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Public input sought on east Lee land use

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Residents, businesses and environmentalists can spend the next two weeks helping determine the best use of 83,000 acres in southeast Lee County, an area important for drinking water supply and mining.

The workshops are expected to gather public input as consultants, county officials and all interested parties try to decide if — and how — different uses can co-exist here. The first one is Wednesday.

“The decisions made in the next few months will have indelible impact, and some will have such long-lasting consequences we could call them ‘forever’ decisions,” said Victor Dover, a partner with Dover, Kohl & Partners, a Coral Gables consulting firm.

A final decision on land use in this area could come in July, following discussion by the county commission.

The county has paid Dover’s firm \$1.4 million to compile 14 studies that have examined different uses on this land, including water supply and mining, the two that have made the most headlines lately.

Mark Preston, who has lived in southeast Lee for nine years, has developed a mantra about the conflict there.

“You can live without a lot of things. Water is not one of them,” he said. “In an ideal situation, I’d like to see (commissioners) say, ‘No mining out there.’”

It is hard to declare such a strong statement, especially when two issues favor miners.

One is the fact that southeast Lee is one of only six regions in the state that provides rock for roads. The other is property rights, including the Bert Harris Act, the state law that allows property owners to use their property for what it was intended. And in this area of Lee, mining is allowed.

Richard Friday, chief executive for Youngquist Brothers Mines, wants a solution that’s fair for everyone. His company is a partner in a group that wants to mine nearly 1,400 acres over 25 years.

“I’ve got high hopes on this thing,” he said. “We don’t need somebody coming in in five years trying to resolve what we didn’t resolve this time. We need to resolve it.”

There is development pressure too.

A Coral Gables developer has asked to build 4,000-plus homes and 2 million-plus square feet of commercial space just south of State Road 82. And Dennis Gilkey, former president of the Bonita Bay Group and now head of the Gilkey Organization, is consulting Six L's Farms. The company has marketed its 5,000-plus acres north of Corkscrew Road, possibly for development.

The county's growth plan allows only one home for every 10 acres in the area, where nearly a quarter of the 83,000 acres is in public ownership. Gilkey declined to say he wants development restrictions changed, sticking with his explanation that a balanced approach to planning is his objective.

That will mean planning for environmental protection, both habitat for the endangered Florida panther and other wildlife Southwest Florida is known for and the drinking water supply for county residents, said Nicole Ryan, governmental relations director with the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

"Certainly there is room for all the perspectives," she said, "but in the end commissioners are going to have to take a look at what's in the best interests of Lee County in the future."
