

SOUTHEAST LEE COUNTY PLAN FOR CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

LEE COUNTY, FLORIDA

SITE: An environmentally and agriculturally valuable 130-square-mile region outside Fort Myers, Florida that is under pressure from potentially disruptive development. **PROGRAM:** An innovative collaboration with the county government that uses transferable development rights to focus growth into urban villages and control mining impacts, allowing agricultural and wetland areas to remain regional assets.



In 1990, a special designation was applied to most of southeast Lee County Florida—an economically and environmentally sensitive 130-acre area of high-yield farming and lucrative limestone mining, existing alongside endangered Florida panther habitat, wetland ecosystems, and public water wells that supply much of the region. But this “density-reduction” strategy relied on large-lot residential zoning and instead left the area vulnerable to sprawling growth of the nearby Fort Myers urban area.

By the mid 2000s, a long-term plan was needed to ensure the continued viability of these regional assets, especially considering the increasing pressure to develop the site. Dover, Kohl & Partners was brought in by the county to organize a series of charettes that would establish a sustainable strategy. These meetings benefitted from the involvement of local government officials, landowners, and individuals from Fort Myers who depend on water obtained from the site. DKP took the resulting 11 guiding principles, which emphasized careful and limited development of the land, and applied them to this comprehensive and innovative plan.

The core premise of the plan is concentrating potentially disruptive activities such as mining and urban development so that local agriculture can continue and the area’s habitats and water flow-ways remain connected or are reconnected as a system. Based on findings from a comprehensive hydrology study (that made innovative use of historical aerial photos to locate pre-irrigation-era wetlands), mining sites and natural restoration areas were carefully chosen in order to maximize this connectivity. This vision made possible through a creative application of transferable development rights (TDR), through which landowners can cluster their development rights into compact urban villages on their land, transfer them to larger villages on the boundary of the site, or shift them to infill sites in the Fort Myers urban area. Rights are multiplied if landowners choose the second or third options and there are further incentives for returning agricultural land along water flow-way systems to

a natural state. Each transfer means a minimum of 10 acres of farmland is protected. For instance, a 440 acre new community requires 3,500 acres of preserved land.

Importantly, Dover Kohl and its team took great care in working with the local community to design and code the villages that the TDR program will create. The county agreed to supply each site with appropriate transit access, and every village has a form-based code that emphasizes the interaction between a dense core and its agricultural surroundings. Because landowners expressed interest in community-supported agriculture, DKP worked with them to develop a plan to integrate farming into the villages through community plots, rooftop gardens, and contact with the agricultural fringe. Each planned community is ready for LEED-ND certification once built.

Equally in tune with social and economic needs as environmental ones, this plan also brings much needed urbanism to an existing sprawl community called Lehigh Acres, a neighboring bedroom community that lacks any retail or civic space and has become a nationally known example of foreclosure-related problems in isolated “drive-til-you-qualify” communities. The new planned villages with the highest priority within the TDR program are located adjacent to Lehigh Acres and would provide this struggling area with necessary services such as shopping, transit, and community space. Thus, DKP’s plan not only prevents sprawl from infringing on a valuable natural and rural site, it also helps re-center and revitalize a struggling auto-centric community.

The Southeast Lee County Plan for Conservation and Development has been adopted and is already protecting this treasured regional resource. One TDR village, a 500-unit mixed-use development called Daniel’s Parkway, is currently underway and has preserved 6,000 acres of farmland and wetlands on the site. This plan illustrates the remarkable accomplishments that flower when local government, urbanist practitioners, and agricultural and environmental interests work together with a vision guided by the Charter.