

It may take a city to save rural life

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It's ironic that incorporating as a city could be a way to preserve the rural character of a community, but that choice is facing the people of Pine Island.

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The issue is whether county government, which governs the island now, is willing to keep enough of a lid on development to satisfy most of the island's 9,000 residents. Like other areas — Cape Coral, Sanibel, Fort Myers Beach and Bonita Beach — Pine Island may find that it can take control of its destiny only by becoming a city of its own.

For the rest of Lee County, what's at stake is the preservation of a different place, still unique and relatively unspoiled by the urban sprawl that has pounded down most of the precious character of Southwest Florida into Anywhere, Florida.

Also at issue is whether the county can really stand up and protect a community's own plan and vision for its future, in the face of the the ravenous demand for development property.

A TRIPWIRE

Pine Islanders prevailed on the county 16 years ago to set a traffic tripwire on the island's single road link to the mainland. If trips on western Pine Island Road hit 910 during the busiest part of the day, commissioners were to stop allowing new residential developments on the island.

But the tsunami of development that has rolled over the region is threatening Pine Island, where agriculture and fishing are still mainstays. County commissioners have moved the goal posts.

Since Sept. 14, 2004, when traffic hit the magic number, the county has approved or is reviewing 14 developments with more than 800 potential residences. If all were approved, traffic would increase by 50 percent.

Officials are relying on a more recent Highway Traffic Capacity Manual than the one used to calculate the original limit. The new trip limit is 1,130.

ACT NOW

Whatever. The point is that some technicality will always be found to duck the tough decisions if the county doesn't want to make them.

Incorporation is no guarantee that any particular policy will be followed. But if a majority of people want to preserve the principle of the community plan they have devised for themselves, they should start working on incorporation now.

Maybe they can reach an acceptable accommodation with the county short of incorporation, maybe not. Maybe legal action is a good alternative. But the incorporation option should be developed, starting now.