

Estero Development Report
 Volume 10, Number 8, Issued March 2011
 Produced by the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL)
For More Information about Estero
 ...see www.esterofl.org

April Opportunities for Citizen Participation
That will Protect Estero's Quality of Life

| Date | Time | Event | Location |
|-----------------------------------|---------|--|--|
| Friday, April 8 th | 10 a.m. | Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL) meeting with Presentations by local Florida Parks and Recreation Managers | Estero Community Park |
| Monday, April 11 th | 9 a.m. | Board of County Commissioner's Management and Planning Meeting on the Conservation 20/20 Land Purchase acquisition list including Edison Farms | Commission Chambers, 2 nd Floor, 2110 Main Street in downtown Ft. Myers |
| Tuesday, April 12 th | 5 p.m. | Estero Fire Rescue Monthly Meeting | District Headquarters on Three Oaks just south of Corkscrew |
| Wednesday, April 13 th | 5 p.m. | Estero Design Review Committee (EDRC) | Estero Community Park |
| Monday, April 18 th | 6 p.m. | Estero Community Planning Panel (ECPP) | Estero Community Park |

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Estero Community Website

The community groups sponsoring the site are:

- Estero Community Planning Panel (ECPP)
- Estero Community Association (ECA)
- Estero Design Review Committee (EDRC)
- Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL)

Lee County Board Approves Zoning Changes
for "Downtown Estero"

The Downtown Estero development, located in the northeast quadrant of Broadway and US 41, received its zoning approval from the Lee County Board on March 7, 2011.

The developer, Southland Group, worked very closely with the community to bring this vision to life. With over three years and close to 100 meetings invested, the development received full support from County Staff, as well as the ECPP. The development is the first of its kind in Lee County, and it employs the increasingly popular Mixed Use concept. Jeffrey Rapson, famed mixed use expert was retained by the developer, and along with the other consulting team members, turned out a product that the ECPP called "amazing".

The zoning permits 310 residential units, 125 hotel rooms, and 200,000 square feet of commercial space on its 30 acre site. The development will feature vertically integrated uses in creating a downtown atmosphere. A great deal of extra effort was put into creating public spaces that will help build the community feel for the development and Estero itself. A main street will be created running through the property from Broadway to US-41.

Southland Group is currently working on additional permits, and beginning the architectural design process. It hopes to have a ground breaking during the first quarter of 2012, with facilities opening by the holiday season that year.

Corkscrew/Three Oaks Lift Station Landscaped

Several years ago Lee County installed a lift station on the northeast corner of Three Oaks Parkway and Corkscrew Road. As you probably have noticed the lift station was enclosed by a chain link fence and was very unsightly.

Early in January the ECCL Transportation Committee contacted the Lee County Utility Department to ask them to install some landscape around the fence to improve its appearance.

Within a few weeks Michael R. Currier, Lee County Wastewater Collection Manager, responded cooperatively and indicated that they would be happy to do something to make the facility more attractive. As they studied the problem they found they had few alternatives due to the close proximity of Three Oaks Parkway and the small amount of soil available for planting.

Early in March we were informed that the County had completed the project. The South side has been planted with perennial plants and the West side with vines. The plants are small but we are told that they will, within a growing season, hide most of the fence. The project should become much more attractive in the years to come.

The Committee sends a heartfelt thank you to Michael Currier and Lee County for taking care of this matter so quickly.

Bonita Community Health Center (BCHC) Extended Hours Paying Off

On January 17th the BCHC began to increase their hours by three hours per day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., on all weekdays. The South Lee County Hospital Committee has long been seeking better access to emergency care...adding three hours per day to the schedule of the walk-in clinic begins to address this need while the Committee continues to work on obtaining a 24/7 Free-standing Emergency Department and eventually a hospital.

Since the Center extended its urgent care hours, they have treated an average of 12 additional patients during those extended hours. These marketing efforts and the expanded urgent care hours have helped to increase Clinic patient volume's by 32%.

