



SPIKOWSKI PLANNING ASSOCIATES

MEMORANDUM

TO: Fort Myers Beach Local Planning Agency
FROM: Bill Spikowski
DATE: October 1, 2005
SUBJECT: E.A.R. Workshop on October 11, 2005, 12:00 noon

As backup for your October 11 workshop about the evaluation of the Comprehensive Plan, please find attached a preliminary draft of the fifth section of the evaluation and appraisal report:

5. ESTERO BOULEVARD – Length of Island

- A. Evaluation of Existing Policies
- B. Additional Data and Analysis
- C. Potential Funding Sources
- D. Recommendations on Estero Boulevard

Section 5 contains entirely new language. Please review this section carefully to prepare for the October 11 workshop.

At your September 13 workshop, there was extensive discussion about the alternate recommendations on page 15 of Section 3 concerning possible changes to the pre-disaster buildback provisions. The original recommendation on page 15 was to maintain the status quo for pre-disaster buildback. Four additional incentives that could be explored (beyond those already in the Comprehensive Plan) were discussed on September 13. Each is reprinted below, followed by additional comments:

Additional Incentive #1: Increase in speed and predictability. Public hearings could be eliminated from the pre-disaster buildback process, thus decreasing the review time and increasing the predictability of the result.

COMMENTS: The elimination of all public hearings for pre-disaster buildback was not well-received. However, there was some interest in this concept if it could be limited to applications that met all existing rules and required no variances or deviations.

This incentive could be reworded as follows: *“Public hearings could be eliminated from the pre-disaster buildback process for any application that complies with all current regulations including no increase in floor area. This would decrease the review time for simple applications without foreclosing the right for applicants who proceed through the normal Planned Development rezoning process to request deviations as part of their application.”*

Additional Incentive #2: Walkability preference. *In areas designated "Pedestrian Commercial" on the future land use map, dry-floodproofed commercial space below elevated buildings could be considered a bonus that would be permitted in addition to replacing the previous building's interior square footage.*

COMMENTS: This alternative was favorably received by LPA members on September 13; however, its application may be extremely limited if the changes that FEMA is proposing to the flood boundaries are made into law.

Additional Incentive #3: Fixed size increase. *Instead of limiting pre-disaster buildback to the existing interior square footage, additional square footage could be permitted. For instance, a 25% increase over the existing square footage could be allowed. This could be allowed automatically or could be discretionary based on meeting criteria set forth in the plan or code.*

COMMENTS: This alternative generated considerable discussion on September 13. The consensus seemed to be that building enlargement, if allowed at all, should never be automatic, but might be calibrated either to specific criteria or to the size of the existing building (with smaller buildings or hotel/motel rooms being treated more generously).

The concept for this incentive could be reworded as follows: *"Instead of limiting pre-disaster buildback to the existing interior square footage, additional square footage could be permitted under certain conditions. For instance, up to a 25% increase over the existing square footage could be considered for one or more of the following:*

- *Rebuilding proposals that will operate as a hotel, motel, or resort.*
- *Replacement of hotel or motel rooms that are less than 400 square feet each.*
- *Replacement of existing buildings of any type whose total size is less than one-half the floor-to-area ratio that would be allowed for a new building on that site."*

Additional Incentive #4: Preference for lodging. *A fixed size increase such as the one just described could be provided for new buildings that are dedicated to the lodging industry (rather than to multifamily or other commercial uses).*

COMMENTS: Some interest was expressed for this incentive on September 13, particularly for a variation that would allow existing hotels and motels with very small rooms to be replaced with larger rooms that are more marketable today. This variation has been incorporated into the rewording for #3 above.

SECTION 5. ESTERO BOULEVARD – Length of Island

ISSUE STATEMENT: The Comprehensive Plan established the following vision for the future: “Estero Boulevard has become the premier public space on the island, with a strong sense of place . . . pedestrians now cross safely and many people use the expanded fleet of trolleys to move around the island.” There continues to be a strong consensus to make Estero Boulevard more friendly to pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit and to make it more beautiful as well. Other high priorities are to bury overhead power lines to beautify the town and protect the wires from high winds, and to reduce the frequent “ponding” of rainfall that cannot flow off the pavement in many places. However, there is no consensus about how to pay for these improvements, or how they might be made in a logical sequence over ten or twenty years.

BACKGROUND: The 2000 Estero Boulevard Streetscape Master Plan projected a total cost of \$20–\$30 million to carry out all of its proposed improvements to Estero Boulevard (including up to \$7 million to move the rest of the power lines underground). This figure is well beyond the ability of the town to finance at current levels of taxation.

