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Pine Island faces building ban

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 By SARAH GREENHALGH, sgreenhalgh@news-press.com

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Lee County likely will quit issuing development permits for Pine Island late this month or early in January.

That's when daily traffic is expected to reach a threshold mandated by the county's comprehensive plan.

The 1989 plan says some development on the island must stop when traffic counts hit 910 vehicles at a designated peak hour.

"We are at about 890 vehicles right now," said Pete Eckenrode, director of development services in the Lee County Department of Zoning.

"We will probably make 910 by late December or early January."

And Eckenrode said that's when his department will impose a moratorium on development orders.

The moratorium will not stop people from building homes on the thousands of already plotted lots or developing projects already approved by the county.

Traffic is counted on Pine Island Road all day at Matlacha. Peak time is 5 to 6 p.m. The two-lane road is the only way by land on or off the island, and the threshold was put in place to guarantee sufficient evacuation time in the case of a hurricane.

Eckenrode said the moratorium will affect developers and speculators who are looking to build subdivisions, high-rises and marinas. Those with development orders already in place won't be affected.

"People are welcome to come build on their lots," said Bill Spikowski, the planner hired by the Greater Pine Island Land Civic Association as a consultant to the Greater Pine Island Land Use Implementation Committee.

Spikowski was brought in to revise the 1989 land use plan for the island, which now has more than 9,000 residents.

The revisions, which face several challenges from land owners, have been approved but not adopted by the county.

"The new plan took further steps to prevent overdevelopment and to preserve the rural character of the land," Spikowski said.

"Owners of vacant tracts (large pieces of assembled acreage) are given a range of choices, from preserving part of their land as native pine forest and clustering homes on the remainder, or accepting a reduction in the number of homes they could build."

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Susan Novak of St. James City crosses Pine Island Road at the foot of the Matlacha drawbridge Friday evening. Traffic numbers are increasing and soon will limit building on Pine Island. "It's getting busier and busier by the day," Novak said. *STEPHEN HAYFORD/news-press.com*