March Progress Report

In early March members of the South Lee County Hospital Committee met with the BCHC public relations team to discuss how the area's communities and organizations could assist the Center with it's short term and long term marketing efforts. One of the initiatives discussed and/or underway is a quarterly community newsletter called "Health Beat" that can be distributed by each community and organization by email. This newsletter is an excellent way for the residents of each community to become aware of BCHC scheduled health screenings and activities, physician announcements, health articles and important BCHC news.

Several other new marketing initiatives were discussed and will be introduced at the beginning of the next season. These include a speaker's bureau, a Welcome Back and Reconnect program for returning winter residents, and web links from community websites to BCHC. In addition, BCHC is partnering with the Commons Club at the Brooks to assist in their "Living a Healthy Life" project.

As you are aware, BCHC is a non-profit facility and its revenue is invested back into the Center to improve its medical care and technology. Recent new investments have included:

- a high field MRI, a 16 slice CT scan,
- upgraded bone density equipment;
- high definition endoscopy equipment in the Surgery Center,
- improved ultrasound equipment
- three additional treatment rooms in the urgent care center.
- a new waiting room for radiology patients.

Our joint marketing efforts are needed to increase awareness throughout the Estero and Bonita communities of the wide array of services provided at BCHC, the extended hours of the urgent care clinic and the physicians that practice at the Center.

The facility improvements demonstrate the commitment of the BCHC Board to the goal of ensuring that the residents of Estero and Bonita Springs have easy access to an up-to-date health care facility with a broad array of services.

Read more about these changes by clicking on the following link

<http://esterofl.org/EsteroLife/healthcare/Revised%20hours%20flyer%201-5-11.pdf> .

We encourage all residents of Estero and Bonita Springs to take advantage of the new and extended healthcare services now being offered by the Bonita Community Health Center located just south of Coconut Road in Coconut Point.

Further expansion of healthcare services in Estero and Bonita are not likely to be implemented until this facility is more fully utilized. Your support of the Bonita Community Health Center will demonstrate to the BCH Board that the community supports the Committee's efforts to improve access to emergency health care and eventually a hospital.

Background

On December 6th the leadership of the [Bonita Community Health Center](#) (BCHC) notified the South Lee County Hospital Committee that their Board had approved longer hours for the BCHC Walk-in Clinic starting in early January 2011. This was one of the recommendations of the Steering Committee set up by the BCHC Board that included 3 community representatives. At that time BCHC indicated that they were planning to open the Center each weekday morning at 7 a.m. and asked the Committee to suggest when they should close in the evening and how those hours should vary from "season" to "summer". In response to that request the Committee surveyed the members of the South Lee County Hospital Committee, several community service organizations and Estero's residential communities. Many responses were obtained and summarized and reported to BCHC in a short period so that the new policy could be implemented in early January.

As a result of this effort BCHC announced on December 22nd that they would increase their hours to 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. from Monday through Friday and continue to be open on Saturday from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and on Sunday from 8 a.m. to noon commencing Monday, January 17th. This represents a increase of 3 hours per day from Monday through Friday. If the community responds favorably to this change, the policy will continue throughout the entire year, season and summer.

Protecting Estero's Future by Acquiring and Preserving Edison Farms

A coalition of national, state and local environmental and civic groups have united in their support of the public acquisition and preservation of the 4,000-acre Edison Farms site just east of I-75 south of the residential communities along the south side of Corkscrew Road.

The Estero Council of Community Leaders, the Brooks Concerned Citizens, Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Collier County Audubon Society, Audubon of Southwest Florida, CREW Land & Water Trust, Florida Wildlife Federation and The Trust for Public Land has formed a coalition in support of this effort.

The Coalition of organizations supporting the Edison Farms acquisition meets once or twice a month in order to pursue every possible funding source for preserving this key property.

Because of the size of this property funding will likely be necessary from a number of sources, local, state and national. In addition due to the current recession most of these projects will be paid off over several years, not all at the time of purchase.

Recent Progress

On March 1st a sub-committee of the Lee County Conservation 2020 Committee voted to recommend all eighteen ranked properties including Edison Farms to the full committee for

acquisition consideration. *Edison Farms has received the highest environmental ranking of all 18 properties being evaluated for purchase by the conservation 20/20 program.*

On March 10th at an official meeting of the Lee County 2020 Committee the full committee also agreed to recommend all of the 18 properties, including Edison Farms, to the Lee County Board of Commissioners for eventual acquisition consideration. Several supporters of the Edison Farms acquisition coalition spoke on behalf of Edison Farms at the 2020 Committee meeting.

