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[Back](#)

Article published Mar 29, 2005

Panel advises keeping island traffic rule

Measure would block development on Pine Island

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Pine Island residents who are worried about large residential developments going on their island received welcome news Monday.

A citizens advisory committee recommended not changing a traffic rule that prevents further development on the island of 7,000 residents.

"We are all concerned with overdevelopment," said St. James City resident Richard Little. "We should be held to higher standards because we are more pristine. We don't want Pine Island built up like Sanibel."

The Local Planning Agency, part of the Lee County Planning Agency, conducted a public hearing on a proposed amendment, changing a traffic rule that restricts residential development. The change would have allowed additional residential development despite the excessive traffic occurring in Matlacha.

The rule is commonly called 910. It means that if traffic counts hit 910 vehicles at a designated peak hour on Pine Island Road, residential development projects on the island will not be allowed. County transportation officials said the count was now 937 vehicles.

The agency's recommendation will come before the county commission at 9:30 a.m., June 1.

"The commissioners will get the recommendation that the agency voted against the proposed amendment and the commission

will probably also vote against it," said Nan Gonzalez, assistant for Commissioner Bob Janes.

The Pine Island Agriculture & Landowners' Association, a group of Pine Island farmers owning 3,300 acres, wanted to change the way the county regulated the traffic rule. The association wanted to use the traffic counts acquired from vehicles going one-way during peak times, instead of the current two-way peak hour count.

The one-way traffic count would give numbers significantly less than the 910 threshold and open the door for more residential development orders.

"The numbers look lower, but it is still the same amount of traffic," said Bill Spikowski, a Fort Myers planner and chief architect of the Pine Island plan. "The agriculture and landowners wanted to change the quality of service on Pine Island Road from D to E, essentially creating and allowing more traffic."

Lee County Department of Transportation grades the congestion of roadways on a scale of A to F. "A" means a street is free flowing, whereas an "F" is virtual gridlock. "E" means a road is at full capacity, or the maximum amount of cars are utilizing the road. The road can't handle any more vehicles without falling apart (pot holes, cracks, deterioration).

Matt Uhle, attorney for the Agriculture & Landowners' Association, said the reason for the requested change was to provide farmers an exit strategy if they needed to sell their land, getting the most value for their property.

Under the current law, for every acre agricultural landowners want to develop they must keep 10 acres undeveloped to help avoid a high density of development.

"The agricultural owners aren't developing now, but in the agricultural business you can run into problems," Uhle said. "There may be a significant possibility they may have to shut down and sell. This would have given them something to fall back on."

Uhle was disappointed with the agency's decision to not support the change, but confident progress was made raising awareness about problems associated with the 810/910 rule.

"The policy change would have put the 910 rule and Pine Island in the same footing as the rest of the county," he said.

Nole Andress, a member of the LPA, voted against adopting the proposed amendment. He said Pine Island Road is destined to become more congested without changing the 910 rule allowing new residential development.

"There are about 6,000 residences on Pine Island now and there are over 6,000 unbuilt home lots in which the owners have a legal right to build," he said. "That is almost a doubling on the road without adding any more new development orders right now."

<<
[Back](#)