

Growth a burden on only evacuation route

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If Pine Islanders needed independent confirmation that their community is growing too populous for its own good, they got it Tuesday from a planner who specializes in hurricane preparedness.

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and other parts of the county in August 2004, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been, said Dan Trescott, a senior planner for the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council.

Of all recorded hurricanes, Charley had the smallest radius of maximum winds to make landfall, and it moved faster than most.

The result: "What we actually got was half a hurricane — all the wind but two-thirds less storm surge," Trescott said.

The community has one major limitation: It has just one, two-lane bridge connecting it to the mainland and "there are no improvements scheduled for forever," Trescott said.

Vehicles already creep along that S.W. Pine Island Road corridor at peak traffic periods, but if there's an evacuation ordered, not only will some 12,700 Pine Island residents need to use those roads to leave, but about 1,000 additional people from the outer islands — Useppa, Cabbage Key, Cayo Costa and Upper Captiva — will also use that route.

In all, about 13,700 people could conceivably attempt to head inland along that two-lane stretch through Matlacha and over the drawbridge, which can accommodate 560 to 760 cars an hour, depending on traffic conditions.

As things stand now, Trescott estimates it would take between 7.5 and 10 hours to evacuate the islands if a storm struck in July, or 8.5 to 12 hours in October, when there are more people living there. And that gets them only to Burnt Store Road on the mainland, where they will join thousands of other north county residents fleeing along Pine Island and Burnt Store roads as well as U.S. 41.

Trescott estimated that it would take 19 to 22 hours for Lee County to evacuate — assuming nearby counties aren't streaming onto the major highways as well.

The method of determining how long it takes to evacuate an area is based on computer models that come up with calculations based on lots of variables.

"There are a lot of assumptions but it's something to go on, something to plan for," Trescott said. "I don't think we've been fully tested with a major storm with a high level of surge."

Those in attendance questioned him about what to do as they prepare for another hurricane season starting June 1.

"I really believe the solution is to build as good a house as you can build and leave early, or, if you leave late, go to high ground that's close," he said.

Meanwhile, residents should work on limiting growth.

Trescott urged people to demand that the county control growth on the island in order to help ensure that current residents will be able to get to safety in time should another hurricane head their way.

"You can justify why you want to keep the community at a certain level of density," he said. "You can justify it on public safety issues, on environmental issues and on infrastructure issues."

That's precisely what members of the civic association have been doing over the past few months as they've lobbied the county commission to require its staff to rein in growth by enforcing the Pine Island Land Use Plan. It calls for planners to calculate the number of car trips a new development will add to traffic already on the road and that which has already been approved for other developments.

Elsewhere in the county, each development's impact is figured independently of existing and future projects.

In January, the Lee County Commission halted the approval process for all Pine Island developments until it could determine if county personnel were correctly interpreting the Pine Island plan's intent.

The three-person committee charged with figuring that out split over the matter and the Local Planning Agency sided with the minority, which maintained that the current practice does not properly limit development and changes must be made in the process to make that happen.

Phil Buchanan, a retired attorney heading up the civic association's campaign to get the plan enforced, said he's optimistic county commissioners will side with the civic association and vote to enforce the plan at their meeting Tuesday.

"If they continue following the rules as they have, development would never stop," Buchanan said. Adhering to the land-use plan won't stop growth, but should make it less dense, Buchanan predicted.

"There will be larger lots, more green space and a more rural atmosphere," he said.

And, as a result, the number of people crossing the community's one bridge will grow at a slower rate, too.