On April 11th the Board of County Commissioners has scheduled a Management and Planning Committee meeting to review these properties and the funding available for them. The Coalition is encouraging the BOCC to ask county staff to seek appraisals on Edison Farms and the other properties that they deem worthy. The public is invited to attend or view this meeting on television but is not permitted to testify at this work session.

The Trust for Public Lands (TPL), a national not for profit land conservation organization and a member of the coalition, has met with county staff and several of the Commissioners to express their interest in playing the role of interim buyer of the Edison Farms property. TPL's involvement would permit the land to be sold immediately with TPL being paid off by the County over a period of years with little or no increase in the cost of the overall transaction.

If your community has not passed a resolution of support of the acquisition of Edison Farms there is still time to do so. Thus far over twenty Estero residential communities have passed resolutions of support. These resolutions will be used to convince the Lee County Board and other funding sources to approve the acquisition of this important environmental property.

Background

On January 19th the Edison Farms Public Acquisition Coalition met to review progress and plan for the next steps in the acquisition process. The following summarizes the status of each element now underway:

Conservation 20/20 Update – All of the site visits have been completed as of January 12, 2011. These site visits complete the secondary review process; therefore, the CLASAC Advisory Committee can now rank the properties and send their recommendation to the BOCC. There is a Criteria and Ranking Subcommittee meeting on February 1st, 2011, where the staff is expected to provide a proposed ranking. Hopefully, the subcommittee recommendation will then go to the full CLASAC at their meeting on February 10th.

Phil Flood of the South Florida Water Management District's (SFWMD) Ft. Myers office agreed to write a letter to the CLASAC committee in support of the public acquisition of Edison Farms. Our local member of the SFWMD Board, Charles Dauray, concurs in this support but the District's Executive Director Carol Wehle has not yet approved the letter.

SFWMD Funding—for the foreseeable future the SFWMD is not going to fund any projects other than for water quality and water storage in the Everglades.

FGCU support – The Committee continues to seek support of Dr. Bradshaw, President of FGCU. A meeting is expected soon,

Lee Port Authority Funding – When the Southwest Florida Regional Airport adds a parallel runway in a few years it will need to update its mitigation plan. It has hired a consultant whose

study will exploring the mitigation options for the runway will be completed shortly. Once this report becomes available the Committee plans on meeting with the staff of the Port Authority to explore the possibilities of some of this mitigation, and the funds to pay for it, being designated for the Edison Farms property.

Florida Forever Funding – Due to the State precarious financial condition Florida Forever funds are not likely to be available for some time.

During September 2010 at least eight (8) Estero community organizations approved resolutions supporting the acquisition and restoration of Edison Farms. Please urge your Community Board to approve the Edison Farms petition that can be obtained on the ECCL webpage at http://www.esterofl.org/Issues/edison_farms.htm.

In addition The Conservancy of Southwest Florida initiated a petition necessary for the project to be considered for funding from the Federal government's "Great Outdoors Initiative" program. Please add your name to this petition by selecting The Conservancy link on the right side of the same internet page... http://www.esterofl.org/Issues/edison_farms.htm.

On August 12th The Coalition testified in support of the project before Lee County's Conservation 20/20 Conservation Lands Acquisition and Stewardship Advisory Committee (CLASAC) who subsequently voted unanimously to nominate Edison Farms for acquisition.

CLASAC is a 15-member citizen's advisory committee appointed by the Board of County Commissioners. This committee, along with a sub-committee, recommends to the commissioners which properties should be purchased. Only properties with a "willing seller" may qualify for the Conservation 20/20 program. If the commissioners agree, the Division of County Lands then will initiate the negotiation process.

Earlier this year the state's "Florida Forever" land acquisition program ranked the property and contiguous Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) area as #3 statewide in the Partnerships and Regional Incentives Projects category.

