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Buying them back, grouping them and developing may help the community's cause

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Lee County Lands Director Karen Forsyth has come up with a plan for the county to take over Lehigh Acres lots whose owners have quit paying taxes. A targeted area between Harn's Marsh and the Hickey Creek Mitigation Park would be set aside as a regional watershed. These lots eventually could be banked, swapped and reassembled for parcels for schools, parks, water management and perhaps for future commercial and residential development.

For nearly 20 years, we've been debating what to do about the lousy way the 60,000-acre Lehigh Acres development was laid out back in the 1950s. Now is the time to actually do something about it.

Fortunately, the political will finally may be growing to go to work on a solution.

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Lee County Lands Director Karen Forsyth has come up with a plan for the county to take over Lehigh Acres lots whose owners have quit paying taxes. A targeted area between Harn's Marsh and the Hickey Creek Mitigation Park would be set aside as a regional watershed. These lots eventually could be banked, swapped and reassembled for parcels for schools, parks, water management and perhaps for future commercial and residential development. They certainly aren't doing anyone much good as they are.

A 1998 article, "Planning in the Wake of Florida Land Scams," co-written by local planner Bill Spikowski, notes: "The purchase of tax delinquent lots has considerable promise in Lehigh Acres; it does not infringe on individual property rights and is not nearly as costly as many other options."

Lehigh Acres has about 135,000 platted lots and about 121,000 of them are still vacant; owners of 26,000 haven't been paying the taxes on them and owners of about 35 lots a year offer to donate them to the county just to get rid of them.

The problem

So why should anyone care — especially if they don't live in Lehigh — if lots there are unused or unwanted?

Besides the loss of revenue to Lee County government agencies, there are a number of reasons.

At the same time as all these vacant lots exist, a good portion of the home buying public wants subdivisions loaded with amenities, such as golf courses, parks, nature trails and open space. Water, sewers, drainage, sidewalks, street lights and maintained roads are taken for granted. Therefore, developers look for fresh land, where they can create a master-planned community from scratch, such as Verandah, the new Bonita Bay Group community along the Orange River near Alva, or in sensitive lands in southern Lee County. In other words, developers are gobbling up the last land in Lee County while lots in Lehigh sit empty.



Lehigh also is an important area of Lee County for groundwater recharge, more important even than the protected Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource area that developers seem to be constantly eyeing. Acquiring platted lots in Lehigh Acres to set aside for protection is vital to groundwater recharge.

Legacy of greed

The people who started Lehigh Acres weren't land planners or developers, they were marketers. Their only purpose was to make money by selling lots — a retirement spot in the sun — to anyone with a few dollars down and a few dollars a month.

The characteristics of these communities in Florida are pretty similar:

No water.

No sewer.

No drainage.

No open space.

Little or no land set aside for schools, parks, libraries, fire houses or commercial development.

An insufficient road system laid out on a grid, creating thousands of uniform lots.

Severe environmental damage.

Despite all these factors, Lehigh Acres is growing — 146 percent between 1990 and 2000 and predicted to grow another 73 percent by 2005. It could well become the next Cape Coral. People looking for affordable housing are willing to forgo amenities for the benefits of home ownership. Some are attracted by the isolation of being surrounded by vast empty lots. These pioneers are the ones threatened yearly by the costly brush fire season.

And far from being the sleepy retirement community it was envisioned to be, it appeals to young families. The median age of its residents is younger — 38 — than in Bonita Springs or Cape Coral. But there is no land for new schools. Getting to jobs requires a lengthy commute on substandard roads.

When there were only a few scattered settlers, wells and septic tanks weren't a problem. Now, however, some wells are going dry and the health department has declared a moratorium on building a well and septic tank on some quarter-acre lots.

Lehigh's population is 33,430 now and 300,000 at build-out. It is finding out what happens when one of these poorly planned communities becomes a boomtown.

So, a key question for Lee County and Lehigh Acres, when considering Lehigh's future is: "What happens if we do nothing?"

The solutions

Cape Coral incorporated into a city with its own officials and the ability to levy and collect taxes to solve some of the platted lot problems it has had. It has had to provide costly water and sewers and a stormwater system for drainage, plus find land for commercial development to support its more than 100,000 residents.

Spikowski notes, "There is often little support by residents of pre-platted subdivisions for municipal incorporation, due to expected higher levels of taxation. This fear is often legitimate, since residents are often older and of modest means, and the communities often do not have

commercial or industrial tax bases, or affluent neighborhoods, that would generate strong property tax revenues.”

As Lehigh residents once more consider incorporation and alternatives, they must consider those issues. Perhaps more important than who governs is, “What needs to be done and what is the best option to accomplish it?”

A GOOD START

In any event, the plan brought forward by Forsyth and her team is a good start. In an area identified for an East County Regional Watershed (see map), she proposes:

- Changing state law to make acquisition of abandoned lots quicker and easier.
- Acquiring the tax-delinquent lots.
- Soliciting for lot donations.
- Offering lot owners who have been paying their taxes the chance to trade for a county-owned lot in another area.
- Buy out the remaining lot owners.

Many complex issues remain to be worked out. However, we would urge Lee County's commissioners to move forward with this long-overdue plan.

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