

COLLIER COUNTY

Community Character Plan

Technical Memorandum #3

March 9, 2001 - The narrative below appeared in a draft form of the Community Character Plan document, but was removed from the Character Plan at the direction of County Staff and will therefore not appear in the published version. However, this material may be useful to the County or its Rural Fringe Committee in the future, so it has been reformatted as this Technical Memorandum #3 from the consultants to the County staff.

The Future of the Future Land Use Map

Clustering: Stealth Sprawl or Rural Preservation?

Most rural areas outside Collier County's urban growth boundary are zoned for agriculture. These properties can also be developed, under existing rules, as 5-acre homesites or with golf courses. This is an ideal time for these rules to be re-examined, while the county's Rural Fringe Committee is working vigorously to craft recommendations on how best to regulate this area.

"Clustering" provisions, while written with the best of intentions, often make it possible to group homes on smaller lots in a pattern resembling conventional suburban sprawl. Golf courses can also be built on easements across full-size 5-acre lots. These scenarios can inadvertently become formulas for stealth sprawl, in which suburban development beyond the boundary is legalized without having to ask the political body to officially move the boundary eastward.

"Standalone" golf courses are also allowed in rural areas, creating two concerns. First, as borne out by recent Collier County experience, standalone golf courses tend to be precursors to leapfrog residential development because they drive up land values in anticipation of similar approvals being granted in the future. Second, experts contend that wildlife, while impacted by agricultural uses and 5-acre lots, will nevertheless cross those territories, but will rarely venture onto heavily used golf courses. Thus golf courses set up "walls" that impact wildlife habitat much more seriously than farming or large lots. This effect is multiplied when the golf course is eventually combined with clustered residential development, especially if the development is configured conventionally, as fingers of disconnected streets that disturb large territories for relatively few houses.

On the other hand, it is conceivable that true rural clustering could result in compact hamlets or villages, with miles-wide bands of connected, undisturbed habitat or rural land in between. This approach to clustering could result in simultaneous preservation of property rights, rural character, and environmentally sensitive areas, while making conservation of agricultural land much more viable. Thus all clustering is not created equal, and telling good clustering from bad is more a matter of context-sensitive design than one of density formulas. A basic test for Collier County's rural areas: will a cluster development increase rural character and preserve farmland or connected native upland habitats, or will it result in farmland and native habitats being broken up and replaced with fairways and gated streets?

Preserving Options for the Future

Someday Collier County may run out of room for its growing urban population, once vacant land is filled up west of the present urban boundary and in Immokalee and Golden Gate Estates. If this occurs, even many decades from now, the county will need to rethink the location of its urban boundary.^a

However, if close-in rural land has meanwhile been used for relatively few dwellings in large gated clusters and golf courses, that land will never be available for normal settlement patterns if some rural areas need to be urbanized. The result could be the need to place future urban development to the east of Golden Gate Estates, exacerbating traffic congestion by lengthening car trips and separating neighborhoods even further from the jobs and shopping that are concentrated near Naples. Therefore, keeping rural areas rural, at least for now, is the best way to preserve rural character and avoid foreclosing the ability of future generations to reasonably use parts of what are now rural areas but which can also be considered as Collier County's potential "urban reserve."

The following recommendations would implement the suggested change regarding suburban development outside the urban boundary:

Intent

New suburban and urban development should be kept within the current urban boundary rather than being allowed to creep further into the countryside. Redevelopment and vacant acreage inside the urban boundary should be used to accommodate most anticipated growth.

Changes to the Growth Management Plan

a. Amend the description of the "Agricultural/Rural designation" (page 35) so that suburban and urban development can no longer occur in this designation by "clustering" the one-unit-per-five-acre rural density into a suburban development pattern. The allowable density in this category would not change, but new golf courses would not be permitted, and clustering of allowable dwelling units would be allowed only to the extent that it allows increased protection of native lands and rural character.