told the Local Planning Agency on Aug. 31, edited for length and clarity.

Kynse Leigh Agles, North Fort MyersI'm not anti-growth. 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 ... Farms, ranches, barrier islands, working waterfronts, wetlands and rural communities have always had different limitations and different needs. Those protections aren't red tape. They're the fence between responsible growth and somebody else's very profitable bad idea. Lee County can choose to do better. We're told removing these protections shouldn't significantly affect future development, then why remove them?

'People are not happy with the process'

Daniel Becker The general takeaway from the Aug. 25th forum and today's meeting is people are not happy with the process and the attempt of the staff to

gaslight the audience. It seems ... that citizens are an inconvenience to the process of amending the Lee plan and land development code ... It should be slowed down and taken back through citizen workshops which you can do voluntarily by statute. All that people are asking for is to not have regulations force-fed to them and to have an equal voice on how their community is managed. Is that too much to ask of the bureaucrats and elected representatives that are supposed to work for the people?

Jay Brown, Captiva There is no other community like Captiva in Lee County and one-size-fits-all community planning is, in my mind, just ridiculous. There are tremendous differences amongst all of these communities.

Sue Dahod, Bokeelia I ask that rather than rushing through this, can we have a side-by-side comparison? We've been told things haven't been eliminated but it does appear that some elements have been, and that would be much easier for the community to see if it was set forth by staff so that we could read through it and do a compare-and-contrast.

'It's not an inconvenience to us to live here.'

Matt DePaolis, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation This is moving incredibly quickly, and it's not something we can afford to get wrong. You heard a lot of talk about SB 180 today; if we make a misstep here, SB 180 says that we're not able to go back and fix it to the way it was, because now that will be deemed more burdensome and more restrictive. You've heard it here today that people like their communities in Lee County. We like where we live; we live here for a reason, and we don't want that to be given away.

Roxanne Gause, Alva The Alva Community Plan plays an important part in our ... historical community established in 1882 ... It defines us (but) I fear the changes that have been requested will essentially lose Alva's identity. State Road

80 will become one long strip center; the rural village boundaries will be meaningless and agriculture along North River Road will be no more.

Bobbie Jo Gordon, Pine Island Pine Island is a coastal hurricane-vulnerable community with limited infrastructure, environmentally sensitive lands and serious evacuation constraints. Pine Island only has one evacuation route on and off of the island. How can we reasonably discuss additional development on Pine Island without simultaneously discussing how those additional residents are going to evacuate? Every additional development brings additional people. Additional people bring additional vehicles, yet we are not creating another evacuation route for our island. This is not about anti-development for me. This is basic emergency management.

'I pray that you all will listen to what we have to say.'

Melissa Kilpatrick, North Fort Myers We specifically live in these communities because we want what they offer. If we wanted to live five minutes from a Walmart, we would live in an area that was five minutes from a Walmart. It's not an inconvenience to us to live here. We chose it. I would ask that y'all would delay this until Senate Bill 180 is expired (in 2027) and that we can have time to go through all this that has been proposed and see how it is going to affect our individual community plans and give us an opportunity to be involved. I pray that you all will listen to what we have to say.

Mikes Maillakakis, general manager, Greater Pine Island Water Association This summer I read a biography of George Washington. One of the things that struck me was that the founding generation was not simply fighting for independence; they were fighting against a system in which ordinary citizens had little voice in the decisions affecting their lives. They sought to establish a government that listened to its citizens and derived its authority from the people themselves. That brings me to the issue before you today. The Pine Island plan

was created through years of citizen participation and community involvement, so my question is this: How can these plans be removed from the land development code and the Lee Plan without direct and meaningful notification to the communities most affected by their elimination? The people who helped create these plans deserve more than discovering the removal after the fact. Public participation is not procedural; it's not an obstacle. It's a foundation of good planning and good local government. We ask you to delay forwarding this to the state and give the communities more time to digest what they've just found out about.

'Where is the replacement for the citizen participation requirement?'

Crystal Norton Lee County is not one homogeneous community. Pine Island has limited roads and evacuation capacity. North Captiva has no bridge. Alva, Buckingham, Olga and northeast Lee have agricultural and rural lands under development pressure. Boca Grande and Captiva are constrained barrier islands and Lehigh Acres demonstrates what happens when growth gets ahead of roads, drainage, utility and public services. Those differences are precisely why community-specific planning matters. I am especially concerned about citizen participation. Where is the replacement for the citizen participation requirement? And does SB 180 actually require Lee County to permanently eliminate it? If it does, please identify where and if it does not, where does compliance with state law end and county policy begin? A temporary state restriction should not automatically result in permanent loss of community safeguards ... the public information meeting was Aug. 25 and this hearing is only six days later. Please slow this down and make sure we understand exactly what we are giving up before we give it up.

Holly Schwartz, Alva

I wanted to give an example of interactive participatory input during the public planning process ... The city of Fort Myers is going through a review of their comprehensive plan and to date, their public outreach and engagement has included 491 community surveys, 166 youth surveys and community workshops held around the city at the Collaboratory, the STARS Complex, Riverside Community Center and Fire Station 15, multiple advisory committee presentations, stakeholder interviews and finally the staff compiled all of that public input and presented it to the planning board where they've held several

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out about just recently.

'Put this hearing on hold and send this matter back to staff.'

Nadine Slimak, Bokeelia The LPA should put this hearing on hold and send this matter back to staff. If Lee County commissioners want the wholesale elimination of community plans, if that is their desired goal, they should state that publicly and on the record.

'These places and their character aren't a problem.'

Elliot Taylor, Fort Myers In 2011, when I was at FGCU, we did a class trip out to the ropes course in Buckingham. I was surprised. I've been all over Lee County and I never knew there was a quiet farm town right in the middle of it ... In 2019, when my wife and I were pregnant with our first, we spent a long weekend on Sanibel and it felt like we were a world away ... We took lazy bike rides to dinner and to the beach for sunset. These places and their character aren't a problem. They're the reason my wife and I decided to start a family here. These places are the last sense of community that we have left. Everyone is here for the same reason: they feel like their home is slipping away, that their town is becoming unrecognizable. They're frustrated and they're worried and that's exactly what