
GREATER PINE ISLAND COMMUNITY PLAN UPDATE

This document presents a community plan update for Greater Pine Island. Background material on current conditions is followed by specific proposals to amend Lee County plans and regulations that affect Greater Pine Island.

A quick summary of this plan is available by reviewing the shaded boxes throughout this document. One of Greater Pine Island's major planning issues is summarized in each box, followed by one or more recommended responses.

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Written comments can be forwarded to the Greater Pine Island Civic Association at P.O. Box 478, St. James City, FL 33956.

This plan update was formally submitted to Lee County on September 28, 2001. Formal public hearings will be held in Fort Myers. Notices are published in advance in the News-Press.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION TO THIS PLAN UPDATE .	Page 1
<i>Pine Island – the Place and the People</i>	<i>Page 2</i>
<i>Existing Private Property Rights</i>	<i>Page 4</i>
TRANSPORTATION ISSUES	Page 5
<i>Hurricane Evacuation</i>	<i>Page 5</i>
<i>Road Constraints</i>	<i>Page 7</i>
POPULATION AND LAND USE	Page 11
<i>Town and Country on Pine Island</i>	<i>Page 11</i>
<i>Population Summary</i>	<i>Page 18</i>
<i>Greater Pine Island's Boundary</i>	<i>Page 19</i>
COMMUNITY CHARACTER	Page 20
<i>Design of Commercial Buildings</i>	<i>Page 20</i>
<i>Bike Paths</i>	<i>Page 22</i>
<i>Fences and Walls</i>	<i>Page 24</i>
<i>Historic Buildings</i>	<i>Page 26</i>
<i>Cap on Building Heights</i>	<i>Page 28</i>
<i>Business Signs</i>	<i>Page 30</i>
<i>County-initiated Rezonings</i>	<i>Page 31</i>
<i>Pine Island – a Vision for 2020</i>	<i>Page 32</i>
<i>Municipal Incorporation</i>	<i>Page 33</i>
THE ENVIRONMENT	Page 34
<i>Protecting the Aquatic Preserves from Runoff</i>	<i>Page 34</i>
<i>Septic Tanks Along Canals</i>	<i>Page 36</i>
<i>Jet-skis and Air Boats</i>	<i>Page 38</i>
APPENDIX A: TRANSPORTATION DATA AND ANALYSIS	
APPENDIX B: RURAL LAND-USE ALTERNATIVES	
APPENDIX C: EXISTING AND APPROVED LOTS	

INTRODUCTION TO THIS PLAN UPDATE

Pine Island, Little Pine Island, and Matlacha share many characteristics and are collectively called Greater Pine Island, or simply Pine Island. These islands are located west of Cape Coral and mainland Lee County but inside the string of barrier islands along Florida's west coast.

While geographically separate, Greater Pine Island is part of unincorporated Lee County and is governed by its board of county commissioners. Although without legal self-determination, local residents have always been vocal about public affairs, especially planning and zoning. An informal coalition of Pine Island residents formulated the original "future land use map" for Pine Island that was adopted by Lee County into its 1984 comprehensive plan (the original Lee Plan). Five years later, a community plan prepared by the Greater Pine Island Civic Association was the basis for a complete section of the Lee Plan (now under Goal 14) dedicated to the future of Pine Island.

The opening statement of the community plan explained its purpose:

GOAL 14: *To manage future growth on and around Greater Pine Island so as to maintain the island's unique natural resources and character and to insure that island residents and visitors have a reasonable opportunity to evacuate when a hurricane strike is imminent.*

Over ten years have passed since Goal 14 and its supporting policies and maps were adopted. Many of those policies are still pertinent; a few have not been implemented fully. However, due to the passing of time, new factors have arisen that require an overall re-examination of the plan. The explosion of agricultural activity on the northern half of Pine Island was not anticipated.



Residential growth has slowed somewhat from the 1980s. And traffic on Pine Island's only link to the mainland has increased, reaching target levels that were set in the 1989 plan to indicate the imminent overloading of the road system.

This current plan update begins with a general description of Greater Pine Island and its past and present residents, referred to in this plan simply as Pine Islanders. Major planning issues are then discussed in detail: hurricane evacuation, traffic, town and country boundaries, community character issues, and the environment. Each planning issue ends with a policy conclusion and specific recommendations for changes to the Lee Plan and the land development code.

Pine Island – the Place and the People

Pine Island is physically separated from the rest of Lee County. Situated within the estuary formed by Charlotte Harbor, Pine Island Sound, and San Carlos Bay, Pine Island differs in geography from the mainland to the east and the barrier islands to the west, though sharing some of the characteristics of each. It is a 10,000- to 12,000-year-old accretion island of some 33,620 acres, over a third of it mangrove forest and the remainder upland (originally slash pine and palmetto, now mostly cleared for agriculture or developed).