A. Evaluation of Existing Policies

OBJECTIVE 1-A ESTERO BOULEVARD — *Improve the functioning and appearance of Estero Boulevard as the premier public space and primary circulation route of Fort Myers Beach.*

EVALUATION OF OBJECTIVE 1-A: This objective remains valid today. Many positive steps have been taken in recent years, as described in the evaluations of Policies 1-A-2, 1-B-2, 7-B-3, and 7-E-1. However, Estero Boulevard is still far from being worthy of the designation of “premier public space” on Fort Myers Beach. Specific issues yet to be resolved are discussed beginning on page 44.

POLICY 1-A-2 *The town should develop a sidewalk and streetscape plan for all of Estero Boulevard that builds on the design theme of the 1997 improvements from Times Square and to the Lani Kai. This plan should recreate the historic “Avenue of Palms” concept by adding appropriate palm trees such as coconuts on both sides between the sidewalk and new curbs. This plan should also address related needs such as parking and trolley pull-offs, and should be sufficiently detailed to estimate costs and suggest potential phases of construction. Priorities should include positive impacts on:*

- i. stimulating revitalization consistent with the town’s overall vision in this comprehensive plan*
- ii. completing pedestrian and bike path linkages from one end of the island to the other;*
- iii. managing traffic flow;*
- iv. improving pedestrian crossings; including push button (demand) lights; textured materials to emphasize crossings to drivers; and covered seating areas and other “oasis” amenities at trolley stops and beach accesses;*
- v. lowering construction and maintenance costs from the original design;*
- vi. correcting drainage problems;*
- vii. coordinating with utility undergrounding; and*
- viii. working within new and available sources of funds.*

After completing that plan, the town shall establish a phased schedule of capital improvements to complete this network.

EVALUATION OF POLICY 1-A-2: As a result of this policy, the town commissioned the WilsonMiller engineering firm to prepare a streetscape master plan. This plan, completed in June 2000, presented design alternatives for each segment of Estero Boulevard as it passes through six geographical areas of differing character: north end,

core area, civic complex, quiet center, high-rise resort, and south end. Cost estimates were provided for all alternatives.⁵

POLICY 1-A-3 *In commercial and mixed-use areas, the town shall identify specific portions of Estero Boulevard where changes in land development regulations could work towards a more coherent “framing” of the Boulevard. New regulations should accomplish the following design goals over time through infill and redevelopment:*

- i. *bringing buildings closer to the sidewalk;*
- ii. *encouraging or requiring compatible means of meeting the mandatory flood elevation requirements (for example; using dry-floodproofing techniques, designs such as the old hardware store which is built close to the street with outside steps up, but with added steps up inside to reach the flood elevation);*
- iii. *locating most parking to the rear of buildings, limiting curb cuts, and promoting shared parking areas;*
- iv. *facilitating pedestrian and bicycle access and contributing to the interconnectedness of the circulation system;*
- v. *adopting design guidelines that encourage architecture and urbanism along Estero Boulevard that contributes to human scale and “beach cottage character” (such as the Huston Studio or Hussey tourist information center).*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 1-A-3: By 2003 the new land development code had been completed to incorporate all of the redevelopment design goals listed in this policy.

POLICY 1-B-2 *Improve the appearance of the town throughout by landscaping public property and rights-of-way with native vegetation.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 1-B-2: This policy has been implemented, though with fewer physical results thus far than had been anticipated:

- The improvements to Old San Carlos Boulevard have been completed, with native coconut trees being the predominant landscape theme.
- The plant palette in the streetscape master plan is weighted heavily in favor of native trees, shrubs, and ground cover.
- Five native trees that typically survived Hurricane Charley were nominated for an election for the town’s “official tree”: coconut palm, silver buttonwood, southern live oak, wild tamarind, and gumbo limbo. The gumbo limbo tree was selected and is now being planted on town projects.
- Since 1998 the town has offered a neighborhood landscaping program. A tree booklet was prepared that offers twelve types of trees that are salt tolerant and are good choices for planting near the beach. The town offers to pay half the cost of purchasing and planting trees along neighborhood streets for participating neighborhoods; \$20,000 has been budgeted each year.
- Residents can also buy individual coconut palms and gumbo limbos from the town at half price to help replace trees lost to the hurricane.

POLICY 1-B-5 *Develop a program for placing utilities underground that addresses both public and private sector development.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 1-B-5: Between 1996 and 2002, all overhead wires have been moved underground on all of Old San Carlos, throughout Times Square, and on Estero Boulevard from Times Square to the Lani Kai. Power lines were already underground from the public library to Donora Boulevard. It has long been a goal of the

⁵ *Estero Boulevard Streetscape Master Plan, WilsonMiller, Fort Myers and Naples, Florida, June 5, 2000*

town to see overhead wires moved underground on the remainder of Estero Boulevard; see the evaluation of Policy 14-B-1 and a more thorough discussion on page 46.

