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Pine Island battles development

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Residents say rural island's flavor at risk

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Pine Island is mango farms and palm nurseries, horses grazing in pastures, the St. James General Store, trailer parks and million-dollar homes, boats in the front yard, churches, mullet fishing, a Dairy Queen, gravel lawns, mangroves, stunning sunsets, hundreds of artists, eagles, hawks, ospreys and scrub pines.

And not a single stoplight.

It's a different Southwest Florida island — a rural throwback in an Internet world.

And while the largest island on Florida's west coast has evolved slowly over the decades, any future development may be put on hold.

The 17-mile-long island's only link to the mainland, Pine Island Road, is dangerously close to hitting its capacity. When that happens, possibly next month, it will trigger a moratorium on new subdivisions or commercial projects.



Louise McDonald of St. James City buys vegetables every week from an Immokalee resident who utilizes the former Pine Island Organics stand. She hopes the island can avoid more growth. "I'd rather see the developers stay away," McDonald said. *Photos by STEPHEN HAYFORD/news-press.com*

"We'll follow the plan and create the moratorium," said Lee County Commissioner Bob Janes. The moratorium won't affect about 6,500 single-family homesites or a few development orders that have been issued. And it hasn't deterred developers.

A Fort Lauderdale real estate broker wants to turn more than 1,000 acres of the sleepy island of about 9,300 residents into condos and hotel rooms, homes and commercial buildings, industrial facilities and boat docks. The broker's plans are ambitious and likely to face many regulatory hurdles. But residents are mounting a campaign to keep it from happening, anyway.

"We're scared," said Peggy McTeague, a 27-year island resident and owner of WildChild Art Gallery in a sea-foam green building in Matlacha. "If the big condos come we'll lose all the rural flavor."

Petitions have been circulating that will tell Lee County commissioners that islanders want growth to be controlled. The best way to do that, they say, is for the island's governing body to approve changes to land codes that would make it tougher for a developer to do what broker Russell Setti is proposing.



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Setti, a 60-year-old former mayor of Cooper City, has quietly purchased about 60 acres of the 1,045 he wants to develop. His plans would take nearly all of the residential and commercial land available for development on the island through the year 2020, according to the county's land use code.

He's also challenging the Greater Pine Island Civic Association's proposed changes to the Lee Plan, the county's land-use bible.

So are some of Pine Island's largest land owners, many of whom are farmers. They worry that restrictions will reduce the value of their land if they decide to sell or develop.

A state administrative judge will hear the case in February.

Road worries

Pine Island Road is so congested now that the county won't allow a single piece of land to be rezoned. And if only a few more cars start driving the two-lane State Road 78, county officials said they will quit issuing development orders — something required for nearly any project short of a single-family home on a pre-platted lot.



That could keep Setti's plan from ever reaching construction, but islanders are leery of what they call a "developer-friendly" county commission.

Denise McElfresh of Cape Coral baits her hook while fishing from a relative's boat at Jug Creek Marina Thursday. Although McElfresh herself is part of a home-building company, she would rather not see more development on Pine Island. "That would ruin it," McElfresh said.

"We're concerned that the county might change the rules," said Bob Hawkins, owner of Island Hardware & Marine Supply in St. James City — a place that often hosts nationally known musicians on its dock. "We don't have the roads and we never did."

Those rules limit most of the island to one home on one acre of land, keep the maximum building height at 38 feet, or about three stories, and stop new development when more than 910 cars per day pass through Matlacha.

The traffic count is expected to be eclipsed early next year, and when it is, development stops. That is, unless the county commission allows an increase, which it hasn't done since the threshold was established in 1989.

One islander, however, thinks the county will do just that.

"The board of county commissioners are going to change the numbers," said Bob Glennon, an island palm grower. "The (traffic counts are) based on old data from the 1960s."

But Janes, who represents the island, and Commissioner Andy Coy said that's unlikely.

Coy said he would favor keeping the limit but would like to find alternatives to ease future traffic for "the development that's already been approved."

He'd also like to expedite getting Burnt Store Road widened to four lanes to help ease the island's hurricane evacuation time. Islanders can expect 21 hours to evacuate Pine Island compared to 18 hours for neighboring Cape Coral.

Slowing growth

Lee County slowed development on the 33,000-acre island in 1989 because there is no economically viable way to widen Pine Island Road.

