

Estero Events Since 2000.

A 2014 Dialogue (Summary)

With Don Eslick and Neal Noethlich.

This dialogue is a summary of a conversation between Neal Noethlich and Don Eslick, recorded by Nancy Cohen in June of 2014, in order to create a record of the volunteer efforts that led to the creation of the Village of Estero. It is intended to convey the demeanor of the leadership that led to what is Estero's lite government, with an attitude to work for both the residents and developers who have made Estero such a desirable place to reside.

As of 2015 this record can still be used as an informal treatise on how to incorporate a community within the State of Florida.

To view the full conversation – 4 videos totaling 97 minutes – go to, either here on our Estero Historical Society website or on Estero Village's website.

Part 1

The Beginning:

Estero was a blank slate in 2000.

- Civic Association formed by Meg Judge and run by Arnie Rosenthal, both deceased now.
- Estero Chamber of Commerce was formed soon after.
- The Chamber was the primary funder of our Community planning group.
- Community growth was coming mainly from the south, up US 41.
- US41 in Estero was pretty bare.
- 2000 Census Population of Estero +/- 9500 permanent residents and +/- 5500 snowbirds, or 15,000 total residents.

ECCO (Estero Concerned Citizens Organization.):

- Formed in the Spring of 2000.
- By Jim Ramsburg, Arnie Rosenthal, Larry Newell and Neal Noethlich.
- April 2000 met with Lee County Community Development staff.
 - We asked if it was possible to form a citizens' group to influence Estero's growth.
 - Commissioner Ray Judah was very much in favor.

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ECPP (Estero Community Planning Panel) was formed:

- After the County approved the Community Plan this Panel was need to administer it.
- The County funded the development of the first and second phases of the Land Development Code.
- It consists of 6 members, 3 citizen representatives and three developer representatives; the balance was important.
- Since the Panel was all Estero volunteers and not appointed by the County, it was not subject to the Florida Sunshine Act. So the members could speak to each other at any time about pending developments and could negotiate with the developers about the community's concerns about it.
- Because the dialogue was in the best interest of both parties, only once did a developer try to circumvent the Panel and when it was mentioned in the local newspapers he returned to comply.

Estero Community Plan:

- Estero Community Plan is actually part of the Lee plan, called "Goal Nineteen" at that time.
- The Lee County Staff suggested development of a "Sector Plan," in reality a "Community Plan."
- We raised \$42,000, including some Lee County money, to have Community Plan and its related Land Development Code provisions be created.
- The County helped us raise \$8,500 to hire 2 professional planners.
- The Community Plan received community input from public surveys and several public meetings.
- At the time Miromar Outlets and the International Design Center were underway and we felt they set a good design example.
- The rapidly growing "commercial corridor," US41, needed our attention.

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- Half way between Fort Myers and Naples, Estero is a unique location for merchants serving both communities.
- There was much emphasis on architectural appearance and landscaping at the time.

Vision Statement:

- The Vision Statement in the Community Plan provided guidance to the community and the County.
- It evolved into our “Village with a Vision” presentation in later years.

Community Plan Adoption:

- Dan Delisi followed Mitch Hutchcraft as our planner.
- Public surveys and public meetings continued for almost 2 years to refine the Plan’s content.
- The Plan was adopted in January 2002.

Trip to Boca Raton:

- Bob Giness, a former Boca Raton planner, arranged a trip to Boca to study their design review procedures and attend a Boca Community Appearance Board (CAB) meeting.
- We imitated their process, but called it our “Design Review Committee” (EDRC).
 - In Boca’s case the CAB was authorized by the city of Boca to have final approval authority, subject to developer appeal to the City Council.
 - In Estero, the panel would only be advisory to the Lee Board of Commissioners.

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- The developers in Boca never appealed because the panel – which included three architects – knew their stuff.
- Our Community Plan always included a provision that, before a developer could rezone any property, he/she had to hold a public meeting in Estero.
 - The meeting had to be well advertised and in the Community at a facility that could accommodate a crowd.
 - As a result the Community would learn what the developer wanted early in the process and, conversely the developer would learn what the Community wanted or disliked about their proposal, before spending a lot of money.

