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“This is one of the oddest situations you’ll probably ever find in land use.”

—Tom Missimer, DR/GR

Land of uncertainty



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

This sign was nailed to a tree along Corkscrew Road. Some residents are opposed to Lee County allowing further mining in the 96,000-acre Density Reduction/Groundwater resource area.

20 percent of Lee County land is currently restricted. Is it bureaucratic ruse or sound policy?

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
ewilliams@florida-weekly.com

In 1989, former Lee County commissioner Charles L. Bigelow received a phone call from friend and colleague Tom Pelham. Back then, Pelham was the head of the Florida department that managed



BIGELOW



MISSIMER

growth and was pressuring county’s to plan for the future. They agreed on a compromise, which may have helped protect Lee County from developing visions of an urban nightmare - endless rows of grey rooftops and gassy factory smoke beneath a sickly yellow sky; questions like “What exit are you from?” Or it may have been something else altogether: simply, the beginning of a long, messy geopolitical imbroglio. Maybe both.



FLORIDA WEEKLY GRAPHIC

“You could probably call Charles Bigelow the father of the DR/GR” Tom Missimer said. Missimer has a PhD in geology and specializes in hydrology, the study of water, and has been involved with the DR/GR before it was so named, in a 1973 U.S. geological survey, as well as drilling some of the initial test wells there.

DR/GR stands for Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource. It is the 96,000-acre patch of land, located mostly east of I-75 and south of State

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Learn more about the DR/GR. **A8**

SEE DR/GR, A8 ►

MEDIA & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

DR/GR

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Road 82 (and partially in North Fort Myers). It is purportedly reserved to help contain urban sprawl and protect natural resources, most importantly, water; Missimer claims that's only partially true, saying both newspaper and television media made an "urban legend" out of the DR/GR.

"(County planners) sat down with a map and a pen, and the boundaries were set nice and square," he said. "They weren't based on land use or water. There just happened to be empty land there. The way they would justify these areas was as a water resource. They retroactively adopted four studies that backed up the science of it."

"To this day, I wonder whether the whole crisis was sort of artificial." The name of the land itself is misleading, Missimer said. The term "Density Reduction" was thrown in as a sarcastic remark at a county commission meeting as the DR/GR was being planned. It stuck, he said, giving the area a greater significance than it deserves. The term "Groundwater Resource" was the excuse the county used for making the restrictions on that particular land sound politically legitimate.

"This is one of the oddest situations you'll probably ever find in land use," Missimer said.

Pelham, who was reappointed this year by Gov. Crist to again lead the state's growth management department, had explained in that 1989 phone call to Bigelow that he was suing Charlotte County officials for over-developing. Because of the lawsuit, he said it wouldn't make political sense for him to turn around and agree to let the same thing happen in Lee County that he was suing the neighbors for.

In addition, the state of Florida was putting pressure on the county to lower the density of population growth, threatening a moratorium on any and all building, which would last for one year.

The compromise those commissioners made involved keeping a specific area of Lee County from being developed with any more than one house for every 10 acres of land (instead of the originally agreed upon one to one ration), and allowed for agriculture, mining, and limited commercial development on that land.

"I conceived it," Bigelow said, thinking of the phone call he received 18 years ago and what it led to.

Over the years, and in spite of some intentions otherwise, the county initiated and approved development in the area. For example, Florida Gulf Coast University was built within it. Also, the university is located in a spot already pressured into higher concentrations of development, Bigelow said, because it sits where I-75 runs closest to the Gulf of Mexico, compressing any residential and commercial growth - including the University and all the roads, shopping malls, movie theatres, dormitories and housing complexes which flow from it - into a narrow corridor.

But there was always pressure to develop. The reason?
"Sunshine," Bigelow beamed.

A report by The Estero Council of Community Leaders in May 2006 alluded, in its own, bureaucratic manner, to the sunny appeal Florida holds for multitudes of ageing northerners: "The need for density reduction stems from the pre-platted community development escapades of the 1950s when the developers of both Cape Coral and Lehigh Acres sold hundreds of thousands of small-down-payment, quarter-acre retirement lots to persons around the world."

A recent study performed for Lee County by Van Buskirk, Ryffel and Associates, Inc. summarizes the situation as follows:

"In 1994, Lee County had 237,818 vacant platted lots, the highest of all counties in the state of Florida. As a result, Lee County contains two of the largest lot-sales communities in the nation (Lehigh Acres and the City of Cape Coral)."

