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Abandoned lots next frontier in Lee County

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Published by news-press.com on August 21, 2003

The more than 16,000 single lots abandoned because of unpaid taxes throughout Lee County could become tomorrow's parks, schools or preservation areas — that is, if officials can piece them together in a quick and cost-effective way.

"What looked like little patches long ago are now coming together," Lee County Commissioner John Albion said. "If you're going to capture this land, there is no time like the present."

County officials and private developers, together, have been busy evaluating how replating can benefit both sides — particularly in Lehigh Acres, where 93 percent of the delinquent properties are located.

Developers are looking at the community as their next frontier because the supply of land suitable for development in south Lee County is running out.

And, because assembling all those platted single-family lots will be difficult, the private sector is getting more involved.

But the real work will be in fostering legislative changes that will make it easier to replat these private home lots and convert them to other uses that will serve the public or help the economy.

Jim Fleming, vice chairman of the East County Water Control District, said he wants to see a public land trust formed by the Legislature. The land trust would operate under the state's Sunshine Law, which opens records and meetings to the public.

Land trusts work by bartering, trading and selling property in an effort to, among other things, preserve land. With this one, Fleming wants the power to condemn lots to help create blocks of land for public use. But for this to happen, streets would have to be vacated and back taxes and assessments excused.

However, with no taxes being collecting on those properties, the school district and other authorities could lose any chance of recovering the unpaid money.

Still, school officials are optimistic.

"We definitely have an untapped resource here," said Stephanie Keyes, facilities planner for the Lee County School District.

The school district, Keyes said, still could benefit if a school is built and nearby properties increase in value.

"It can be a win-win situation," she said, "but it does have to be carefully thought out."



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Besides, developer David Graham said, doing nothing would reduce the quality of life for area residents.

The Bonita Bay Group vice president said that if nothing is done, there likely will be communities without parks and problems with their infrastructure, water quality and septic systems.

"That scenario is scary to look at," said Karen Forsyth, lands director for the county. She thinks this could be the future of Lehigh Acres and its potential for more than 300,000 residents. Currently, a little more than 38,000 people live there.

"The timing is right," Forsyth said. "Growth is driving the issue now."

The county holds 78,350 certificates, but that includes as many as seven certificates on many properties.

Last year alone, Lee County acquired nearly 18,000 tax certificates.

Jerry Jones of Northville, Mich., owns five of those properties and hopes a viable plan is worked out — soon.

"It's a drag," he said. "If I could find a way to get me some kind of benefit, I would like to benefit."

The county can expect to spend millions of dollars replatting the land.

Contacting the owners and taking over the 1,600 or so parcels to create a watershed in northern Lehigh Acres — mostly west of Sunshine Boulevard — would take nearly 8,500 hours of work and cost at least \$1.6 million.

"That proposal actually is a 10-year buying plan," Forsyth said. "We could condense it if I had a bigger staff."

Another hurdle, she said, is how to handle the bond requirements and law related to the East County Water Control District.

Both require the district to collect assessments from property owners, which means the county is charged along with everyone else. Also, the more land the county picks up through tax certificates, the more it will owe to the drainage district.

To address those concerns, about 50 planners, public officials, developers and others interested in the matter met last week at Edison Community College.

By the end of the seven-hour meeting, they agreed to form a steering committee to find out more about what needs to be done.

The aim is to form a task force of property owners, taxing authorities and others to study Lehigh Acres and draft legislative proposals.

But most agree that more information is needed about Lehigh Acres' needs to determine what should happen with the lots that are peppered throughout the community.

The one thing that has been documented about Lehigh Acres over the years is its need for more commercial space.

"Our commercial situation is in dire straits," said Fleming, who is also a real estate broker. "We're going to choke on our own residential growth."

So how do you pay for such a program?

Taxes and proceeds from the land the trust assembles and sells for development could be used to help support the program.

To get the freedom to do all this, the Legislature needs to be on board.

“We want to be ready for the next legislative session,” Fleming said. “I think we could put something in place in the next two years.”

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