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County seeks Pine Island compromise

Two groups at odds over rural land designation

BY JEFF CULL
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Lee County commissioners agreed Tuesday to keep Pine Island's community plan intact, but they want growers and islanders to sit down and hash out a compromise on one sticking point.

Those two groups are at odds over a coastal rural land designation that growers claim takes their prop-

erty rights and devalues their land. Many islanders, however, say it is the only way to ensure the rural flavor of their community will be maintained.

Commissioners agreed to give both sides two months to come to some agreement on the land designation that makes developers cluster their housing projects on 30 percent of their land and return the balance to the way it used

to look before it was farmed. If they can't work things out, "We can always make the hard decisions anytime," Commissioner Doug St. Cerny said.

But getting the two sides to agree on anything may not be an easy task. Growers such as Mark Dean, who farms about 2,000 acres of palm trees on Pine Island, said they have nothing to give in a negotiation. Coastal rural will cost land owners too much to put the land back into pre-farming shape.

"We're the only ones who will lose money on this," he said. "I've worked my whole life to get where I am — I started with 10 acres 20 years ago. The people who put this plan together don't own any farms. It's no skin off their back."

Supporters of the plan countered that developers still can use their land but it will have to conform to the island's look of native vegetation and low density. It also will help the island survive another hurricane.

"The Pine Island plan was developed to protect the safety of islanders," said Barbara Dublin, an islander involved in community planning.

Commissioners want to know whether an agreement is possible before a judge hears a challenge the growers have made to the plan.

County attorneys also warned commissioners the county could be liable for up to \$60 million in claims under the Bert Harris Act, which was passed in 1995 by the Florida Legislature to protect landowners from a government making rules that would devalue a person's property.

Commissioners, however, were trying to balance the county's desire for community plans with the risk if Bert Harris claims are won in the courts.

"The (Greater) Pine Island (Civic) Association has worked very hard on this plan and the growers still have issues," Commissioner Bob James said.

Commissioner John Albion suggested and the other commissioners agreed to approve the plan as is and give both sides two months to find a solution.

Commissioners, however,