Representatives of Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) Land & Water Trust and the Calusa Land Trust announced they will be contributing \$100,000 and \$10,000 respectively towards the purchase of this land. Pledged donations from community and other organizations will help Edison Farms chances for approval by the Committee and the Board of Commissioners. We would urge all Estero community organizations to consider pledging some funds, no matter how small, for the acquisition.

Conservation 20/20 funds were committed in 2009 for the acquisition of a select group of properties using phased acquisition over the next several years. All Conservation 20/20 nominations received since January 1, 2009 have only undergone a preliminary evaluation to be retained and held for future consideration when funds became available again or to be rejected. As a result of the preliminary evaluations, CLASAC has retained a total of 28 nominations, including Edison Farms. About \$20 million per year is raised for the Conservation 20/20 program by a special property tax levy approved by the voters of Lee County in 1996.

The Renewal of the Estero Community Plan

The Existing Plan

It has been ten years since the Estero Community launched its community planning effort, eight years since the existing Plan was adopted by the County Board and five years since the Board last updated the Estero Chapter of the County Land Development Code.

Since then the Estero Community Planning Panel (ECPP) has been intensively involved with the zoning of a large number of developments that include most of the land along the US 41 and Corkscrew Road commercial corridors. In addition the Estero Design Review Committee (EDRC) has influenced the architecture, site plan, landscape and appearance of scores of projects located in these developments.

Meanwhile Estero has tripled in population and property used for commercial purposes has increased fourfold from less than 1,000,000 square feet to 4,500,000 square feet in spite of the sluggish market that has persisted for the last four years.

This economic slowdown presents the ECPP and the community with an outstanding opportunity to reevaluate and update our Community Plan and the Land Development Code provisions specific to Estero.

County Funding Availability

Lee County has budgeted \$150,000 for community planning grants during their present fiscal year which began on October 1, 2010. County Planner Ebaugh has suggested that the ECPP convert the agreed outline of changes into a Work Plan to be submitted to the County in order to obtain a community planning grant of up to \$50,000. That grant and an equal amount of local matching funds will be needed in order for the ECPP to employ the professional assistance necessary to prepare amendments to the Community Plan and Land Development Code that incorporate the changes that the community decides it wants the County Board to approve.

March Community Planning Progress

At the March 21st ECPP meeting, the members reviewed and approved a rewritten Work Plan to be submitted to the county. Key elements of the three focal points of this plan are as follows:

Signage

Facilitate a joint workshop with the ECPP and EDRC and conduct a review of the existing sign code to gauge its effectiveness in achieving the Estero Vision. Work with Lee County staff to recommend updates and improvements to the existing sign ordinance in Chapter 33 to better implement the Estero Vision. Participate in all negotiations with County staff and all public hearings (a minimum of 5 hearings).

Design Style and Overlays

Review existing design guidelines and overlays. Conduct a public workshop with the Estero Design Review Committee and other interested residents to solicit feedback on the effectiveness of the guidelines and process toward achieving Estero's vision. Draft changes to Chapter 33 to improve and update the current guidelines and process. Draft suggestions for the creation of gateway/entryway design features or elements, including funding sources. Participate in all negotiations with County staff and all public hearings (a minimum of 5 hearings).

Redevelopment/Vision Refinement

Create planning ideas for the redevelopment of historic area of Estero, include planning concepts for how the community can achieve better access to the Waterfront. This task also includes ideas for greenways, connectivity between parks/public open space areas, and planning ideas for better connectivity for mobility. In generating these planning ideas, specific community workshops should be held with residents from the west Broadway/Highlands Ave./Sandy Lane communities (Redevelopment), as well as the east Broadway and west Coconut Road Communities and other west of US 41 communities e.g. West Bay and Pelican Sound and State Park locations (Public access to the waterfront). The final product for this task should include a series of general site designs will implementing policies. The designs are not intended to be regulatory, but a guide for policy implementation. The final product should also include a guide of suggestions for implementation, including funding sources, for redevelopment and open space creation.

A timeline and budget for these three elements were also submitted. The county is compiling submissions from other planning groups and will respond to the ECPP after their analyses are completed.

