

RLSA program actually means less building

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Much has been written about Collier County's Rural Land Stewardship Area (RLSA) program since its adoption in 2002 and what may occur over the next 50 years in our rural lands.

There are at least three sides to this issue: the owners of the rural land, the environmental community and the residents of Collier County.

From the landowners' perspective, the issue is simple — they own the land, they pay taxes on the land and their land has inherent development rights of one home for every five acres they own. The environmental community also has a straightforward point of view: protect endangered species, their habitats and sensitive wetland ecosystems. Residents of Collier County have the toughest job, and that is to decide what is best for our current and future residents.

The RLSA overlay is about 200,000 acres surrounding Immokalee. The landowners have the right to convert their land to five-acre lots similar to what exists today as Golden Gate Estates. This scenario would mean about 40,000 homes could be built in the rural area. When the local street network necessary to serve the five-acre lots is contemplated, another 9,000 acres would need to be developed. Without the RLSA program, Collier County could have had 49,000 acres of development in the rural area.

The RLSA has large connected areas of uplands, wetlands serving as habitat for endangered species such as the Florida

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panther and the Florida black bear. Both the panther and bear populations need large areas to flourish. Wetland ecosystems are used as habitat by these two species, but they also need considerable upland areas. Even if development wasn't allowed in wetland areas of the RLSA, there would not be enough habitat for the panther and black bear.

The RLSA 5-Year Review Committee has spent the last 18 months studying the existing RLSA program and taking testimony from the public and experts of almost every field. One of the committee's recommendations is to cap the developable area at 45,000 acres. The proposed cap means 150,000 acres will be preserved for agricultural uses and wildlife habitat. Some believe a 45,000-acre maximum development footprint is too much development, especially in a rural area. Others believe there will be too many people living on those 45,000 acres considering one home was allowed on a five-acre lot and the RLSA program is forecast to have about 2.5 homes per acre.

Today, 43,000 acres of the 200,000 are anticipated to be developed as part of the existing RLSA program. While this

existing condition is less than the proposed 45,000-acre cap, it leaves 47,000 acres of land available for development at one home per five acres.

Before the RLSA program, a theoretical build-out of Collier County's rural area would have resulted in 49,000 acres of developed land. That acreage does not include any development for government services such as emergency medical service, fire, administration, schools and necessary commercial services to serve the future rural area, collectively called public benefit uses. The existing RLSA program requires all participating development to provide for most of the above services within their developments. The proposed 45,000-acre development cap proposed by the 5-Year Review Committee is inclusive of public benefit uses.

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superior to tens of thousands of scattered five-acre lots. The word "superior" in this context means a well-thought-out mix of uses with dense populations capable of supporting public benefit uses while minimizing sprawl.

This leaves over 150,000 acres of land contiguous to millions of acres of preserved land that will never be developed.

Take a hard look at what could have been, what exists now and what could be changed for the better. We could have had 49,000 acres of sprawling development in five-acre tracts over a 200,000-acre area with no RLSA program. Without changes to the existing RLSA program, there will be about 43,000 acres of development and 47,000 acres subject to development with one home per five acres.

If the RLSA 5-Year Review Committee recommended changes are implemented, 45,000 acres may be developed and 150,000 acres will be perpetually preserved as existing agricultural uses, restored habitat areas and native forests.

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