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Zoning change on Pine Island causes stir

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Angry agricultural landowners on Pine Island say they are losing developmental land and money in a compromise approved by Lee County Commissioners on Tuesday.

In the past, agriculturally zoned land on Pine Island could be developed with one home per acre. Now, in order to develop one acre, 10 acres must be preserved. Landowners can develop at a one-to-one ratio if they build all the residential units on 30 percent of the land in a cluster and restore the remaining 70 percent.

Bill Spikowski, land planner and chief architect of the Greater Pine Island Land Use Plan, said the compromise isn't going to make everyone happy, but the difference is it is actually going to allow farmers to farm and build residential units in clusters at the same time.

"(The compromise) lets you continue to farm and have some rights, but not all of them," he said. "Anyone who farms can't do both (build and farm); now they can do both, just at lower rights."

County Commissioner Bob Janes doesn't see how the farmers are going to lose any money or value with the compromise.

"If they say that a farmer can cluster his units and still farm, how does he lose?" he said. "He is getting value for his units, he is just clustering them."

The compromise cannot be enforced until it is approved by the state. That could take about two months.

John Cammick, president of the Agricultural and Landowners Association and a grower, said the compromise hasn't given farmers any reason to believe they are benefiting from the changes.

"They still took all our density rights away and haven't done anything," he said. "They are telling me they can give me a (transfer of development rights) in the future, but that doesn't mean I am going to make any money on it."

As part of the compromise, Lee County included the transfer development rights program, giving Pine Island agricultural land owners just one more option of developing their land.

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The transfer development rights program, which is voluntary, was established in the 1980s as an incentive for wetland owners to develop elsewhere in the county at a higher density. For example, a wetland owner may be allowed to build only one stilt home on his wetlands, but if he bought into the transfer of development rights program, he could build four homes somewhere else in the county.

By buying into that program, developers can build on lower-quality land while keeping the more pristine land preserved. The problem Pine Island agricultural land owners have with the transfer of development rights program is the fact that the land they develop elsewhere may be less valuable than the land they already own on Pine Island.

Cammick said that program is not an answer Pine Island agricultural owners are looking for.

"(TDRsw) say give me a one hundred dollar bill and I will give you a bill back later, but you don't know if it is going to be a five, or a one or two \$100 bills," he said.

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