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## Water site growth talks at a standstill

Groups may still be at odds when Lee commissioners hear proposal

RYAN HIRAKI • RHIRAKI@NEWS-PRESS.COM • JULY 5, 2008

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An ambitious growth management plan that aims to protect water supply and property rights in southeast Lee County could end in the same dispute that started the process.

The representatives of residents, mining interests, builders and environmentalists still do not have a plan that works for all of them on these 83,000 acres that provide Lee's residents and visitors with drinking water. That could leave them battling one another again, the same way they have been the last few years.

A county committee will debate three proposals during the next month before making a recommendation to commissioners, whose initial meeting on the proposals is scheduled for Aug. 1. Scenario 1 suggests a little more mining and development, with the other two scenarios offering even more mining. There are no specifics, and commissioners will have the final say.

The option Coral Gables consultant Dover, Kohl & Partners is recommending leans toward conservation. But Steven Brown, an environmental policy specialist with the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, questions the part of the plan that



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suggests allowing more mining because rock is needed to build roads, homes, schools and businesses throughout the state.

“With the rising concern about the cost of fuel and the changes in development pattern with people not wanting to drive far, I believe the demand for housing in the far-flung rural areas will go down and more development would occur in the urban core” of the area, Brown said.

The average price of a gallon of unleaded gas reached a record \$4.04 Wednesday in Lee County, according to AAA. But that will not stop mining companies from protecting their property rights, especially when Lee County is one of only six areas of the state with the rock used to facilitate growth.

The companies tried, unsuccessfully, to change laws in Tallahassee this spring that would have stripped or limited local government authority over mining applications.

Digging up rock is an allowable use in this water resource area, although zoning changes are required in at least a half dozen cases and a moratorium that runs through September prevents that.

Dan Delisi, a planning consultant with Delisi Fitzgerald who represents Old Corkscrew Plantation, believes the process Dover Kohl used to create its report might not be fair to his client.

He said the county’s consultant used a town planning process, asking people their vision for the area. But in this situation, he argued, there are two types of land uses that are scientifically based: mining and the environment, including water supply, water quality and wildlife habitat.

“For mining, you need to mine where the rock is. The rock is where the rock is,” he said. “Same thing with the environment. You preserve the land that needs to be preserved.”

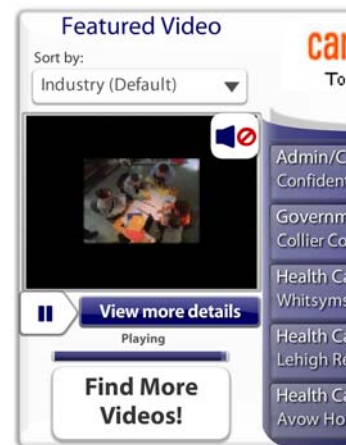
Jason King, a planner with Dover Kohl, believes the report was fair.

“It balances interests,” he said.

Mining, a use the report suggests keeping near other mines along Alico Road, is under consideration at Old Corkscrew Plantation. Old Corkscrew is 6,500 acres of citrus groves along State Road 82, near the east end of Corkscrew Road.

The report says development is allowable there, with a mix of residential, commercial and office uses, along SR 82. Delisi said a development would not be

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worth the cost, mainly because of the water and sewer line extensions that would be needed to serve the remote property.

Development is allowable at a controversial property as well, according to the report.

A small southern piece of the Agripartners property, maybe a little more than 100 acres, could support a mix of residential, commercial and office uses. Daniel Aronoff, one of Agripartners' leaders, came under scrutiny for attending an Estero fundraiser for U.S. Rep. Don Young, the Alaskan Republican who designated \$10 million for the study of an interchange that would have connected Aronoff's land with Interstate 75.

The fundraiser generated \$40,000 for Young, \$3,000 from Aronoff and his family. Aronoff could not be reached for comment. The money was later removed by Congress for the study and instead will be used to possibly study improvements to the Bonita Beach Road interchange.

It seems the only local interests happy with the report are residents.

"There's an effort on conservation and restoration," said Neal Noethlich, an Estero resident who has lobbied the county on repeated occasions to protect the water supply in the area.

Kevin Hill, 46, who lives in the water resource area, believes following the recommended option in the report could maintain the rural character there.

"People value the fact that they don't hear their neighbors argue, hear their neighbors' music or smell what their neighbors are having for breakfast," said Hill, who moved there in 1985. "I'm encouraged with the direction they've taken and I hope (the commissioners) can embrace it."

Commissioners still are studying the report, but one of them, Bob Janes, was ready to admit he likes what he sees.

"I'm leaning toward Scenario 1 because it's the one with the most preservation," he said.

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