POLICY 3-A-4 *A “heart of the island” plan should be prepared to coordinate the public and private actions needed to fully implement this concept, including identifying the sequence of actions, responsibilities for implementation, and potential funding sources. Initial actions should include:*

- i. *develop a design concept consistent with the new streetscape plan for Estero Boulevard, identifying approximate costs, potential funding sources, and suggested phasing;*
- ii. *refine regulations that would allow a compatible mix of uses such as residential, live-work spaces such as studios or galleries, and small-scale specialty retail uses consistent with the historic theme, including eased setback and parking regulations to accommodate the unique needs of renovations of existing and move-on cottages; and*
- iii. *prepare architectural guidelines for cottage renovations and for infill development.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 3-A-4: The streetscape portion of this policy was carried out as part of the streetscape master plan. The regulatory changes in subsection (ii) have been included in the town’s new land development code. Architectural guidelines for cottage renovations have not been prepared.

POLICY 3-C-1 *The town wishes to convert, over time, the existing Villa Santini Plaza and surrounding land from its current configuration of auto-oriented commercial uses. The desired plan would create a new “Main Street” shopping and civic center to serve residents of the south end of Estero Island and visitors to the state park on Black Island and Lovers Key (see Policy 4-F-2(ii) of the Future Land Use Element). To accomplish this goal, the town wishes to structure a public/private partnership agreement that provides for the following:*

- i. *outlines the public improvements necessary to implement the concept, and identifies the agencies and entities involved and their respective roles;*
- ii. *provides the town’s design criteria to guide the preparation of the development plan by the property owners; and*
- iii. *sets forth the process for the partnership, identifies responsibilities, areas of commitment, timing and process, order of magnitude costs, fiscal impacts/benefits, and any reimbursements.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 3-C-1: The design criteria have been prepared and are now in the land development code in a new “SANTINI” zoning district. The current owners of Santini Plaza and the adjoining Fish-Tale Marina are very interested in pursuing the public/private partnership described in this policy and redeveloping the shopping center accordingly. The partnership will have to involve Lee County because the county still owns and operates Estero Boulevard; during the coming year the town will determine whether county officials are prepared to proceed.

OBJECTIVE 4-A SMALL-TOWN CHARACTER — *Maintain the small-town character of Fort Myers Beach and the pedestrian-oriented “public realm” that allows people to move around without their cars even in the midst of peak-season congestion.*

EVALUATION OF OBJECTIVE 4-A: Maintaining “small-town character” continues to be a focus of most activities of town government, including the evaluation and analysis contained in this report.

POLICY 4-A-2 *The Town of Fort Myers Beach values its vibrant economy and walkable commercial areas. Through this plan, the town will ensure that new commercial activities, when allowed, will contribute to the pedestrian-oriented public realm.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 4-A-2: The new land development code carries out this policy through its property development regulations and commercial design standards.

POLICY 7-A-1 CONGESTION: *Every winter, Estero Boulevard becomes so crowded that traffic backs up, sometimes for miles in both directions. Much of this congestion is caused by visitors, who will continue to frequent the beaches regardless of development levels on Estero Island. Despite the road congestion, the town welcomes visitors and intends to provide mobility alternatives as described in this plan.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-A-1: Mobility alternatives such as sidewalks and bike paths have been pursued in great detail in the streetscape master plan, in the recent improvements to Old San Carlos Boulevard, and in the ongoing redesign for North Estero Boulevard. During the past year, the town's Traffic Mitigation Agency has championed and carried out important transit improvements to allow visitors to reach Fort Myers Beach without driving their own vehicles. These include greatly increased trolley service from Summerlin Square shopping center to Bowditch Point; temporarily eliminating trolley fares; adding a trolley-only lane on the Sky Bridge (using the existing southbound breakdown lane); and experimenting with electronic signs that advise waiting passengers exactly when the next trolley will arrive.

POLICY 7-B-3 IMPROVEMENTS TO ESTERO BOULEVARD: *The Town of Fort Myers Beach shall initiate additional pedestrian and streetscape improvements along Estero Boulevard beginning in 1999, and shall negotiate with Lee County for the turnover of responsibility for its maintenance if necessary to carry out these improvements.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-B-3: In addition to the streetscape master plan, the town has made progress on other improvements to Estero Boulevard. The town has acquired a 5-foot-wide sidewalk easement on the bay side of Estero from the owners of Seafarer's and Helmerich Plazas. The previous right-of-way at this point was only 50 feet wide which does not allow for proper sidewalks on both sides or for a median refuge island that would allow pedestrians to cross in two stages without stopping traffic with the pedestrian signal.