Pine Island's ecosystem is unique. Its mangrove shoreline and seagrasses just offshore play a vital role in the cycle of all aquatic life, supporting fishing interests both commercial and recreational. These plants are important elements in the well-being of the entire estuary, serving as its filtration system, aquatic nursery, and feeding ground. Seagrasses in Charlotte Harbor have declined by 29% over the last 40 years; much of the decline was caused by dredging and maintenance of the intracoastal waterway.

Within recent years large areas of pine forest have been cleared for agriculture. Currently over 3,600 acres are in agricultural use, with 36% in rangeland, 35% in nurseries, 21% in groves, and 5% in vegetables. The moderating influence of surrounding waters on the climate creates ideal growing conditions for certain tropical fruits such as mangoes, carambola, and lychees (99% of Lee County's tropical fruit acreage is on Pine Island). Ornamental palms of several varieties are now being widely grown on Pine Island. The tradeoff is this: every acre of land cleared for agriculture is an acre lost to its natural inhabitants. Furthermore, the extent of damage from fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides draining into the estuary is not known. Efforts to monitor these conditions are both modest and underfunded.

Pristine areas remaining on the island provide a haven for an abundance of wildlife, much of it endangered and threatened — bald eagle, wood stork, osprey, ibis, heron, egret, pelican, manatee, alligator, gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake, and beautiful pawpaw, to name a few.

Pine Island's history sets it apart. Archaeological finds in Pineland confirm the existence of one of the most important sites of the Calusa Indians, dating back more than 1,500 years. Digs and educational tours at the Randell Research Center are ongoing, as well as efforts by the non-profit Calusa Land Trust to purchase the remaining portions of a cross-island canal constructed by the Calusa Indians. The Pineland site is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Later settlers, appearing on the scene late in the 19th century and early in the 20th, contributed their own colorful chapter to the history of the island, eking out a hardscrabble subsistence fishing and farming. By the early 20th century, citrus and mango groves were planted near Pineland and Bokeelia. Many descendants of these pioneering families still live on the island.

Pine Island differs from other communities in Lee County in the needs, interests, and aspirations of its people. Its population is diverse, made up of old commercial fishing families, a large population of retirees from the north, and younger working families with children attending school, with families finding employment both on and off the island.

Each group harbors its own priorities and ambitions, yet they share common traits. They are independent-minded and they all chose to come to this place looking for privacy, a laid-back lifestyle, a setting of slash pine and open skies and blue water — qualities there for all to enjoy, whether by fishing the waters, or biking through the neighborhood, or simply returning from a hard day at the office or jobsite and crossing the bridge at Matlacha to find a refuge from heavy traffic and urban sprawl.

Peace and tranquility brought them to Pine Island, and that is what they value most.

Life on Pine Island mixes country living with the wonders of being surrounded by water, a fragile combination in coastal Florida. Without attention, the treasures of this unique place may be obliterated.

Looking east from the bridges at Matlacha, Pine Islanders see a vast expanse of sameness, a development form that suits the needs of others but that seems alien and a threat to Pine Islanders' vision of their own future.

Pine Island has two traffic problems resulting from the near-impossibility of widening Pine Island Road through Matlacha without destroying its historic district. This road is nearing its capacity for meeting the daily travel needs of Pine Islanders and visitors, and it is barely adequate for evacuating low-lying areas in case of tropical storms and hurricanes.



Matlacha historic district, bisected by Pine Island Road

Photo courtesy of Mohsen Salehi and Bill Dubin

“Places like Matlacha are rare in this state, not just for its historical interest, but because the locals thrive by protecting the place. They like where they live and don’t want to change it. Tourists respond by coming just to hang out on the bridges yakking with fisherfolk, then staying to buy local crafts and eat the fish they’ve seen caught. They come because they want to feel part of a real place, a place that doesn’t put on mouse ears to pull them in.”

— Florida writer Herb Hiller

The main mechanism currently protecting Pine Island from overdevelopment that would worsen the existing congestion and evacuation hazard has been Policy 14.2.2, found in the Lee Plan as follows:

POLICY 14.2.2: *In order to recognize and give priority to the property rights previously granted by Lee County for about 6,800 additional dwelling units, the county shall consider for adoption development regulations which address growth on Pine Island and which implement measures to gradually limit future development approvals. The effect of these regulations would be to appropriately reduce certain types of approvals at established thresholds prior to the adopted level-of-service standard being reached, as follows:*

- *When traffic on Pine Island Road between Burnt Store Road and Stringfellow Boulevard reaches 810 peak hour, annual average two-way trips, the regulations shall provide restrictions on further rezonings which would increase traffic on Pine Island Road.*
- *When traffic on Pine Island Road between Burnt Store Road and Stringfellow Boulevard reaches 910 peak hour, annual average two-way trips, the regulations shall provide restrictions on the further issuance of residential development orders (pursuant to the Development Standards Ordinance), or other measures to maintain the adopted level of service, until improvements can be made in accordance with this plan.*

Ten years after this policy was adopted, here are the critical facts:

- Of the “6,800 additional dwelling units” cited in Policy 14.2.2, about 6,675 still can be built at any time (without requiring any further rezonings or subdivision approvals).
- Official Lee County traffic counts for the year 2000 show that the 810-trip threshold has now been exceeded for the third consecutive year.
- There are no practical or economically feasible plans to widen Pine Island Road through Matlacha or provide a second road to Pine Island.

