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Price of DR/GR land study climbs

Lee could spend \$650,000 more than expected

By Ryan Lengerich

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A landmark environmental land study in southeast Lee County will be more expensive than expected.

Lee County staff is asking commissioners to spend 87 percent more than originally estimated for a comprehensive study of environmentally sensitive land in the Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource area.

The study will recommend new land-use scenarios and the necessary changes to the comprehensive plan and land development code.

A time crunch and the need for new land-use maps and traffic studies contributed to the price increase.

On Dec. 4, commissioners set aside \$750,000 from unincorporated county taxes for a consultant to come up with a comprehensive study in the 83,000-acre environmentally sensitive and diverse area. The unincorporated tax provides funds for operations, including development review, zoning codes and building inspections.

The county land planning staff is recommending Coral Gables-based Dover, Kohl & Partners for the work. When the staff entered into negotiations after the commission approved the original amount, it became clear the original cost estimate was too low.

On Tuesday, the staff will ask commissioners to accept Dover, Kohl & Partners as consultant and free up another \$650,000.

"What has happened, as we got into it, questions came up of more things that

IF YOU GO

- What: Lee County Commission meeting
- When: 9:30 a.m., Tuesday
- Where: Commission Chambers, 2120 Main St., downtown Fort Myers
- On the agenda: Whether to set aside an additional \$650,000 for a comprehensive study of environmentally sensitive land in southeast Lee County, and other topics.

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needed to be done," said Joan LaGuardia, community development spokeswoman.

In the meantime, as the study is conducted, a controversial moratorium on growth plan amendments and zoning changes in the area carries through Sept. 10.

The area, while environmentally sensitive, also is a white-hot mining location, rich with aggregate for building and, in some cases, road construction.

Estero resident John Goodrich is concerned about water quality and flooding from the area. He was "thrilled" the county is considering spending more to strengthen the study.

"To me, the largest issue confronting the residents of Estero and the surrounding community today, is the appropriate planning of the (resource) area," Goodrich said.

Having the study completed, reviewed by a 15-member advisory committee and a plan of action in place by the September moratorium deadline means time can't be wasted, LaGuardia said.

Lee County's staff has the right to enter into negotiations with the next two highest-ranked consultants.

"We absolutely could, but what we had was not a lack of confidence in the No. 1 choice," LaGuardia said.

"It was a desire to make sure we were doing all the tasks we needed to do."

The county staff made the original \$750,000 estimate under the belief land use maps it had created were sufficient for the study.

In negotiations, Dover, Kohl & Partners officials said additional mapping would be involved.

When contacted, Dover, Kohl & Partners planner Jason King deferred comment to the county.

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