Serious discussions of transferring maintenance responsibility for Estero Boulevard to the town have not taken place. However, the county and town are now jointly carrying out an important study of the feasibility of a transit-only lane on Estero Boulevard (see page 45). Detailed plans for improvements have been delayed until the feasibility can be determined.

POLICY 7-D-2 IMPROVE TROLLEY SERVICE: *Trolley ridership increases when service is more frequent and when fares are low or free, yet no long-term funding or operational plan has been developed for providing higher service levels. Practical measures to improve trolley usage include:*

- i. *Recurring subsidies from tourism sources so that service can be enhanced and congestion minimized during heavy seasonal traffic;*
- ii. *Pull-offs at important stops along Estero Boulevard so that passengers can safely board and traffic is not blocked excessively; these pull-offs could be built during other improvements to Estero Boulevard or required by the Land Development Code during the redevelopment process.*
- iii. *Clear signs at every stop with full route and fare information;*
- v. *Bus shelters at key locations, with roofs, benches, and transparent sides;*

- v. *Replacement of the existing trolley buses with clean-fuel vehicles so that businesses won't object to having trolleys stop at their front doors; and*
- vi. *Accommodation of the special needs of the transportation disadvantaged.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-D-2: The town has not been able to convince county officials to use tourism funding sources to supplement transit service to Fort Myers Beach. However, the town itself subsidized increased service this past year and waived trolley fares, demonstrating how these service improvements increase ridership. In 1993 through 1995 fare were also waived and service was increased; ridership increased quickly then as well.

The streetscape master plan addressed improved trolley pull-offs and bus shelters. No progress has been made on replacing diesel trolleys with clean-fuel vehicles.

POLICY 7-D-3 ALTERNATE TRAVEL MODES: *The town shall support alternatives to car travel to free up road capacity for trips that do require a car. Public funding sources shall include county/state gasoline taxes and road impact fees. The town shall modify its road impact fee ordinance by 1999 to allow these fees to be spent (within legal limits) on capital improvements that relieve road congestion, such as better sidewalks, trolley improvements, and off-island parking areas. The town seeks to at least double the usage of the trolley system by the year 2001 (from its 1996 total ridership level of 238,754).*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-D-3: In 2000 the town converted its road impact fee program into a transportation impact fee program as proposed in this policy. In the second half of 2005 the town began examining funding for improved transit service from new development occurring on the mainland that is oriented to regular beach users.

Historic ridership on the beach trolley system is summarized in the following table.

<i>Fiscal Year</i>	<i>Total Riders</i>	<i>Increase over 1996</i>	<i>Service Notes</i>
1992	268,306		
1993	424,643		<i>free</i>
1994	463,352		<i>free; more frequent service</i>
1995	466,018		<i>free; continued frequent service</i>
1996	238,754		<i>fare reinstated</i>
1997	251,871	5%	
1998	243,478	2%	
1999	260,845	9%	
2000	369,992	55%	
2001	372,112	56%	
2002	342,825	44%	
2003	355,272	49%	
2004	416,710	75%	
2005	524,870	120%	<i>more frequent service; transit-only lane</i>
	<i>(through July only)</i>	<i>(through July only)</i>	

During the first ten months of fiscal year 2005, trolley usage has finally exceeded the Policy 7-D-3 goal of a 100% increase over 1996 ridership levels.

OBJECTIVE 7-E UPGRADE ESTERO BOULEVARD — *As part of its congestion avoidance strategy, the town shall methodically upgrade Estero Boulevard to reduce speeding and encourage walking, as higher traffic speeds and car-oriented businesses are antithetical to its pedestrian character. (If a suitable partnership to this end cannot be achieved with Lee County, the town shall consider taking on maintenance responsibility for Estero Boulevard.)*

EVALUATION OF OBJECTIVE 7-E: The initial steps toward this objective were taken with the streetscape master plan. The lack of funding to make major improvements has stalled this effort since that time.

POLICY 7-E-1 TIMES SQUARE STREETScape: *The town shall begin work by 1999 toward extending southward the curbs, colorful sidewalks, and street trees installed by the Estero Island CRA in 1996. Similar sidewalks should be placed on both sides of Estero Boulevard as far south as the public library, including drainage, lighting, and trolley improvements. Unspent funds from the Estero Island CRA should be sought from Lee County toward this end. Generous urban sidewalks should also be built in the future around the Villa Santini Plaza as part of its redevelopment (as described in the Community Design Element).*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-E-1: The town was able to obtain about \$2,000,000 of unspent funds from Lee County’s former Estero Island CRA. Most of this money has been spent to improve Old San Carlos Boulevard. No physical progress has been made on improvements to Estero Boulevard; the problems have included indecision as to the best design and lack of funding to complete such a large project.