Earlier Community Planning Progress

Several ECPP members met with the County in early February to discuss how the Statement of Work necessary for county funding should be developed. The ECPP members presented County staff with a three part outline with projected funding requirements:

- Design Style and Overlays,
- Redevelopment/Vision Refinement, and
- Signage.

County staff responded as follows:

- The Statement needs more detail:
 - Each item needs to identify what will be accomplished, what deliverables will be produced,
 - Estimate when each item will be completed.
- We need to prioritize -- if we cannot fund all of the items, which items does Estero want to do first, second, etc.?
- The County did not understand if the community was requesting funding for all the items (\$100K) or would Estero be responsible for half?
- If the final time for completion is to coincide with the next County Plan submission, that time would be spring 2013.

- Adoption should be the final task -- the last of the sequence – to ensure completion.

The ECPP representatives also asked the County to provide copies of other submissions to be used to gage their level of detail in order to improve the next draft.

At its February 21st meeting the ECPP asked County staff to forward some Work Plan of other community planning groups to help them in their further development efforts. The ECPP plans to circulate the Work Plan revisions to all ECPP members for input as the document is further developed prior to next month's meeting.

Airplane Noise Progress Report

In October 2008 the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) changed the [flight patterns for commercial aircraft](#) departing to or arriving from the northeastern section of the United States. As a result many Estero communities began to be impacted by noise from these aircraft. At that time the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL) and the Brooks Concerned Citizens (BCC) formed a committee to work on this problem.

During the last two years the Committee has worked with the Regional Office of the FAA in an effort to reroute these flights or to alter these flight patterns so that they will provide noise relief for the residents of Estero. As a result of this effort some of the flights are being rerouted while other planes are flying higher than before. In addition the FAA has initiated a monitoring system that will soon be providing the Committee with periodic reports that will allow the Committee to assess the impact of the changes.

March Activities

On March 8th Anu Lacis, a member of the South Lee County Airport Noise Committee and a resident of Shadow Wood in The Brooks, was appointed by the Board of County Commissioners to the Special Management Committee of the Lee County Port Authority. This five member committee reviews all airport management decisions and recommends appropriate actions to the Authority Board (composed of the members of the Lee County Board). Anu has extensive airport management experience with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the entity that runs the airports in the NY/NJ area and retired as manager of Teterboro Airport near Manhattan.

On March 14, the Lee County Port Authority (LCPA) Commissioners approved a contract with consulting firm ESA Airports to prepare a voluntary airport noise study for the Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW). While RSW does not have any residences within so-called non-compatible contours around the airport, and does not have a noise problem according to federal criteria, Lee Plan Policy calls for updated RSW noise exposure maps every five years with a noise compatibility plan to guide future land use planning.

The airport has opted to accomplish this through a Part 150 Noise Study, first in 1989 and subsequently in 1995 and 2006. The 2011 study will be completed in two years and include a "community "education and outreach" program that will review all noise complaints received by RSW during the past five years. In response to Commissioner Ray Judah's inquiry, airport staff has stated that the study will also include consideration of Estero's airplane noise concerns.

The FAA informs us that funding of the flight tracking system that has been developed for RSW has been approved but is being delayed by the ongoing Federal funding controversy now underway in the Congress. Once funding for the balance of this fiscal year is secured the “tracking system” will become available for use by all the residents of Lee County.

In the meantime Estero and other residents can file their noise complaints on the RSW Noise Complaint line at 239-590-4466 or by email at noisecomment@flylcpa.com.

Background

On November 8, 2010 the Lee County Port Authority, the operators of Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW), met and approved the following items:

1) Accept a federal and a state grant for an [airplane](#) tracking system. This system will allow any Estero resident to use his personal computer to view the following information about any flight that they found annoying to them:

- The track of the aircraft
- The name of the carrier
- The tail number
- The flight number
- The elevation of the flight as it went over their home

This information may be used to notify the Port Authority of any flight that has not followed the prescribed approach path.

2) The Port Authority Board, following the recommendation of the Airport Special Management Committee, selected ESA Airports to conduct the next Part 150 Noise Study required by Federal law every five years. The Authority staff will now negotiate the terms of a noise study contract with ESA. The study should begin by mid-2011.

