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Pine Island's traffic rule upheld

By **ANGELA HILL**
AHILL@NEWS-PRESS.COM

Pine Island farmers hoping to make money off land sales were the losers while residents fearing more development were the winners Wednesday.

Lee County commissioners voted unanimously against a proposed change to the traffic rule that prevents further new development on the island of 9,000 residents.

"We dodged a couple bullets," said Phil Buchanan of St. James City. "It is a good step forward. This is the fifth time I have down on proposed changes to the 910 rule. I sure hope this is the last time."

The proposed amendment change would have allowed additional residential development despite increased traffic in Matlacha. The current rule, called 910, restricts development based on traffic counts along Pine Island Road.

"It's a growth management issue and a classic one," commissioner Bob Janes said. "The problem now is that it's growing out there, and it is a tough rule to follow. To have a rule like that can bring a lot of new development to a screeching halt, that is why it is a work in progress. It's not a perfect document."

Matt Uhle, attorney for the Agriculture & Landowners' Association, said the reason for the requested change was to provide farmers the ability to get the most value for their property if they need to sell their land.

"Any property owner wants to retain their property rights so if something happens you've got options," said Mark Dean, owner of PalmCo, the largest commercial palm grower on Pine Island. "The Pine Island Land Use Plan is so one-sided. It's terrible what's going on."

Under the current law, for every acre agricultural landowners want to develop, 10 acres most remain undeveloped to help avoid a high density of growth.

Barb Dubin of Bokeelia said the commissioners' decision against changing the rule will ensure the safety of Pine Island residents.

"Let's face it, the most important thing out here is the safety of the islanders," she said. "You figure what you would be doing is allowing way more development. It would take that much longer to evacuate the island if we had another hurricane."

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The 910 rule means that if traffic counts hit 910 vehicles at a designated peak hour on Pine Island Road in front of the Sandy Hook Restaurant in Matlacha, new residential development projects on the island will not be allowed. County transportation officials said the count was now 937 vehicles.

The Pine Island Agriculture & Landowners' Association, a group of Pine Island farmers owning 3,300 acres, wanted to change the way the county used the traffic rule to allow more development.

Bill Spikowski, a Fort Myers planner and chief architect of the Pine Island Land Use Plan, said the traffic rule was written to allow the already 6,000 vacant lots waiting on building permits to be developed while putting a cap on new development.

"The existing restrictions would have effectively been replaced," he said. "It was a ludicrous request."

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