EDRC (Estero Design Review Committee) Formed:

- Created October 2002, based on the Boca model.
- The County suggested we create it as an independent volunteer community entity that could make suggestions to the County, not a Committee appointed by the County.
- As a result the EDRC was not under the Florida Sunshine Act so the Committee could have a dialogue with the developer to work out a plan suitable to both parties.
- **Rezoning vs. Development Order:**
- The County procedures for rezoning a property requires a Hearing Examiner hearing at which the public may testify and after the Hearing Examiner submits a report the Board of Commissioners vote to approve or disapprove the rezoning.
- Only those who testified before the Hearing examiner can testify before the Board of Commissioners.
- Development Orders in Florida are typically approved by County Planning Staff without input from the public.

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- Estero and Boca do not follow this procedure. In these communities the citizens have input on the development order and thus on the development's appearance.
- Zoning rules apply to the entire Development.
- On the other hand a development may include several projects, with each one of them requiring a development order.

National Developers:

- They often come from other parts of the country, without any understand of plants, trees and exterior designs that work in our semi-tropical climate.
- In this regard the EDRC has consistently worked with the developers to demonstrate what works well here. Therefore, the developers benefit by getting a community aesthetic that is know to sell well.

Part 2

Coconut Point Development:

- Miromar Outlets and The Design Center served as a model of desirable architecture so that future development would compliment and provide a consistent appearance.
- The Simon Development Group and Oakbrook Properties from Oakbrook, IL created Coconut Point.
 - Their initial proposal included a couple of million square feet of retail space.
 - They also became our model for “mixed use,” consisting of both commercial and residential space.
 - Initially they wanted to rezone their 500 acres on the east side of US 41, from Williams Road on the north to the Bonita Springs border on our south.

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- The large size of this development required that it be treated as a Development Regional Impact (DRI) project, involving the Regional Planning Council as well as the County.
- The Regional Planning Council includes all the counties of southwest Florida.
- As the Coconut Point rezoning got underway ECHO organized the 12 communities surrounding the site to insure that their concerns were addressed by the developers.
 - We invited the leaders of each community to meet with us and give us a list of their concerns.
 - We collectively reviewed the lists and narrowed them down to concerns we all felt were reasonable, negotiable and germane to every community.
- We met with the Regional Planning Council (RPC) and with Lee County Community Development and Transportation to learn their requirements so we would understand the rules of the road and how we might achieve our goals for the community.
- We narrowed our list and went back to the RPC and County staff to determine what could be done legally.
- Only after that did we meet with the developers with our 5 page position paper that listed all of our concerns.
 - The list then consisted of 10 to 15 different items.
 - The developers addressed every item and agreed to something with every item.
- One of the agreements involved having a standard route laid out for all construction vehicles to follow going to and from the development site.
 - The developers also agreed to provide a hot line so any resident could report any trucks deviating from this route.

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- Once the agreement was signed we needed to stay involved in order to make sure the developer lived up to the agreement.
- Shortly thereafter Walmart announced plans to build two stores in Estero. One at US 41 and Estero Parkway and the second on the northwest corner of US 41 and Coconut Road.
 - The people at The Vines, next to Walmart's US 41 and Estero Parkway site, asked us to help them work with Walmart like we had done with Coconut Point.
 - We met with their representatives and Walmart people many times throughout 2003 and 2004.
 - And, we grew from 12 Communities to a 15 or 16 member group of communities.
 - All the boards of the different communities designated someone to represent their community with this group, which soon became the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL).
 - ECCL would play the role of representing the communities regarding issues that impacted them but were outside their gates.

That completes the final third of our *Big Three*. First, the Community Planning Panel, then the EDRC (design review) and then the ECCL.

“Village with a Vision” Presentation:

- Bonita Springs was incorporated as a city December 31st, 1999.
 - Their charter said they could not annex anything in Estero for 5 years.