On November 10th several members of the South Lee County Airplane Noise Committee met with FAA and Port Authority officials to review updated FAA information on the noise issues the Committee has been discussing with the FAA since the new arrival patterns were instituted in October 2008. Their report included the following:

- A review of traffic patterns from the summer showed that almost all the aircraft using the SHIFTY 2 (the new pattern that brings aircraft over Estero) went out over the Gulf before turning back to the airport. This is an improvement from earlier when a large number of flights were “turning early” which brought the planes over more communities between Estero and the airport.
- The FAA agreed to supply the Committee with additional information on the use of alternative routes and a more detailed explanation of the reasons why one of our noise relief proposals cannot be implemented.
- The FAA reviewed their plans for implementing the satellite based “Next Generation” air traffic controlling system at RSW with the Committee. The FAA is currently conducting tests around the country that will allow aircraft to approach airports (including RSW) in a controlled “constant descent” approach. This new system will allow planes to approach airports and then use this constant descent procedure that will permit lower engine power (and sound) all the way into the airport. This is in contrast to the current

procedures where aircraft use a stair step procedure to repeatedly lower their altitude and then increase velocity (and noise). The result would be a very significant decrease in noise level of approaching aircraft. We can expect this to be implemented in airports around the country over the next 5 or 6 years, but the FAA indicated that RSW could well be among the earlier users for airports of its size.

The FAA is committed to working with the Committee to find additional ways to reduce airplane noise over our area from aircraft approach RSW from the northeastern U. S.

Earlier

The Committee has been working with the Port Authority Commissioners (They are the same as our Lee County Commissioners) to try and get some representation from south Lee County on the Airport Special Management Committee. If we succeed in this effort we will be in a better position to continuously encourage the Port Authority to be more proactive with the FAA regarding any changes that could negatively affect the residents of south Lee County. In the process of its work the Committee learned that many comparable airports have installed flight tracking systems that permit residents living in the airport's flight paths to use their personal computers to learn the altitude of any of the flights over their home. If that information indicated that the flight was below the required altitude the resident may then report it to the FAA and the Port Authority.

The Authority has requested proposals for the system's purchase and has received a proposal from Bruel & Kjaer Environmental Solutions. The proposal has been reviewed by staff and submitted to the FAA for compliance assurance. On September 28th the Airport Special Management Committee approved the purchase of the tracking system. Every five years the Airport Authority is required by the FAA to update its Part 150 Noise Study. At the September 28th meeting of the Airport Special Management Committee four noise consultants were interviewed and the Committee voted to rank ESA Airports first among the applicants for the job. Upon approval by the Port Authority Board staff will negotiate the terms of a noise study contract with ESA.

Members of the ECCL and BCC spoke with the ESA Airports representatives after the meeting. They are well aware of the noise issues produced by the 2008 landing pattern changes and promised to hold one or more hearings in Estero to determine what alternatives might be feasible in order to address the communities concerns.

Fire Districts Vote Down Merger

Commissioners representing three Lee County [fire and rescue districts](#), Bonita Springs, Estero and San Carlos Park met on March 2, 2011 to consider a possible merger. The meeting stemmed from the 2009 independent consultant's report that urged the districts to merge in 2011 with potential annual savings of over \$4 million.

The moderator of the public meeting was Terry Eberle, the Executive Editor/Vice President of The News-Press. The format for the meeting allowed public comments both at the beginning and end of the meeting, reports by each of the three fire chiefs, and comments by the fifteen commissioners, which was followed by a voice vote of commissioners for or against a merger at

this time. At the end, only one commissioner, Ed FitzGerald from Bonita Springs, voted for a full merger at this time.

About 75 members of the public attended the meeting, about half of which indicated that they live in Estero. *Both Don Eslick from the ECCL and Nick Batos representing Brooks Concerned Citizens encouraged the districts to work toward a merger over the longer term. They recommended that in the interim the districts work together and with the unions to reduce health care and pension costs, continue their joint efforts to share resources and consolidate purchasing agreements, and work with the unions to align the various collective bargaining agreements. Most comments from the public favored the merger.*

Estero Chief Vanderbrook, speaking collectively for the districts, reported that the three districts experienced a 29% reduction in taxable values reflecting the decline in real estate values in the last two years. This has led to a \$9 million drop in revenue for the districts. In response, the districts have lowered costs, in part by eliminating 33 positions at an annual savings of over \$4 million. Despite these cost reductions, the combined budget deficit this year approximates \$5 million. These deficits are now being financed by drawing down previously accumulated surpluses.