Given these facts, it is clear that further increases in traffic are inevitable as property rights previously granted are exercised. The question is: how many *more* development rights will Lee County grant on top of those already in existence?

The conflict between these two realities—impending population growth on the island on the one hand and traffic exceeding limits established by the Lee Plan on the other—is the dilemma faced by island residents and by Lee County in the coming years. The proposals in this plan update represent the best efforts of Pine Islanders to deal with this conflict and to manage growth responsibly in the coming decades.

Growth is inevitable. Pine Islanders recognize that as a fact of life, but they seek a kind of responsible growth that preserves and enhances the best features of Greater Pine Island.

Existing Private Property Rights

In a 1989 study about Greater Pine Island, Lee County tabulated the number of existing dwelling units and the number of additional dwelling units that have already been approved but not yet built.¹ Most of the “approved” units are reflected in older subdivision plats where the lots have already been sold off to individual owners; a small number of the “approved” units were in development orders issued by Lee County that may or may not be developed. That inventory showed 4,256 existing dwelling units and 6,663 “additional units” not yet constructed. (Unlike the U.S. Census, that inventory counted mobile homes and fixed recreational vehicles such as those in Cherry Estates as dwelling units.)

As part of this plan update, additional data sources were examined that might verify, contradict, or update those figures. One data source is the Lee County Coastal Study, which counted the number of dwelling units that existed in 1985 based on the official tax rolls. Another is a complete new inventory of existing and approved dwelling units conducted for this plan update, the complete results of which are found in Appendix C. Table 1 below summarizes those new data sources and presents a revised estimate of 6,675 additional dwelling units yet to be built, based on existing approvals. These “build-out” totals do not include development rights for unplatted vacant land or agricultural land.

This estimate of the number of additional dwelling units yet to be built is very close to Lee County’s 1989 estimate. It is true that some, possibly many, of these dwelling units will never be built, due to limited demand, or vacant lots being held as open space by adjoining owners, or unforeseen permitting problems. Yet the magnitude of the development rights already granted is

¹ *Commercial Study: Pine Island*, Lee County Department of Community Development, July 1989.

overwhelming to Greater Pine Island, given the factors that will be discussed in the following sections of this report.

TABLE 1
Dwelling Unit Totals for 1985, 2000, and Build-out

Pine Island, By Sector	Dwelling Units		(15-year increase)	Dwelling Units	
	1985	2000		Build-out	(additional)
Bokeelia	393	914	521	1,735	821
Pineland	128	322	194	2,022	1,700
Pine Island Center	485	873	388	2,269	1,396
Matlacha	632	695	63	1,029	334
Flamingo Bay	717	869	152	1,330	461
Tropical Homesites	117	259	142	713	454
St. James City	1,182	1,705	523	3,213	1,508
TOTALS:	3,654	5,637	1,983	12,311	6,674

SOURCES:
1985 dwelling units: Lee County Coastal Study, pages 3 through 13 of Volume II, Godschalk & Associates, 1988.
2000 and build-out dwelling units: See full data in Appendix C.
Sector boundaries: See map in Appendix C.

TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

Hurricane Evacuation

Pine Islanders will have a very difficult time evacuating if the island is struck by hurricanes of certain types.

Updated evacuation estimates were recently provided for Pine Island by the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRPC). In the event of a Category 2 hurricane coming from the most hazardous direction in the month of November, over 20 hours could be required for an evacuation.²

This evacuation time is unacceptably high even at today’s population levels. Hurricane forecasters are not confident that they can provide this much warning that a hurricane is likely to strike a specific area. Also, this evacuation time already exceeds the regional³ and county⁴ standards for evacuation times.

These problems are not isolated to Pine Islanders alone. First, any evacuation of Pine Island would include residents of Upper Captiva and Useppa. Second, although Matlacha and its two-

² This time period includes 12 hours to get all evacuating vehicles through the most restrictive segment of the evacuation route (called the “clearance time”) and to a shelter or to the county line, plus 8 hours (“pre-landfall hazard time”) to account for the time before the hurricane strikes when the evacuation must cease due to gale force winds or tidal waters flooding the evacuation route. This time period could be reduced slightly if westbound traffic is temporarily banned from Pine Island Road, which may be ordered during the latter part of an evacuation if traffic is backing up on Pine Island.

³ “Projected evacuation times will be regularly reduced from 1995 levels, and by 2010, evacuation times will not exceed 18 hours in any part of the region.” [Goal III-5, Strategic Regional Policy Plan, SWFRPC, 1995]

⁴ “By 1995, evacuation times will be restored to 1987 levels using the 1987 Southwest Florida Regional Hurricane Plan Update as guidance; and by 2010, the clearance time portion of evacuation time will not exceed 18 hours.” [Objective 79.1, Lee County Comprehensive Plan]