Adding lanes in Matlacha would eliminate parking in the historic district there, and the bridge is only two lanes wide. An alternative span or route to the island was deemed not feasible.

The county developed a community plan that allows development on a specific amount of land through the year 2020. Today, only 616 acres of residential land and about 20 acres of commercial land can be developed in the next 16 years. Setti's development would take most of that.

When it's used up, no new development orders would be issued, said Paul O'Connor, director of planning for Lee County.

About three years ago, a group of civic leaders understood that building would soon outpace the road and a moratorium would kick in.

So, to give builders some relief from the moratorium while keeping the island's look intact, they proposed changes. The island doesn't have a government, so the only way to change land rules is through the county's comprehensive land-use plan.

The changes call for any new development to be housed on 30 percent of the land. The remaining 70 percent must then be returned to its former native state and maintained that way. It also allows development after the 910 cars per day threshold is met, said Bill Spikowski, a Fort Myers planner and Bokeelia resident who wrote the plan.

But Setti and some farmers are objecting. They filed formal challenges to the Pine Island plan with the state.

Breese Glennon and her husband Bob grow palm trees on 60 acres they bought in 1990. They're part of the island's agribusiness that farms about 3,600 acres.

They were surprised, as were other land owners, at the restrictions being proposed.

"The choice of what to do with the land was taken away," said Breese Glennon. "When we purchased the land, a deal's a deal."

She also lamented that an estimated \$25,000 per acres to replant trees and vegetation to get her farmland back to "native" was excessive.

Most farmers have rural zoning on their property, which allows for one home on 1 acre. Many said they have no immediate plans to develop their land, they just want flexibility.

Commissioners earlier this month heeded the land owners' warning that changing the rules on their land could amount to claims against the county. They commissioned a \$100,000 study on the effects of Pine Island's proposed rule on property values. The results are expected in February.

It's already changing

"Pine Island has become a cool place; now it's hip," said 23-year island real estate agent Mike Shevlin. "It's a place to go that's not stuffy."

Many residents agree that the island has changed.

Some blame the Internet for spreading Pine Island's country-island lifestyle to the masses. Others say overdevelopment on other island communities has beckoned investors here.

"People are looking toward Pine Island because Sanibel and Captiva are full," said Dave Lukasek, a Bokeelia resident. "We were not so desirable before because there were no beaches, but now everyone wants to be near the water."

Farmers were lured to Pine Island after Hurricane Andrew in the early 1990s. They left storm-prone Homestead, bought island woodland and converted it to palm nurseries or mango orchards.

In the mid-1990s, a ban on gill-net fishing drastically changed the way about 300 families made a living. Many moved away, and those who stayed had to adapt.

"When the net-ban came, we expected our fish houses would turn into marinas and condos, and it's happened," said Rhonda Dooley, a 30-year island resident and wife and mother to commercial fishermen. "The flavor has changed; we used to know everyone on the island, but you can't anymore."

That led to Matlacha's current look of tony boutiques, funky art galleries and colorful inns, all occupying buildings sold after the fishing net ban.

Now, tourists can spend \$290 per night to stay at a trendy bed and breakfast in Bokeelia or \$1,600 to attend a four-day fishing school in Pineland or sip champagne at a St. James City restaurant.

Future growth

Islanders, especially longtime residents, said they don't mind some change, but it needs to be gradual and preserve the island's flavor.

But the degree of change is an open argument. Some complained when a Subway shop opened in an old store at the island's only four-way stop — it was too mainland.

Now Setti wants to develop four different projects. He said he's in for the long term.

"This is not just for today, we are looking at least 20 years," he said. "I am not just talking about residential, there is business, a medical facility, expanding the school and we want to put in about six private/public boat access ramps.

"I am taking the 'Old Florida' style approach to this. These are homes that look like the ones from the early 1900s. I want them to blend in harmoniously with the existing developments of the island."

Setti's proposal envisions about 350 acres of residential land, which means about 1,400 people could become permanent residents of Pine Island if his proposal is accepted.

"I am addressed as the bad guy, the marauder, not the investor," Setti said. "These projects are better for the community than standard box housing."

But some residents want to keep Pine Island the same.

"You drive over that bridge and you're in another world," said Sally Tapager, president of the Pine Island Chamber of Commerce. "It's beautiful here."

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