POLICY 7-E-2 TRAFFIC CALMING: *The town shall support two types of traffic calming to reduce speeding, which endangers lives and diminishes the quality of the pedestrian environment of Fort Myers Beach:*

- i. The first is “active” or traditional traffic calming along residential streets, using physical techniques such as speed humps, narrowed lanes, landscaping, traffic diverters, jogs, or traffic circles at intersections.*
- ii. The second is “passive” traffic calming along Estero Boulevard, to control speeding without reducing the number of vehicles that can use the road. Techniques include full curbs and sidewalks separated by street trees; buildings nearer the road; interesting vistas for drivers; and avoidance of overly wide travel lanes or intersections.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-E-2: The town has funds budgeted in this fiscal year to study “active” traffic calming on Connecticut Street and adjoining streets in the upcoming fiscal year.

“Passive” traffic calming has been implemented for Old San Carlos Boulevard. It is also planned for Estero Boulevard but not yet installed. The new land development code ensures that new buildings will be placed closer to Estero Boulevard than under previous rules.

POLICY 7-E-3 BUILDINGS CLOSE TO THE STREET: *Where pedestrian levels are high, buildings should adjoin the sidewalk rather than be separated by parking spaces. Front walls of stores, offices, and restaurants should have large windows rather than blank walls, preferably shaded by awnings or canopies. Access to parking areas shall be off side streets wherever possible. The town’s Land Development Code shall implement these concepts beginning in 1999.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-E-3: The land development code now includes all of these principles.

POLICY 7-E-4 SIDEWALKS AND BIKEWAYS: *The town shall work toward major expansion of sidewalks and bikeways. In addition to the next phase of Estero Boulevard sidewalks (see Policy 7-E-1 above), the town shall support the following projects:*

- i. *Support Lee County's imminent plans to fill the gaps from Buccaneer to Estrellita Drive and from the Villa Santini Plaza to Bay Beach Lane using federal funds;*
- ii. *Initiate extensive improvements by 1999 to Old San Carlos and Crescent Street in conjunction with parking improvements (see Policy 7-F-2);*
- iii. *Initiate engineering studies by 1999 for bikeways and additional sidewalks on the second side of Estero Boulevard and improved pedestrian crossings, including consideration of a pedestrian overpass at Times Square.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-E-4: The sidewalk from Santini Plaza to Bay Beach Lane has been completed as planned, as have the wide new sidewalks on Old San Carlos. On Estero near Times Square, a sidewalk easement has been obtained and improved pedestrian crossings have been studied, but physical improvements have not begun.

POLICY 7-H-10 CONNECTIONS TO ESTERO BOULEVARD: *An excessive number of streets and driveways have direct access to Estero Boulevard, reducing its ability to handle peak-season traffic. The town shall take advantage of any suitable opportunities to consolidate street connections into fewer access points onto Estero Boulevard.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 7-H-10: This policy has been embedded into the land development code in section 34-676(d)(1) and 34-706(c-d).

POLICY 10-H-3 *Provide occasional "oasis" areas (resting places for pedestrians and bicyclists) at selected trolley stops and other strategic locations along Estero Boulevard as a part of the Estero Boulevard Streetscape Plan described in Community Design Policy 1-A-3(iv). The first oasis area shall be the Newton estate at Strandview Avenue (see Policy 10-F-3) which shall be closely linked to the Great Calusa Blueway paddling trail, the public trolleys and sidewalks/bike paths along Estero Boulevard, and to the public beachfront.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 10-H-3: The second sentence of this policy was added in 2002 when the town had an opportunity to acquire the Newton estate. Despite serious damage from Hurricane Charley, Newton Park is expected to open as a public park in late 2005.

POLICY 14-B-1 *The town would like to see major power lines placed underground to protect the lines, to avoid interruptions to evacuation due to fallen lines, and to improve the visual experience for tourists and residents.*

EVALUATION OF POLICY 14-B-1: Overhead wires are unsightly and are vulnerable to tropical storm and hurricane-force winds. However, undergrounding power lines is very expensive, up to \$1,000,000 per mile, and Florida Power & Light has not been willing to bear any of the costs. The undergrounding process is very disruptive unless the lines are buried while the road is being rebuilt for other purposes; as a practical matter, if undergrounding is to take place, it must be an integral part of other streetscape improvements to Estero Boulevard. See a discussion of this subject beginning on page 46.

