

## Platted lands need control

Government should get more power

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There is no question that Southwest Florida's huge 1960s-era subdivisions were poorly planned, and that parts of them need to be redesigned to allow better development. These residentially platted lands need space set aside for schools, parks and, yes, commercial development.

Government has a well-established right to use its power of eminent domain to condemn, or force the sale of private property for such public purposes as road or school construction, the creation of water preserves and other public projects. Government also can condemn property, including homes, for redevelopment after declaring it "blighted," a controversial process to be sure.

But legislation pending in Tallahassee would directly affect the vacant lands in antiquated developments such as Lehigh, which were platted into many tiny residential lots before land-use regulations were enacted to prevent the practice.

The bill was endorsed unanimously by the county's Smart Growth Committee, headed by Wayne Daltry. Daltry said its purpose is to set forth a comprehensive land use plan for Lehigh Acres and put smart growth principles to work on the land while it is still undeveloped.

All the people who are going to settle in Lehigh Acres will need doctors' offices, grocery stores and dry cleaners as well as schools, libraries and parks. Left to their own devices, experience in Lehigh and similar communities has shown, developers don't build their commercial properties using smart growth principles. Development is scattered and poorly planned.

But once those areas are designated for specific uses, parcels can be assembled either by government or by developers, although land assembly directed by government is a more open and public process. Lot owners benefit as the value of their vacant land increases. Holdouts would have their vacant lots condemned and would have to sell at a price set by the courts.

House Bill 1513 and Senate Bill 2548, which could be voted on this week as the legislative session ends, would allow government broader power to condemn vacant land to promote needed economic development.

Fixing these problems is a worthy goal. We want to steer new development into areas where development has already begun, rather than into relatively unspoiled areas.

Florida has been talking for decades about the platted lands issue, and doing precious little about it. There have been opportunities in the past for government to assemble land for redesign without condemnation. As little as three years ago, Lee County probably could have bought as many vacant lots as it wanted from willing sellers, but that boat has been missed.

Urge our leaders in Tallahassee to vote for this legislation.

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