

Estero planning to grow a town center

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Group gathers input from residents.

Estero needs to go beyond being a land of gated communities and arterial roads.

It needs a town center or centers where people can congregate, the community's planning panel agreed Monday.

Unincorporated Estero has been gathering input from residents for two years as it works on an update to its community plan under Lee County.

It's building on its 2000 plan, which established strict signage, landscaping and Mediterranean architecture guidelines.

"Since 2000, one of the main things I have consistently heard is Estero needs a sense of place," said consultant and Estero resident Dan DeLisi of DeLisi Fitzgerald.

"For many people that sense of place was defined to some degree with the construction of the Coconut Point mall. ... That's not really what we would like — a shopping center for your main street.

"You still drive through Estero, and you wonder where it is centered."

He said Estero can create a sense of place and character by highlighting two unique aspects — the scenic Estero River and the area's history that dates back to the early 1900s.

"If you look at documents that were written in the 1920s, Estero was more of a defined place than Miami was," DeLisi said. "It used to be an incorporated city that extended from Fort Myers Beach up to Gladiolus Parkway."

Panel member Greg Toth said: "I love the Estero River, but the access that we talked about is so limited, that to use that as the center of the town, I just don't see how that could happen."

Planning panel member Howard Levitan said planning the future of the historic core is not a priority for him, especially because the Koreshan State Historic Site exists west of U.S. 41. Noting that Estero's corridors include 7 million square feet of unbuilt commercial space, he said he'd rather see the plan focus on Corkscrew Road and Sandy Lane/Via Coconut Point.

Member Roger Strelow added: "Midwestern people are not looking for a charming historic neighborhood. They're looking for a good time, maybe some good music, good food."

Member Ned Dewhirst said the plan should also include redevelopment of Estero's historic core between Broadway Avenue and the Estero River, east of U.S. 41.

DeLisi said that can be flanked by a mixed-use town center on the north and one on the south, where developments of Downtown Estero north of Broadway Avenue East and Estero on the River to the south were previously proposed.

DeLisi said successful town centers have interconnected streets, walkable blocks, public green spaces and integrated development.