

# Eyes to the Future

Bonita officials grapple with development and infrastructure challenges.

By Beth Luberecki

**G**roundwater quality. Infrastructure improvements. Mixed-use development. Those are just some of the topics on the minds of Bonita Springs government and business leaders lately. Here's a look at where things stand with some of the major projects and plans in the city.

**Liquid Assets**

A land-use study is under way for the nearly 5,000 acres of Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource (DR/GR) area in Bonita Springs. That land is part of the 96,000 acres east of I-75 put aside by the Lee County Board of County Commissioners in 1989 to protect the region's water supply and limit sprawl. Though currently protected from heavy development, the DR/GR land in Bonita already contains some 2,000 residences as well as mining and citrus operations. "There really isn't any pristine land associated with this portion of the DR/GR," says Daniel DeLisi, a principal with DeLisi Fitzgerald Inc., which is doing

the land-use study. "From a groundwater standpoint, [2005's groundwater] study already stated we can, through best-management practices, not have a negative impact on groundwater. So everyone is looking at this as an area that can and perhaps should be developed. The question is how will it be developed?"

Since the summer of 2007, DeLisi and Bonita Springs Assistant City Manager Barbara Barnes-Buchanan have been meeting with those who have an interest in the area, including prop-

erty holders, developers and advocates for the environment. Once they are finished gathering information, they will present a draft report to the public with recommendations for acceptable land uses.

"We support protecting any land scientifically proven to be [needed for groundwater] recharge," says Nancy P. Keefer, president and CEO of the Bonita Springs Area Chamber of Commerce. "But we feel a lot of east Bonita has received a broad brush, and certainly responsible development could happen in that area.

It's one of the last large tracts of land in the city. On a large-scale basis, it's the best opportunity to do something with some sort of mixed-use development."

with this area," says DeLisi. "There are a lot of pollutants and untreated water coming out of the DR/GR and flowing into the Imperial River. The goal of the study is to figure out how we can better the DR/GR. Creating a better DR/GR is not going to happen if we don't do anything. If we do nothing, we provide no incentives for property owners to go out and do expensive things to treat water quality or re-create some of the natural habitat out there that no longer exists."



Expansion plans: Bonita Springs is studying the DR/GR for possible development.

The area, where development currently is restricted to one home per 10 acres, has been mentioned as a location for everything from affordable hous-



Daniel DeLisi

ing to various social service operations. "There's potential for an increase in density [of development], but with tradeoffs elsewhere and protection of the Imperial River flow way," says Barnes-Buchanan.

"There will be a cost to obtain that density," DeLisi says. "It could be [for the] acquisition of environmentally sensitive lands in other parts of the city or county, or acquisition of additional property along the Imperial River greenway, or provision of affordable housing."

No matter what is decided about the site, maintaining water quality remains a key priority. "I think, universally, people understand that there are a lot of things wrong

The city is also working on a linear park along the Imperial River, assembling public properties and negotiating easements on some private land. It's also in the process of permitting an upriver canoe and kayak launch east of I-75.

"The city has done a great job building up parks [in downtown Bonita Springs] and providing a sense of place for the community," says Keefer. "The plans it has for the river area really bring about an opportunity to promote ecotourism."

**Downtown Developments**

City leaders are working with the Antaramian Development Group on the rezoning application for the Imperial Landing project in downtown Bonita Springs. If approved, Antaramian will close on the five-plus-acre site and begin work on a mixed-use development with 102 residential units and 32,000 square feet of

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"That's definitely going to be the catalyst for what happens in Old Bonita," says Keefer. "Several businesses are doing a wait-and-see as far as doing things with their property or bringing

**Traffic and Taxes**

Some major road improvements in Bonita Springs should be completed in 2008, while another long-awaited road project has just begun. The wid-

**FOCUS ON BONITA SPRINGS**



Future view: If rezoning goes through, the Imperial Landing project will begin.

Parkway, a north-south route connecting Lee and Collier counties, is scheduled to be finished by early 2008. "We are all waiting with anticipation," says Barnes-Buchanan. "That should make some major changes in traffic patterns, and we all have expectations that everything will improve." Further improvements are anticipated

in fall 2008. That's when the widening of Old 41 Road to four lanes from Rosemary Drive north to U.S. 41 is projected to be completed.

This fall, widening of I-75 began. By 2011, additional north- and south-bound lanes will be added to a 30-mile stretch of the highway between Colonial Boulevard (S.R. 884) in Lee County and the new Golden Gate Parkway interchange in Collier County.

"Any expansion of the system is going to be good for the area," says Keefer. "Most of the transportation experts will tell you that once the two lanes are completed [the roads are] again going to be at failure. It's long overdue. But I hope in the long run it will help alleviate some of the strains on the roadways."

The Bonita Springs Area Chamber of Commerce also would like to see

an I-75 interchange study for south Lee County between Coxscrew Road and Bonita Beach Road. Such a study, according to Keefer, should "look at the existing interchanges and see if there's opportunity to make improvements to those to help with traffic flow, or see if another interchange would be warranted in that area as well."

Controversial federal funding to study a possible interchange at Coconut Road was eliminated this past fall.

The City Council has discussed "in generalities" enacting an occupational tax to obtain additional revenue for infrastructure, says Barnes-Buchanan, but has not taken any action at this point.

"Typically it's a minimal charge, between \$30 and \$50," says Keefer. "Businesses don't want to see any new taxes, but if it's inevitable, we would like to see it used for economic development, infrastructure updates, or maybe some workforce housing." 