DELISI

One statistic says one in every 500 people in the United States live in Lee County. "Lehigh Acres changed the drainage pattern north of State Road 82," Missimer said. "Permanently."

The rooftops of Lehigh Acres platted lots appear in the northern edge of aerial photographs of the DR/GR provided by Passarella & Associates (a team of ecologist, biologists, environmental consultants and technicians); large portions of the 96,000 acres are studded with what appears to be lakes (mines), or rows of notches (citrus groves).

Don DeLisi, a land planner who formerly worked for the Bonita Bay Group, uses these aerial maps to help plan development in a 4,000-acre section of the DR/GR located in Bonita Springs.

"Most of the existing state of the DR/GR has already been impacted in some way," DeLisi said. "Our goal as planners is to figure out what areas are still pristine, and how to save and preserve those areas. From a Bonita Springs DR/GR standpoint, there's almost nothing with any value in its current state. There's nothing pristine about this area."

In fact, Cypress Trees and Pines were logged very early on there, as soon as the railroad came through in 1903. Most of the trees were removed by the 1920s or 30s. Aerial photos of the land from 1944 reveal that ditching and diking of Lee County land, for agricultural purposes, had already begun, Missimer said. By the 1980s and 90s, residential development was creeping into the area as well.

DeLisi pointed to areas on the map where a mobile home park had been built; where wetlands had been overrun by exotic plants like Melalucua and Brazilian pepper, and citrus groves and mines had visually changed the appearance of the land.

But that mining is necessary, Missimer and DeLisi agree, because it supplies the county with local, high-quality aggregate, crushed stone and sand mined and processed for construction of roads, bridges and buildings.

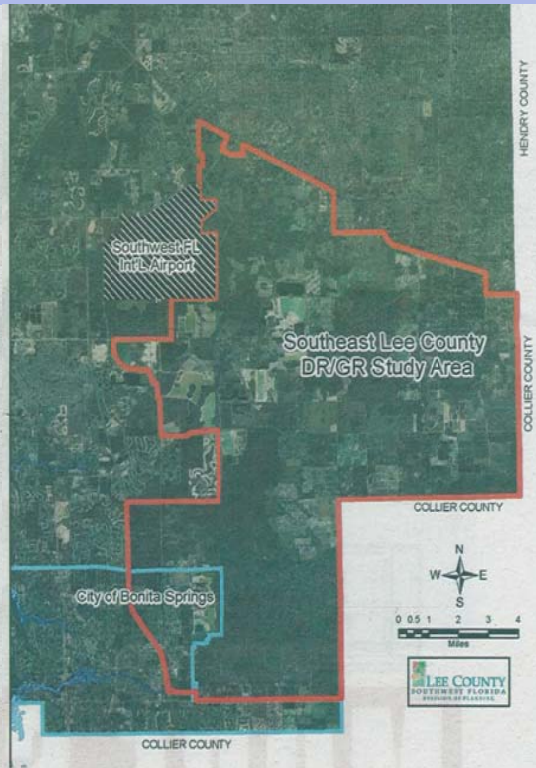
"There is compatibility between mining and water supply," Missimer said. "When you leave the mining site, that hole fills up with water. The water doesn't just go away. The issue is, what

do you want to have left, at the end? Even with mining and agriculture, you could have a very fine environment."

The widening of I-75 and State Road 82, as well as the airport runway expansion, depends on rock coming from those mines, DeLisi added.

"No matter what we do we need to widen State Road 82 and I-75, and widen the runways at the airport, so we're going to need that rock," he said. "If our approach is to just never widen roads, we're going to have a really lowered quality of life."

In addition, if selective parts of the DR/GR are not developed into residential communities, so as to take the pressure off other areas, DeLisi said it will create urban sprawl - the very thing the DR/GR was supposed to protect against. Take Lehigh Acres, for example.



The Southeast Lee County DR/GR encompasses 96,000 acres or about one-fifth of the county.

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"It is mass low-density, singly-family units with very few areas of service and everyone needs to go to State Road 82 or Colonial Blvd. to get to shopping malls or places of employment," DeLisi explained, also noting the way that community was built, has wiped out the environment there and created traffic congestion.

Bigelow, DeLisi, and Missimer agree that the county must prepare a comprehensive plan that will involve a compromise with solutions such as these: saving the lands that are still pristine, developing on the lands that are not, recreating as much of the natural environment as possible, mining in limited areas and in the most environmentally friendly ways possible, and accepting the realities that some development and its inconveniences (trucks filled with rocks, impassable