

VIEWS



Your Turn
Kevin Lollar
Guest columnist

Gems in Lee County at risk

Changes to Lee County development could erase what's been worked for

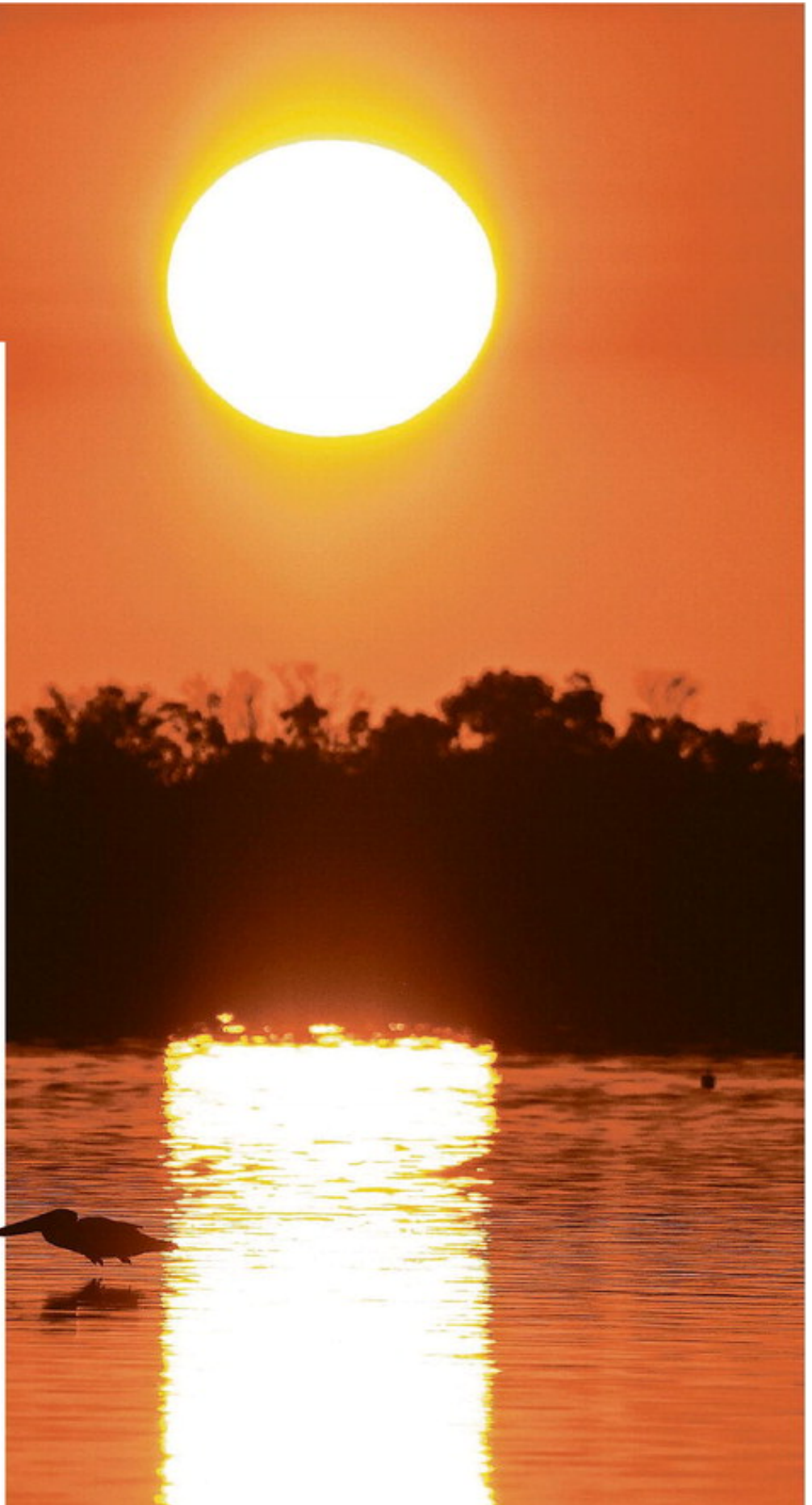
Apparently, Lee County planners don't quite get the concept of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," because they have proposed dumping rules that have been on the books and that have protected Greater Pine Island from rampant development for 37 years.

Folks who live out here are not happy. And if Lee County commissioners approve the proposals at their Oct. 7 meeting, we'll feel as if we've been totally screwed. After all, we live here, and we don't want the rules dumped, and we damn sure don't want people who don't live here making this kind of decision for us.

Anybody who's spent much time on Pine Island knows that this is an extraordinary place. What makes it extraordinary is not big-city stuff such as museums, theaters, concert halls, tall buildings, department stores, bright lights and night life. No, the extraordinary part is the environment: upland slash pine forests, lush mangrove fringe, estuaries with vast, healthy seagrass beds, and an incredible variety of

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A pelican flies close to the water



A pelican flies close to the water surface searching for food along Matlacha Pass at sunrise March 24. Matlacha Pass separates Greater Pine Island from more densely developed Cape Coral. RICARDO ROLÓN/USA TODAY NETWORK-FLORIDA Your Turn Kevin Lollar Guest columnist

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wildlife – wading birds, songbirds, raptors, tortoises, alligators, snakes, lizards, sea turtles, manatees, dolphins, and, of course, lots and lots of fish.

Along with the environment, or maybe because of it, there's a laid-back island vibe. To keep that vibe, as well as the environment, Pine Island residents in 1989 created a The Pine Island Plan, which controls zoning and development on the island. Since then, 16 other unincorporated Lee County communities, including Captiva, Alva, Buckingham, and Lehigh Acres, have created their own Community Plans that reflect the character of each individual community. In short, residents of these communities didn't want outsiders making sweeping changes to their lives and lifestyles.

But the lifestyles of Pine Island and the other 16 communities could be drastically altered if county commissioners approve the proposed changes to the Lee County Comprehensive Plan, which guides development in Lee County, and the Lee County Land Development Code, which provides regulations that enact the Comprehensive Plan.

Of particular concern: While proposed changes would not affect Pine Island's height and density restrictions, they would delete:

- Chapter 33 of the county's land development code, which contains the 17 community plans developed by unincorporated Lee County communities. Dumping Chapter 33 would remove requirements for public hearings for any proposed development in those communities. Residents would, therefore, have little or no say about growth and development in their own communities.

- Goal 24 of the Comprehensive Plan, which is an essential part of the Pine Island plan, whose purpose is to manage "future growth on and around Greater Pine Island so as to: maintain the island's unique natural resources, rural character, and coastal environment; support the viable and productive agricultural community and other local businesses; and to protect the public health, safety and welfare." Without this provision in the county's comprehensive plan, residents of Greater Pine Island would not be able to manage their own future growth.

So, if Lee County commissioners vote Oct. 7 to fix what ain't broke, what's to keep them from voting in the

future to remove other, or all, development restrictions on Pine Island? What's to keep them from turning this extraordinary place, one of the last vestiges of Old Florida, into just another Cape Coral?

Kevin Lollar was the environmental reporter at The News-Press for 26 years before retiring in 2015. He lives in Bokeelia.