B. Additional Data and Analysis

The term “streetscape” refers to all the natural and man-made elements in a street right-of-way, including travel lanes, bike paths, sidewalks, street trees, signs, street lights, utility lines, drainage swales and inlets, and transit benches and shelters.

Two major problems have interfered with implementation of the Estero Boulevard Streetscape Master Plan that was completed in 2000. By far the largest problem has been financial, given the enormous cost of carrying out the entire plan. Another problem has been local resistance to a roundabout that was proposed in the master plan as a gateway feature near Times Square.

One financing option had been to place tolls on the bridges and use a large portion of the toll revenues for pedestrian and transit improvements within the town, many of which are detailed in the streetscape plan. However, there has been strong community reaction against tolling the bridges. Unless the community’s resistance to tolling abates, other revenue sources will have to be found or the streetscape improvements will have to be dramatically scaled back.

To gauge continued public support for major improvements to Estero Boulevard, members of the public who attended the April 7, 2005, workshop were asked their opinions on six potential improvements to Estero Boulevard. The written responses that evening were as follows:

<i>How important to you are the following improvements to Estero Boulevard?</i>			
<i>Underground Utilities:</i>	<u>Important</u> 66	<u>Not Important</u> 3	[no answer] 4
<i>Better Drainage:</i>	<u>Important</u> 65	<u>Not Important</u> 1	[no answer] 7
<i>Sidewalks:</i>	<u>Important</u> 67	<u>Not Important</u> 0	[no answer] 6
<i>Street Trees:</i>	<u>Important</u> 43	<u>Not Important</u> 22	[no answer] 8
<i>Bike Paths:</i>	<u>Important</u> 64	<u>Not Important</u> 5	[no answer] 4
<i>Transit Facilities:</i>	<u>Important</u> 49	<u>Not Important</u> 14	[no answer] 10

These results indicate outstanding support for streetscape improvements. However, the cost problems that have thus far derailed physical improvements have not been resolved.

A potential funding source for some improvements is Lee County, which currently owns and maintains Estero Boulevard from Times Square to Big Carlos Pass. However, the county’s priorities may be different than those of local residents. Before engineers are hired to design actual improvements, the town needs to decide on the basic form they should take so that the town’s livability and transportation goals will be carried out, even if the improvements are built in phases or by different entities. Several issues that need to be resolved are discussed below.

i. Exclusive transit lane

A necessary first step in the design of future improvements is to determine whether Estero Boulevard can be configured to give priority to trolleys, trams, or other public transit vehicles. The streetscape master plan included many features to make public transit more convenient, such as comfortable trolley stops with adjoining crosswalks. Although exclusive lanes for transit vehicles had also been considered, they were not included in the final master plan.

The enormous increase in public transit usage during the winter of 2005 season was partly a result of the experimental use of an exclusive transit lane on the Sky Bridge (see page 41). That success has warranted a new look at the potential for exclusive transit lanes to be part of the long-range traffic solutions for Fort Myers Beach. The town and the county are in the midst of a feasibility study of exclusive transit lanes on Estero Boulevard.

Across the country, most public transit vehicles use the same travel lanes as other vehicles. On downtown streets in larger cities, transit vehicles are sometimes given priority through special turn lanes or traffic signal timing. In a small number of cases, entire travel lanes are restricted to transit vehicles only. Exclusive transit lanes are rare because the number of transit vehicles per hour must be quite high, typically 30 or more per hour, before there is enough benefit for the transit passengers to offset the loss to other potential uses of the same space (for wider sidewalks, on-street parking, or keeping the travel lane open to other vehicles).

The success of the exclusive transit lane on the Sky Bridge had two major factors. First, southbound traffic on the Sky Bridge is often at a standstill due to congestion on Estero Boulevard; reports of trolleys bypassing this line of cars were the best advertising that public transit could ever get. Second, this transit lane was provided without eliminating existing travel lanes or sidewalks – this lane functions as an exclusive transit lane but is actually a second use of the existing breakdown lane on the Sky Bridge.

Where there is space in the right-of-way to construct an entirely new lane, it can be used as an exclusive transit lane without eliminating existing uses. However, the constraint to this approach at Fort Myers Beach is the narrow right-of-way of Estero Boulevard in the very locations where traffic congestion originates: for instance, from Times Square to the public library. In that area, adding a travel lane would come at the expense of adequate sidewalks, which is a counter-productive strategy because every transit rider becomes a pedestrian after stepping off the vehicle. A comfortable pedestrian experience at each end of the trip is at least as important to encouraging transit usage as reducing the time spent sitting on the vehicle.

