

Lee County officials, public to discuss Estero land use at workshops

By VALLI FINNEY

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Lee County officials and the public will discuss the future of the area's Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource (DR/GR) land during four events in the next two weeks, members of the Estero Bay Agency on Bay Management were told Monday.

"A planning group is being brought in from out-of-town," said Jim Beever, a member of the bay management panel and Lee County DR/GR committee. "These folks come from the East Coast."

Dover, Kohl and Partners specializes "in the art of planning and utilizes scientific analysis and practical consensus-building," according to the Lee County Department of Community Development.

The workshops are being called a "collaborative effort, which includes a five-hour hands-on session to help craft land-use scenarios for Lee County's DR/GR, an 83,000-acre area south of State Road 82 and east of Interstate 75.

Beever's presentation to the bay management group centered on the DR/GR area.

"I want people to know about wildlife and habitat," he said.

He called the timing of the workshops critical to the bay's management.

"All of this is included in the Estero Bay watershed," he said of the DR/GR. Some people attempt to say some of the water goes into the Cocohatchee River, but it doesn't.

Historically, all of the lands – uplands or dry areas and wetlands -- in the area were grouped together.

"The area of the Estero Bay watershed tended to run from northeast to southwest," Beever said. "And, much of our wildlife lives in these areas.

Large marsh systems and forested areas existed, as well as dry areas.

The pre-development era showed 70 seasonal wetland pools, and the uplands during the dry season are very critical habitat for wading birds.

"By 2003, this had been fragmented by people," Beever said.

"The prairie in the DR/GR was often created by man and was never allowed regeneration" of historical native species, he said. "A lot of restoration has been taking the prairie back."

Some of the land in the area had been harvested, used for agriculture, roadways were built and mining began.

Now, in the areas where mines existed, residential areas are being constructed. Mines have spread to the area of Corkscrew and Allico roads, he said.

Other difficulties included the Southwest Florida International Airport.

"A large part of that ranch property was wetlands," he said. The wet areas had sinkholes.

One of the reasons Interstate 75 was placed in its location: it "was to be the eastern edge of any development in Lee County. There is no way it'll ever get clogged up and crowded," Beever said of the thinking back then.

But, the interstate system and exits allowed people to begin construction.

"Every interstate exchange had a growth pattern," Beever said.

Data shows numerous species of animals – mammals, reptiles, birds and amphibians – live in the DR/GR, including several protected species. Some of the species include roseate spoonbills, panthers, black bears, a grass frog known to be the smallest North American frog, Sherman's short-tailed shrew which was last collected at Hickey Creek and some believe may be extinct, sandhill cranes, the Eastern Indigo snake and others.

Beever said when he did an assessment of the animals in the area in the mid-2000s, he found at least 139 species of birds, 42 species of reptiles – not including non-native invasive snakes such as pythons which have been seen in the area – and 118 species of amphibians. Many more mammals were counted.

"Some really recent data shows in the Corkscrew Road area...at least three females (panthers) with territories within DR/GR and at least that many males," he said. Some uncollared panthers are known to be in the area. State officials use a collar on panthers in an attempt to track and gather data on the endangered cat.

"That is a prime (den) area of the panthers," he said.

Even bobwhite quail, which have decreased in numbers, are in the area.

And, the hardwood areas are the only place he found the Florida weasel.

"Bobcats love the hardwoods," he said. "They're, to a large extent, replacing the panther as panthers disappear from the urban edge."

All of the meetings require the attendee to give a complete presentation at each, said Joan D. LaGuardia, communications manager for the Lee County Department of Community Development.

The meeting times, dates and locations are:

Opening presentation: 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday at Lee County Commission Chambers, 2120 Main St., Fort Myers.

Hands-on design: 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 17, Harborside Event Center.

Open House, 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 22, Harborside.

Work-in-progress presentation, 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, April 24, Commission Chambers.

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