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Editorial

DR/GR area vital to Lee's future

Originally posted on December 06, 2007

Lee County has drawn a line in the gravel in a sprawling water resource area in south county, halting new mining, zoning and growth-plan changes until a vital and long-overdue study of the area can be completed.

At issue is the fate of the 83,000-acre Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource area, or DR/GR, in the southeastern part of our county east of Interstate 75. It's one of the last relatively open areas in the county, surrounded by intense development and coveted by rock mining companies, developers and protectionists. How well the county manages natural resources there — water for our future, wildlife and open space for human enjoyment, as well as agriculture and mining — will be one of the biggest growth management issues facing the county. It will be an indicator of how serious the county is about fighting to preserve a better quality of life here in the face of immense pressure.

One knotty question is how to keep the products of Lee County's rock quarries flowing without converting thousands of acres of the DR/GR into a moonscape, as worried residents of the area fear will happen.

So important are those products to the building and road construction industries that the Legislature almost took regulatory authority over rock mining away from local governments this year. Those industries will try again next year to get regulation into friendlier state hands. The Lee County moratorium will be a prime exhibit, no doubt, along with restrictions in the state's most important rock mining areas in Southeast Florida.

The industry fears the sort of new

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Members of the advisory committee for the DR/GR study. One member remains to be appointed.

- Brenda Brooks, executive director of the CREW Land and Water Trust, appointed by County Commissioner Ray Judah.
- Steven L. Brown, Environmental Policy Specialist, Conservancy of Southwest Florida, appointed by Commissioner Frank Mann.
- Phil Buchanan, Smart Growth Board, appointed by Commissioner Brian Bigelow.
- Carie Call, PBS&J, Smart Growth Board, appointed by Commissioner Bob Janes
- Don Eslick, resident, appointed by Janes.
- Richard Friday, Youngquist Mines, appointed by Commissioner Tammy Hall.
- Dennis Gilkey, Gilkey Organization, appointed by Judah.
- Cullum Hasty, Sand Castle Realty, appointed by Judah.
- Kevin Hill, UF Southwest Florida Research and Education Center, appointed by Mann.
- Jason Lauritsen, Big Cypress science coordinator, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, appointed by Bigelow.
- Kirk Martin, CDM/Missimer, appointed by Hall.
- Scott McCaleb, Florida Rock Industries, appointed by Mann.
- Peggy Schmidt, resident, appointed by Judah.
- Linda Tanner, resident, appointed by Bigelow.

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demands for better protection of water resources and better reclamation of mined land of the sort that we hope will grow out of the moratorium here, along with limits on how many thousands of acres of this area will be gobbled up by mining when there are so many other competing interests.

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The industry rightly has a place at the table for the crafting of these new restrictions, through an advisory committee appointed by commissioners. It can and should help shape its own future in Lee County, but don't be surprised if this ends up as a statewide battle in court.

This moratorium is a good, responsible move. It will not stop rock mining. Existing permits can keep the draglines busy for years. The moratorium expires next September, a very short time for the work that needs to be done.

According to a study by Spikowski Planning Associates for the Estero Community Improvement Foundation, since the DR/GR land was designated in 1990 under state pressure, 35-40 percent of it has lost its protections "without any comprehensive review of the cumulative effect of those losses."

The DR/GR land in south county is fantastically diverse area, where permitted uses include farming, low-density housing and other development, golf courses and mining, and where there are still opportunities for creating fine nature preserves.

As former County Commissioner Mike Roeder wrote in a recent Mailbag letter, "It is not too late to make sense out of these incompatible land uses. The county should not allow new mining companies with worldwide market ambitions to set up operations in the middle of the most sensitive remaining land in Lee County."

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