

Pine Island reaches limit

Lee County halts developers' work

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Published by news-press.com on September 15, 2004

Lee County commissioners put a stop to large residential developments on Pine Island on Tuesday after traffic on the only road to the island reached a predetermined limit.

A 15-year-old county rule says development projects on the island will not be allowed when traffic counts hit 910 vehicles at a designated peak hour on Pine Island Road. It's commonly called the "910 rule." County transportation officials said the count was now 937 vehicles, and commissioners agreed unanimously to uphold the law.

"The staff has clearly shown that the numbers of 910 have already been exceeded," Commissioner Ray Judah said. "The developers cannot put blinders on."

The development halt applies to large, as yet unapproved projects. It does not mean Pine Island property owners cannot build homes or that already approved developments cannot go ahead.

Some island land owners and real estate professionals said the rule might halt growth on the island.

"It's definitely going to have an impact," said Ken Cox, an island Realtor. "I'm disappointed."

Steve Hartsell, a Fort Myers lawyer, said shutting down development could limit some agriculture companies on Pine Island from getting loans for cleanup after Hurricane Charley because their land value would fall. Land value for large tracts could be reduced because they couldn't be developed into subdivisions or condominium projects.

But residents who want to maintain the island's rural flavor hailed the decision.

"I'm delighted," island resident Phil Buchanan said. "The commissioners did the right thing. It's been the law since 1989."

Public safety officials said the rule will keep housing density low in coastal regions, such as Pine Island, which would suffer less damage in a major storm.

"Just look at Hurricane Charley and its track," said John Wilson, director of public safety for Lee County. "We couldn't have had a better scenario because it hit us where we have low coastal density."

The 910 rule was established in 1989 to allow enough capacity on Pine Island Road for the 6,800 vacant homesites on the island to be built on before the road would become too clogged. This was needed because there is only one way to get to the island, over the two-lane Matlacha Pass Bridge, and there were no plans to build another bridge or widen the existing bridge to allow for increased traffic. Fifteen years later, there are still no plans for widening.

But county officials said it's not exactly a moratorium.

"A small project could be approved," said Mary Gibbs, Lee County's community development director.

And, owners still can build homes on the thousands of already platted lots or develop projects already approved by the county. A builder also could tear down an existing development, such as a mobile home park, and build homes or apartments because they would involve fewer people and create less demand on roads, Gibbs said.

There are eight Pine Island projects with about 500 houses or condominiums currently being reviewed by the county. They



Lee County commissioner
judah

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The county commissioners also approved the following measures Tuesday:

- Allowed the state of local emergency declaration to expire. It was in effect since Aug. 3.
- Increased a contract with Solid Resources Inc. to \$1.3 million to assist the county's Solid Waste Division with hurricane debris removal.
- Approved a wildlife cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of the Interior, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to restore and enhance wildlife habitat on a 103-acre portion of San Carlos Bay-Bunche Beach Preserve. The county will receive \$25,000 on a reimbursement basis for mangrove forest and salt marsh habitat restoration. Also approved the Prairie Pines Preserve Land Stewardship Plan, which establishes guidelines for management and public facilities at the 2,700-acre Conservation 20/20 preserve in central North Fort Myers.
- Increased the 2004 budget of the supervisor of elections by \$200,000 to pay for overages in postage and overtime relating to party changes, increase in numbers of voters and increased requests for absentee ballots.
- WCI's request to defer access battle of the Coconut Point marina to the board's Oct. 26 meeting. WCI officials are arguing that the marina access off Coconut Road becomes private about 10 feet from the water. They want to build 48 slips there. County officials and residents believe the access has always been open to the public.

should be able to move ahead if they don't add significantly to traffic, Gibbs said.

That's not how some view the rule. "The county has one interpretation and we have another," said Association. "It's not clearly resolved yet."

—Staff writer Carie L. Call contributed to this report.

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