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Sides taken in mine controversy

Future of rural land could be at stake

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Some believe a recommendation by a hearing examiner to deny an earth mining project on Corkscrew Road in Estero may help decide the future of environmentally sensitive rural land east of Interstate 75.

The 450 residents in the area opposed to the mine hailed the recent decision of Lee County Chief Hearing Examiner Diana Parker as a major turning point in their effort to protect their homes and the area's water resources and wildlife.

"This is the hinge that everything else swings on. This is a huge victory," said Bill Lytell, an east Estero resident and Baptist preacher who is a leader of the opposition.

Others, including mining interests, are waiting for a county study on the impacts of mining in the area - that is to be released in September - and pending bills in the Florida Legislature giving the state, not the county, authority to approve mining petitions.

For instance, there are ways to protect water resources while mining, said Richard Friday, chief financial officer of Youngquist Brothers, which operates local mines.

In the case at hand, Parker recommended that county commissioners reject the project proposed by Estero Group Ltd. that calls for excavating fill dirt, without blasting, to a depth of 20 feet on 318 acres on the north side of Corkscrew Road 12 miles east of Interstate 75.

The mine, company experts said, would generate 414 daily round trips by dump trucks.

A crucial factor is that the proposed mine site lies in the middle of the 83,000-acre area east of I-75 that supplies drinking water to Lee County. Many endangered species, including the Florida panther, roam there.

Parker said commissioners should reject the project because company experts and the county's planning staff - that recommended approval of the mine - did not give her adequate assurance the water supply, wildlife and other natural resources would be protected.

Also, the residents would be adversely affected by the increased truck traffic, she said.

Parker said that she was concerned that approval of this mine would have the "domino effect" of obligating the county to

approve other mines that could be potentially harmful to the environment and residents.

The issue now goes before county commissioners - who aren't forbidden to talk about it beforehand - at a hearing expected to be held next month.

Parker said commissioners should reject the mine, but give the company permission to address her concerns and resubmit the petition within a year.

What is significant about her recommendation, Lytell said, is that of all the mining projects waiting to be considered, the Estero Group proposal was the least threatening to the environment.

Instead of rock mining - that includes blasting - to more than 100 feet - the Estero Group's proposal recommended digging dirt to a depth of only 20 feet, he said.

"If the hearing examiner didn't feel it was compatible with the area, there's no way any mine will be applicable out there," Lytell said.

Indeed, "in the eyes of the hearing examiner, one has to take into account a lot of the off-site impacts mining may potentially cause," said Don Eslick, chairman of the Estero Council of Community Leaders.

What may provide answers to these concerns, he said, is the county's study.

County commissioners in September imposed a one-year freeze on mining petitions so that a \$1.4 million study could be conducted to determine if it is possible to allow more mining without affecting the water supply.

At least five proposed mines - with a combined 3,467 acres - were put on hold, including a rock mine proposed by Youngquist Brothers.

Friday said there are techniques - although expensive - to adequately protect the water supply.

That is the case with the Youngquist mine on Corkscrew Road that is on hold, he said.

The mine was designed to excavate dirt but after digging began, it was determined the mine was having a negative impact on the water supply, Friday said.

He said the company proposed to spend \$12 million to \$20 million on measures to protect the water supply.

To afford that cost, the company proposed to switch operations to a rock mine, which is more profitable, Friday said.

While the study is under way, there is one more piece to the mining puzzle.

Florida lawmakers are considering at least two bills - being pushed by mining lobbyists - that would effectively take approval of mines from the county and give it to the state.

Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann, who opposes the legislation, said he was encouraged when a vote for approval of one of the bills was deferred last week by a Senate committee, although a companion bill

passed a state House committee.

A second mining bill is scheduled to come before the same Senate committee next week, Mann said.

"This issue is huge. The bills are aimed at crippling Lee County's ability to deal with mining," Mann said.