The best opportunities for encouraging transit usage by shortening the trip will be similar to the Sky Bridge experience: finding opportunities that don't involve unacceptable tradeoffs. For instance, San Carlos Boulevard is excessively wide north of the Sky Bridge, thus providing some opportunities for underused segments to better serve transit vehicles. Likewise, it may be possible for parts of the center turn lane on Estero Boulevard to be opened to transit vehicles if boarding islands could be provided for passengers at each stop.

It is unlikely that an exclusive transit lane would be justifiable along the entire length of Estero Boulevard. In those segments with adequate right-of-way for a new lane, transit vehicles can operate in mixed traffic with little or no problem. In segments with inadequate right-of-way, the tradeoffs with other potential users of the same space will limit the opportunities for exclusive transit lanes.

However, there are many other design features that can be included on Estero Boulevard to encourage transit ridership. The most obvious is providing shaded and comfortable trolley stops, where the number of minutes until the next trolley arrives is posted and complete schedules are available. These can be considered during the design phase for each segment of Estero Boulevard.

Beyond design features, there are many other factors that can increase transit ridership over time:

- Uncertainly over whether parking for private vehicles will be available or affordable;
- The use of comfortable and/or interesting transit vehicles;
- Frequency and predictability of service (e.g., will the trolley run late enough to get riders back home?)
- Fare levels — public transit is already heavily subsidized; requiring cash payment of fares raises little money but adds uncertainty that discourages ridership (e.g., Do potential riders have enough coins? Will the trolley drive provide change?)

Increased usage of public transit is essential to the future of Fort Myers Beach. There are many opportunities for design and operational features that will make transit attractive. The feasibility and usefulness of exclusive transit lanes will be evaluated in the current study which will be completed late in 2005 or early in 2006. After completion of that study, there should no further need to delay making improvements to Estero Boulevard because of uncertainties over the future of public transportation.

ii. Underground power lines

For many years there has been an active debate across the country and internationally over the costs and benefits of burying power lines and other wires such as cable television and telephone wires. In the past ten years, about half the national expenditures for new power lines have gone to underground wires. However, about 80% of the nation's electric grid still uses overhead lines.⁶

Underground power lines cost significantly more to install. They tend to have fewer blackouts, but blackouts that do occur take longer to repair.

It is commonplace in new subdivisions for all wiring to be placed underground on aesthetic grounds alone. Overhead lines can be inoffensive where they are placed in alleys or they are visually screened by street trees, but in a new subdivision, they are usually visually intrusive.

However, converting existing overhead lines is a more difficult proposition, for several reasons:

- Unless the existing lines are due for replacement anyway, undergrounding is an additional expense that can be avoided or deferred.
- While blackouts are more likely to occur when high winds break overhead power lines, blackouts can also occur when storm surges damage electrical equipment placed at ground to serve underground power lines.
- In a new subdivision, the costs of undergrounding can be evenly spread to all benefitting property owners; but in a retrofit situation, an intuitively fair way to apportion the cost is often not available.

⁶ "Out of Sight, Out of Mind?: A Study on the Costs and Benefits of Undergrounding Overhead Power Lines," Edison Electric Institute, January 2004, page 4.

- In the absence of a fair funding formula, power companies are often unwilling to move utilities underground in one area out of concern that customers in other areas will demand similar treatment or will object to paying for the improvements from which they do not personally benefit.

There are several additional factors that affect the final decision on whether to place power lines underground at Fort Myers Beach. The first is the obvious damage to overhead power lines that result from tropical storms and hurricanes. The second is the salinity and high levels of groundwater, and the potential damage that floodwaters might cause to transformers and other ground-mounted equipment; these factors are avoided with overhead power lines. The third is the narrow rights-of-way at Fort Myers Beach, which makes it important that power lines that are being moved underground avoid other underground utilities such as water and sewer lines (this problem is minimized when all utilities are being replaced at the same time).

The decision as to whether power lines should be placed underground does not have to be made for the entire island. It may be possible on some wider segments of Estero Boulevard to combine tall utility poles with shade trees planted in the right-of-way that will hide the overhead power lines from below, yet can be regularly trimmed to avoid interfering with the wires. Even if it is deemed desirable to place all major power lines underground, some segments of streetscape improvements may become unaffordable with underground lines, requiring those segments to be reconstructed with overhead lines or causing the improvements to be delayed. One segment of Estero Boulevard, from the Lani Kai to the public library, still has overhead power lines even though the lines extending in each direction are already underground; this may be the most important segment to underground in the near future.

