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## Bill may make farms ripe for development

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Places such as Pine Island could be opened up to massive development under a bill passed by the Florida House.

Plans developed by counties and cities to prevent urban sprawl would see some drastic changes.

The bill, passed last week by the House but now stalled in the Senate, would allow large agricultural lands adjacent to developed property to be rezoned and developed for homes and businesses, which is generally not

allowed by the land use plan of Lee County, among other places.

The bill, or Agricultural Economic Development Act, could replace all the land planning counties and cities have done to prevent urban sprawl.

The change would be significant in Southwest Florida, where rapid growth is taking development farther away from urban areas and closer to farms and ranches.

This type of development is happening or has already happened at a number of places around Lee and Charlotte counties, according to Bill Spikowski, a Fort Myers planner and chief architect of the Pine Island plan. The projects happened to meet the terms of the counties' land use plans.

"The tomato industry in Bonita Springs is disappearing," he said. "The square miles on the south side of Bonita Beach Road, east of Interstate 75, are being developed.

"Colonial Homes developed what used to be Moody Ranch in North Fort Myers to Moody River Estates and Bonita Bay developed Baucom Ranch in Buckingham to The Veranda. And of course, let's not forget the constant pressures on Babcock Ranch."

The bill gives agricultural landowners a plan of action if land around them

**Agricultural economic development act**

Senate Bill 761 or the Agricultural Economic Development Act:

The bill allows agricultural landowners, or a small farm (up to 5,000 acres), to either sell their land for development (urbanization) or develop it themselves to retain the value of their land. Requires local land plans to include the plan of action for agricultural land owners.

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is developed. It allows them to either sell their land for development or develop it themselves to retain the value of their land.

"We work all these years on environmental protection and coordinating infrastructure with growth and suddenly that wouldn't be the case," said Spikowski. "This is a statewide effort to convert agriculture to development and increase value of land to that end."

The bill's sponsors include Republican Sens. Nancy Argenziano of Crystal River and Mike Haridopolos of Melbourne. A similar bill passed both houses last year, but was vetoed by Gov. Bush.

Argenziano delayed discussion of the bill at a committee hearing Monday. She is working with environmentalists and others who oppose it to find a compromise.

"To the people who've been working on this — sometimes you have to get down to the wire to get things done," she said.

But Argenziano also said there has been lots of misinformation spread to kill its chances.

"To those who have misrepresented what the bill does: Shame, shame, shame."

Many Pine Island residents have fought for years to keep intrusive development off the island and fear this bill will open the gates for developers to move into their rural coastal community.

"The Pine Island land use plan is keeping developers at bay," Spikowski said. "But developers could change the plan with this bill and the county wouldn't have any say or authority of it. Right now it is a fear not a reality, but that could change."

Bokeelia resident Phil Buchanan said the bill is a disaster not just for Pine Island, but the entire state.

"It encourages farmers to turn into developers," he said. "Counties and cities have spent millions of dollars and time to put these land-use plans together. This bill makes it look like a joke by allowing urban sprawl to happen."

Bill Mantis, president of the Greater Pine Island Civic Association, sent a letter to all state senators voicing the organization's objections to the bill.

"It removes the decision-making process from local control," he wrote. "It spurs growth at a time when growth is already out of control: when water tables are dropping, when wetlands and wildlife habitat are disappearing, when state infrastructure is already inadequate to it's job."

Rep. Jeff Kottkamp, R-Cape Coral, was not present to vote on the bill in the House but said he supports it. He said its a matter of fairness to farmers.

"For example, if you are a farmer landlocked by condos, it will give you some way to get relief, monetarily or changing the use of your property," he said. "The point is, if everything around you is affected by the change in zoning law, this gives you an avenue to recoup your losses."

Frank Schnidman, a professor of community and economic development at Florida Atlantic University and an expert in land planning, said counties and cities in Florida are required to plan for growth using state-approved land-use plans. The local plans detail how and when land should be developed. This bill will change that.

"It takes the control for land planning away from local government," said Schnidman. "It would circumvent the comprehensive planning process."

County commissioners have voiced their opposition to the bill. Commissioner Bob Janes, legislative liaison for the commissioners, sent messages to each member of the House and Senate urging them to defeat the bill.

"To what extent does the state want to get involved with county land-use planning?" he said. "What is the point of coming up with land-use plans and where is the fairness when you tilt the benefits over to the side of development?"

"Anything that takes an arrow out of our quiver to manage growth and urban sprawl weakens our authority."

— The News-Press Tallahassee bureau chief Paul Flemming contributed to this report.

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