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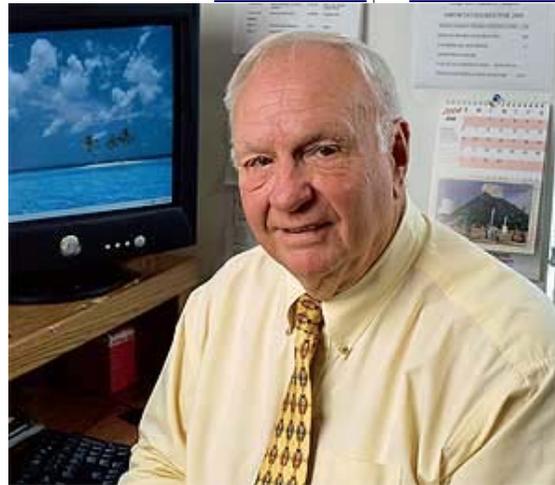
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It's About Growth
The Plots Thicken

August 2004



Lehigh Acres is growing up fast and it's going to be big; with about 96,000 square miles, it's nearly as large as Cape Coral. Our entire region has a stake in how it matures.

Lehigh was born of profit-driven, shortsighted plans, spent its youth with little guidance, and has now hit the growth spurt of an adolescent. Its current population of about 40,000 is expected to double in the next 10 years. Land values have doubled and tripled in the past two years. All the change has drawn renewed attention—and alarm—about how it's taking shape.

At urging from the Lee County Smart Growth Committee, the board of county commissioners has given the go-ahead to set up a citizens' group to figure out what the community wants and needs and to form a plan for its future. The county has given \$25,000 to help with the initial effort.

As with Cape Coral, developers in the 1950s chopped the land into tens of thousands of residential lots to sell and left minimal space for parks, schools or even businesses to serve and employ all those residents. Lehigh now consists of some 90,000 lots, with about 60,000 vacant, owned by people throughout the world; and it faces a severe shortage of public infrastructure. What's more, except for those residents at its center, where the original developers provided water, sewer and electricity to sell the houses, almost all of Lehigh relies on wells and septic tanks, raising fears about water pollutants and supplies. Some sections don't even have electricity.

Yet buyers are gobbling up properties. Outlying lots that would have gone for \$1,000 to \$2,000 a couple of years ago are now getting \$6,000 and more.

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"A huge factor is the entry-level home buyer," says John McWilliams, a realtor with Coldwell Banker Preferred Properties. "Service-sector workers do not have an alternative choice if they want to live in Southwest Florida. Even in Cape Coral, it is becoming difficult to enter the home market due to homes' escalating values."

The greatest growth is in the western sector, close to Interstate 75 and Southwest Florida International Airport—and convenient to businesses where residents can shop and find work. That wasn't a big issue when retirees dominated in Lehigh, but McWilliams has seen the demographics flip since the early 1980s, from about 70 percent retired to about 70 percent young, working families, he said.

And most have to drive out of Lehigh every day for work and commercial needs.

"The employment issue is probably largely unsolvable, because there just isn't the land to do it," says Bill Spikowski, of Spikowski Planning Associates. "It's more important that the schools, parks and the daily shopping is in Lehigh." All of those activities require more car trips than working commutes, he points out.

Compared with Lehigh Acres, Cape Coral's creation seems almost well planned. Cape Coral's developers provided a better road network, more land for commercial use and a downtown center, says Spikowski. "Lehigh has none of those three."

What commercial property does exist is one lot deep along thoroughfares, and commercial sites have been inconsistently spot zoned, say Spikowski and Oliver B. Conover, executive director of the Lehigh Acres Chamber of Commerce. Spikowski formulated the 1996 commercial land-use study for Lehigh's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), which has since been discontinued. He also worked on Cape Coral's downtown redevelopment plan.

"Lehigh is on the same growth trajectory as Cape Coral," he added. "It might be 10 or 20 years behind, but it's headed the same place. But it starts out with that much of a disadvantage."