C. Potential Funding Sources

Only one phase of improvements to Estero Boulevard is currently funded: the northern mile from Lynn Hall Park to Bowditch Point. Because this road segment belongs to the town, approval is not needed from the county or state. Funding is from accumulated gas tax revenues and previously collected transportation impact fees.

Because funding is not in place for additional segments of Estero Boulevard, new funding sources will be required. Several potential funding sources are discussed here.

- **Transportation impact fees.** The town now collects transportation impact fees from new development. These fees are collected when building permits are issued and are used for capacity-enhancing transportation improvements.

Under the current fee schedule, replacing an existing building does not trigger the payment of a new fee. Once the remaining vacant property at Fort Myers Beach has been built upon, the current transportation impact fee program will cease to be a viable funding source for further transportation improvements even though it is apparent that the current transportation system is highly inadequate.

The proposed streetscape improvements would effectively add some capacity to Estero Boulevard, which makes them eligible for transportation impact fees. If a program were devised to charge impact fees for *redevelopment* of property, not just for new development, this could become a viable funding source for the streetscape program.

Capacity is enhanced by streetscape improvements in many ways: sidewalks and bike paths get pedestrians out of the roadway and encourage alternate travel modes; drainage improvements increase capacity during storm events; transit pullouts and/or a dedicated transit lane would reduce vehicle traffic by promoting an alternative mode; and underground utilities are necessary to provide the space in a limited right-of-way for the other improvements.

Because these capacity enhancements are difficult to quantify using normal engineering methods, the existing methodology would have to be updated. The model would use an “improvements-driven” impact fee. Cost estimates for capacity-enhancing elements of the streetscape program would be divided by projected redevelopment activities to determine the gross impact fee cost per unit of development.

For instance, if the town expects to get 50 new residential units each year and another 50 older homes are replaced with much larger units, that combined might be the equivalent of 100 new residential units if the impact fees were based on dwelling size. At an average per unit fee of \$5,000, that would amount to \$500,000 annually. Add another \$450,000 for nonresidential redevelopment, and transportation impact fees might bring in \$950,000. (The current transportation impact fee of \$2,971 per single-family unit and \$2,059 per multifamily unit was projected to bring in \$50,000 this past year, but actually brought in \$323,000 due to several large condominium projects obtaining permits.)

- **Surcharge on the sale of electricity.** As discussed on page 46, one of the greatest difficulties in moving existing power lines underground is the difficulty in finding an equitable way to pay for the substantial one-time cost. One method not previously considered would be to establish a temporary surcharge on the sale of electricity within town limits and then dedicate these funds to moving the power lines on Estero Boulevard underground.

Florida law allows the town to establish a “public service tax” which would require FPL to collect up to a 10% surcharge on the cost of electricity from all of their customers and then remit those funds to the town. This is a logical funding source because of the direct link between electricity usage and improvements to the local electrical distribution system.

An FPL surcharge might bring in \$600,000 annually. Residents of unincorporated Lee County already pay such a surcharge. The town could formally agree to sunset this surcharge after 10 to 12 years when sufficient funds have been collected to place all of the Estero Boulevard power lines underground.

- **County transportation funds.** Lee County still maintains Estero Boulevard and is very aware of its overcrowding and general poor condition. The drainage portion of the streetscape program is very considerable. A partnership with Lee County is possible whereby Lee County would pay the costs of drainage retrofits, road surfacing, and sidewalks/bike paths while the town pays for other costs. Negotiations with Lee County are underway at this time.
- **Ad valorem taxes.** Since incorporation, the town has decreased its annual property tax levels from 1.47 mills to 0.85 mills. Rising property values and fiscal prudence have made these decreases possible. By not continuing to lower the tax rate as property values rise, additional funds could be generated and dedicated to improving Estero Boulevard. For instance, if the town had not decreased its millage from 0.85 to 0.75 for the new fiscal

year, an additional \$250,000 would have been generated this year alone. A similar alternative would be to dedicate a fixed portion of the ad valorem tax receipts to a specific project such as improvements to Estero Boulevard. In this manner, that portion of the millage would have no reason to exist once the specific improvements have been completed.

- **Stormwater utility.** Many communities create a “stormwater utility,” a branch of government whose sole purpose is stormwater management. Its funds usually come from a separate fee that is charged to owners of developed property, based on a share of the benefit each will receive from the utility; these fees cannot be used for any other purposes than improving drainage and stormwater management. A stormwater utility could provide funding for the drainage portion of the Estero Boulevard streetscape. See Section 7 for more details.

D. Recommendations on Estero Boulevard