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Commission OKs more funds for DRGR study

Demand results for added expense of \$650,000

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Here's the money, but this study had better be good.

That's the message two Lee County Commissioners put forth as the board unanimously approved \$650,000 in additional funding for a study of the county's environmentally sensitive southeast section.

The additional money brings the total to \$1.4 million to hire Coral Gables-based Dover, Kohl & Partners for a comprehensive land-use study of the 83,000-acre Density Reduction Groundwater Resource area. It will recommend new land-use scenarios and the changes needed to the comprehensive plan and land development code, such as what new mining operations can develop, how and where.

The board set aside \$750,000 in early December, the original estimate for the study.

"That's a big chunk of dollars," Commissioner Tammy Hall said.

The consultant will subcontract much of the work. Hall on Tuesday wanted confirmation the consultant will not hire local companies with interests tied to the environmentally diverse land.

Mary Gibbs, Community Development Department director, said she emphasized to the consultant during negotiations the need to avoid conflicts of interest.

Commissioner Frank Mann said that for that money the study's results should be clear and complete.

"I want something that really transcends, that goes from the problem to the recommended solution." Mann said. "When it is done, I want it to say something."

IN OTHER BUSINESS

Commissioners approved:

- Sending staff back for more work adjusting an ordinance to protect bald eagles from development. Since 1986, the county's 17-page ordinance meant to complement the federal Endangered Species Act has been incentive-based and voluntary. County staff want to make mandatory the procedures for safely protecting the birds during development. The state's new guidelines are in draft form and are expected to be done next month. How those guidelines will influence the county's ordinance is under determination. Lee County staff will bring back changes to the ordinance to the commission in the future for consideration.
- Moving the county's first concrete-truck spill ordinance to a public hearing Jan. 22. The law would require all trucks on county roadways have a chute closure device to prevent spilling on roadways. Fines would be up to \$1,000 for a fourth-time violator. County transportation officials estimate it costs the county an average of \$50,000 a year to hire a company to fix small concrete spills.
- Spending \$158,600 in state money to purchase an ambulance driving simulator for the Division of Public Safety/EMS.

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Lee County resident Steve Hartsell said \$1.4 million for the comprehensive study seems extravagant.

"What is the new study going to provide?" he asked. "Is it new information, or honestly can the same result be achieved by simply ... meeting with the stakeholders in the area on both sides of the issues."

Additional mapping, traffic studies and water modeling drove up the cost from original estimates, Gibbs said.

As the study is conducted, a controversial moratorium on growth plan amendments and zoning changes in the area carries through Sept. 10, putting pressure on the consultant to deliver the study before then.

"There is nothing more important than the DRGR to critical water resources," Commissioner Ray Judah said. "It is the last frontier."

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