In fact, it's about 14 years behind, according to a population forecast recently completed for Lee County by Van Buskirk, Ryffel, and Associates.

In an April presentation, Paul Van Buskirk and Carleton Ryffel explained to Lee's Smart Growth Committee what Lehigh and the county will be facing.

Many South Florida cities start out as retirement communities with small households. Then come working families to staff retail stores and provide services. Then the city grows more in diversity and population until it starts to look demographically like a traditional community, according to the report.

What that means is that growth starts out steady, hits the up-curve where it accelerates, then levels out a little to steady growth until it reaches build-out. For Lehigh, that's projected to be 303,451 residents around 2065.

Cape Coral and Lee County are both in that up-curve and Lehigh will reach it within the next couple of decades. When all three hit that sharp growth simultaneously, says the forecast, "One might

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conclude this is the perfect storm for development pressures.”

By local and state standards for land use, here’s how Lehigh stacks up, according to the study: It has 1,599 acres for commercial space and needs 1,296 more for its projected growth. It has 370 acres for industrial use and needs 320 more. It has seven acres for parks and needs 2,622 more. And it has 251 acres for schools, but needs 724 more. That doesn’t include needs for additional roads, or conservation lands to help protect water resources.

“Part of Lehigh is a recharge area for the sandstone aquifer, which is Lee County’s homegrown aquifer system,” says Lee County Smart Growth director Wayne Daltry. “If you pave over your

recharge areas or put pollutants in your recharge areas, you don’t have much of a water supply.” The marketplace is looking for relief, he adds, and it can’t be found in places with flats.

But rising prices and growing population pose obstacles to assembling land for those needs.

Spikowski recommended in his 1996 report to start buying up blocks for schools. “Now, instead of being vacant, there’s one house or two houses on them, so instead of buying a \$12,000 lot, you’re buying a \$70,000 house,” he says. It will only get more crowded and expensive in the future, he predicts.

“The result is schools are built outside Lehigh,” says Spikowski; but the roads aren’t designed for a large community. “You end up making that situation where the road network is lousy, so much worse because everybody has to drive everywhere and drive long distances.”

The state legislature passed a bill this past spring that would have streamlined the process for Lee County to pick up some of the numerous lots in Lehigh whose owners quit paying taxes.

“The object was, in our case, to enable Lee County to foreclose on large blocks of land that had been abandoned,” says the chamber’s Conover. Parcels could then be sold to developers, he says, “for use as shopping centers or schools, or whatever purpose was necessary, with the idea that the old grid system would be bulldozed away and a more modern and economically feasible and ecologically sound site created.

“What happened is that with property going up so rapidly, people are paying their taxes,” he adds. “It’s too bad we didn’t start sooner.”

Spikowski and Conover are among those who would like to see Lehigh Acres incorporate. Conover says landowners outside the tentative boundaries want to get into the incorporation effort, which could potentially enlarge Lehigh Acres to 130 square miles. Incorporation efforts in the past have failed, and opposition exists this time, too. But a recent study by BJM Consulting, headed up by long-time Cape Coral leader and former Mayor Joseph Mazurkiewicz, indicates that it’s feasible.

“We don’t have local control here,” says Conover. “We have an urgent need for some rezoning, an urgent need for more stringent site development, more rigid code enforcement. It’s kind of worrisome because this whole thing’s getting ahead of us.”

“It’s only a matter of time before they’re going to have to do it,

because nobody cares more about the future of Lehigh Acres than the people who live and work there,” says Spikowski.

And there’s another important consideration: activity in LaBelle and Immokalee.

“We start talking about infrastructure needs in Lehigh, the next thing we’ve got to do is look around and say, ‘What’s going on around it that would influence its success or failure?’” says Spikowski. There’s plenty happening around it along State Road 80, County Road 78, and southeast, where Ave Maria University will be taking shape.

“We don’t want to be caught napping by LaBelle and Immokalee,” says Daltry. “Bonita Springs used to be a small rural community a whopping 20 years ago.”

Jill Tyrer

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