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- In 2004 Bonita Springs City Manager Gary Price and the Bonita Springs City Council got very aggressive about annexing the southern part of Estero where Coconut Point with its commercial tax base was under construction.
- They held meetings in various communities and we met with them.
- Post Office boundaries do not correlate directly with local government boundaries; The Brooks, The Colony and several more southern Estero communities south of Williams Road had Bonita Springs Post Office service.
- To defend against the annexation threat the ECCL created the “Village with a Vision” presentation.
 - The presentation included a section on Estero’s history back to Ponce DeLeon and the Callusa and Seminole Indians use of the area.
 - The Village with a Vision presentation included an explanation of Estero’s boundaries and its fire district, post office and Community Planning Boundaries.
 - We explained that there was no “official” Estero Boundary.
 - We explained the most meaningful boundary for Estero at the time was the community planning boundary impact the quality of development within those limits.
 - We conducted “Village with a Vision” presentation in all of our communities with Q&A sessions after the PowerPoint presentation.
 - Estero was growing so fast at the time and many people did not see the earlier presentations so we did another 30 presentations the following year.
 - We also surveyed all the 5,000 registered voters in the area Bonita wanted to annex south of Williams Road.
 - The survey asked these voters if they favored or opposed annexation by Bonita Springs.

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- Thirty percent responded to this mailing: ninety percent of responders said they would participate in a referendum and eighty percent of responders said they were opposed to Bonita annexing their area.
- As a result Bonita Springs backed off of their annexation efforts and the leaders of all our volunteer organizations started a series of meetings with the members of the Bonita City Council because there was a fair amount of disagreement between Bonita Springs and Estero.
 - The City hired a mediator to facilitate the early meetings.
 - The mediator tried to identify areas of common interest, mostly regional concerns.
 - We continued the meetings for several years.
 - Things finally fell apart when some of Bonita's liaisons took their issues to the newspapers without consulting us.
- At the time there was another group, "Vote Estero" that wanted to incorporate as soon as possible. But we thought it was premature and would unnecessarily delay ongoing transportation projects.

The Fire Department Issue:

- In the early 2000's the Estero fire department was a group of volunteers.
- There was a major disagreement between the department management and their employees, there was a lockout and a private firm was hired to provide the service.
- After a fatal accident to a firefighter Governor Bush asked Dick Schweers, the Board Chairman, to reverse the situation and return to a regular fire department organization.
- A new chief was hired and things returned to normal.

At the same time three new people were appointed to the Fire Board and they developed 4 fire stations whose appearance is consistent with the Community Plan and Land Development Code standards.

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Estero Community Park:

- Charles Dauray joined the Estero Historical Society and the College of Life Foundation, which he Chairs. He funded the move of 2 historical buildings from Highland Avenue to the Estero Community Park. They are an early 20th Century farmhouse and a 1904 schoolhouse.
- The farmhouse is completely restored and the schoolhouse will soon be finished.

Part 3

Estero Community Park (continued):

- In 2003 Lee County began planning for a Regional Park in Estero.
- The park now consists of 65 acres, 55 of which have been developed by Lee County and partially paid for using impact fees collected on new developments in Estero and Bonita Springs.
- The County hired an urban planner/architect to layout and design the park.
- The planner held 7 community meetings at the library seeking input from the public.
 - The Park does not include a lot of the usual playfields because the Estero community has many retirees who indicated a preference for more of an adult park.
 - In addition, Estero high school, which adjoins the park property, has many play fields so Lee County Parks and Recreation entered into a joint-use agreement with the School Board to share the use of those play fields.

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- We were aware that our neighbors in San Carlos, who participated actively in the planning meetings, had a park with many recreation fields but lacked a recreation building.
- Therefore, the main feature of the park is a large building, about 40,000 square feet, the largest recreation building in Lee County, with a gymnasium and several meeting rooms. The building is now in constant use. And, the children of San Carlos Park can use the soccer fields and indoor facilities as well.
- The band shell in back of the recreation building:
 - At the time the park was being developed we had a couple of local bands or orchestras and thought we needed a band shell for outdoor performances. It is probably the least utilized of the Park's facilities at this time.
 - At about the same time the developer of "Estero on the River" offered to give the Gulf Shore Playhouse 2 to 3 acres of land for a repertory theater. In addition Jim Wallace, developer of Rapallo, had an option on 30 some acres at the north end of Coconut Point for a development he called the "Art District at Rapallo," which was planned to include a community performance hall that could be used for all kinds of performances, concerts, theater, lectures, films, community events etc. So, the two theaters complimented each other.
 - The "Estero on the River" project has been on hold since the economy tanked and the Rapallo Arts District is now the property where the Hertz Global Headquarters is being built.

