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Editorial: County must hang tough on land use

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Lee County commissioners face some epic decisions over a giant water resource area in south county, and they should not be distracted or intimidated by angry denunciations or talk of lawsuits.

At stake is the south county "density reduction/groundwater resource" area, an 83,000-acre tract.

An advisory committee is working with consultant Dover, Kohl on a recommended blueprint for managing drinking water, rock for road and building construction, residential interests and traffic impacts, wildlife and open space.

It's a measure of the intense interest in the area's resources that the committee, after series of public workshops and meetings has made little progress toward a compromise recommendation.

These decisions are among the most important commissioners have ever made, with profound implications for the county's water supply and other natural resources and for the economy.

The appointed committee, representing those with interests in the area, has only two weeks left to meet a deadline for getting their recommendation to county commissioners, who will debate the issue Aug. 1.

A yearlong moratorium on approval of growth plan amendments and zoning changes expires in September.

Dennis Gilkey, representing Six L's Farms, which owns 6,000 acres it's considering for mining in the area, resigned from the committee recently.

He felt a Dover, Kohl report on alternative management plans leaned so far toward preservation as to indicate the whole process is loaded against the mining companies.

This could be a prelude to legal action by the mining industry if the final plan restricts that activity too much.

So be it. Rock mining is vital to our economy. But the county is under no obligation to allow unrestricted mining; in fact, it has an obligation to all interests involved to find a fair balance. That may be hard to swallow for those who expect no new mining

restrictions.

Mining can thrive in a well-regulated area, and it will help if the mining industry stays at the table.

If the mining industry or homeowners and environmentalists on the other side of the debate find the final product unacceptable, they can go to court.

But we think the county can and must find a plan that will survive challenges from either side.