The Mining Issue(s) and the DR/GR:

- The Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource (DRGR) is a vast wetland and habitat area just across I-75 and east of Estero.

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- It is a fifth or sixth of Lee County, originally 75,000 acres, rezoned in 1989 as a low density, large lot, residential, wetland and wildlife preserve by the State and Lee County.
- It serves as a filter to clean the water that filters down to recharge the aquifers in order to provide the water we use daily. There are about 250 water wells now pumping in this area.
- It was planned to be Lee's water supply for future growth. Lehigh Acres and Cape Coral together have about 500,000 residential lots, which are only 20% to 25% developed.
- It is Estero and Lee County's water source and its output flows through Estero to Estero Bay.
- It's wetlands hold the water longer so as to prevent flooding for those of us downstream of the DR/GR.
- It is the source of 80% of Lee County's potable, fresh water.
- With growth for Lee County projected to go from the present 650,000 to 1.3 million by 2040 there is a desperate need to protect this water source.
- Many of the former limerock mines in the DR/GR area have saved some land around the mines' edges so that they can later be developed as high value housing around a lake. Corkscrew Shores, just east of Bell Terra is the latest of these developments to begin construction.
- Finally, historically there has long been a crucial area of rock mining in the northern part of the DR/GR area, centered near Alico Road.
 - This lime rock, very porous, is crushed into aggregate for building construction, roads and to make cement and blacktop.
 - This mining area has provided 80% of all the lime rock and aggregate needed for development in the 7 counties from Sarasota to Collier throughout the last 25 years. Miami-Dade has the only larger mining area in Florida.

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- There's also a lot of rock along Corkscrew Road that the landowners and mining companies would very much like to extract.
- In 2004 the Florida Wildlife Federation introduced us to the Elizabeth O. Dunn Foundation, an environmentally oriented east coast foundation.
 - The Foundation provided \$25,000 or \$30,000 that allowed the ECCL to hire Spikowski Planning, a firm run by Bill Spikowski, a well-respected former Planning Director for Lee County.
 - Spikowski was hired in 2004 to develop a report on all of the prior reports that had been done on the DR/GR.
 - As a result of the Spikowski report Lee County spent the next 4 years and \$1.6 million to re-plan the entire DR/GR area.

Part 4

Estero Today:

- In 2000 Estero had about 7,000 housing units and a half million square feet of commercial development, mostly retail, in place.
- Today Estero's land area is 95% built out.

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- Estero now has over 20,000 housing units with another 5000 to 8000 to come, 4.5 million square feet of commercial and less than about 600 acres left for mixed housing and commercial development.
- What's left is mainly *infill development* along Corkscrew Road or up and down US 41, mostly at major intersections.
- Studies indicate that we have 2 major regional centers, Coconut Point and Miromar Outlets, and 60% of their sales are to shoppers who live outside of Estero.
- Healthcare:
 - More than 37% of our population is 65 and up, double the percentage for the rest of Florida at 18%.
 - Lee Memorial is now developing a new kind of healthcare delivery system for this intensively elderly population, and the ECCL is working with them on this project. The Lee Memorial Hospital Board will approve Architectural and Construction Management contracts in October 2015.
- ECCL has always been organized for tax purposes as a 501 (c) 4 corporation because we have always advocated for the needs of Estero, lobbying the County, the State, the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) the Water Management District to gain their approval for addressing those needs.
- Estero Community Improvement Foundation (ECIF):
 - Created in 2005 to raise money as a 501© 3 corporation on a tax-exempt basis from people subject to federal income taxes.
 - It began with an ECCL project to raise money to landscape the chain link fence around Estero High School.
 - It is still an active in the community but is now independent of the ECCL.