Each of the district's fire chiefs reported on their district's individual financial situation as well as the changes made in recent years to cooperate more fully and work together to reduce costs. In addition to reducing positions, the three chiefs implemented a number of other cost savings measures, some of which were achieved by sharing staff and equipment resources, and combining purchasing power, while implementing "closest unit response" to improve response times to the scene of emergencies.

Each of the fifteen commissioners addressed their concerns and opinions about a potential merger. While some indicated it might be the right thing to do in the future, only FitzGerald spoke in favor of a merger now. Estero's commissioners opposed the merger primarily because Estero's millage rate would almost certainly increase because Estero operates at the lowest cost, and a merger would cause Estero taxpayers to absorb the higher cost of employee benefits of the other two districts.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Eberle concluded by saying that at least for now the issue of a full merger is dead. Although an immediate merger may be unlikely, the ECCL continues to recommend that the three districts move toward a merger by working together and with the unions to lower benefit costs, reduce unnecessary positions and standardize collective bargaining agreements to pave the way toward an eventual merger.

At a subsequent meeting of the Estero Fire Rescue board, Chief Vanderbrook recommended to the commissioners that he continue to take a proactive approach by reaching out to the other two districts to continue efforts toward functional consolidation. His stated initiatives include: expanding inter-district sharing of resources; standardizing purchasing, legal support and IT systems; and working collectively with the unions to control pension and health care costs. The ECCL supports the chief in pursuing these objectives and encourages all three districts to cooperate fully.

Several months ago, at the request of the ECCL and the Brooks Concerned Citizens, Bob Lienesch, an Estero resident and retired finance professional, began working with the three fire chiefs to compile financial information in preparation for the March 2 meeting. With their full cooperation, Lienesch developed over 65 charts portraying individual district and combined financial and operational information, as well as a comparison of employee benefits. The charts were provided to the chiefs, the commissioners and Eberle in advance of the March 2nd meeting. The charts are now displayed on the ECCL web site www.esterofl.org, under the caption "Hot News," below the "Village with a Vision" presentation and denoted by the fire department symbol.

On a related subject, there is an initiative at Bonita Springs Fire and Rescue to assume responsibility for patient emergency transportation to nearby hospitals resulting from 911 calls. This function is now provided by the county for most all of Lee County. The ECCL is concerned about how this would affect Estero residents and whether adding this function could make a future merger even more difficult. ECCL representatives will be meeting in April with Kim Dickerson, Deputy Director of Lee County Public Safety, to better understand the issue. The outcome from that meeting will be covered in next month's EDR.

Estero's February Housing Permits Continue to Stall

During February, five single family homes with a building value of \$675 thousand were permitted in Estero. This number of [Housing units permitted](#) is below the monthly average last year, and well below the 2000-2007 period.

February's permits were primarily for Lennar's Bella Terra development, with some of the permits for homes with a building value, exclusive of land, at less than \$100,000.

The following table compares year-to-date February figures with those of the prior eleven years:

| Year | Annual Total Housing Units | Building Value of Units | Average Building Value Per Unit | Percentage of Single Family Units |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| 2000 | 329 | \$42,541,070 | \$129,304 | 32% |
| 2001 | 289 | 48,480,616 | 167,753 | 57 |
| 2002 | 191 | 354,231,265 | 184,457 | 56 |
| 2003 | 376 | 58,389,301 | 155,291 | 31 |
| 2004 | 248 | 46,184,756 | 186,229 | 76 |
| 2005 | 491 | 104,218,898 | 212,258 | 43 |
| 2006 | 165 | 35,590,117 | 215,698 | 27 |
| 2007 | 139 | 34,406,017 | 247,525 | 20 |
| 2008 | 37 | 12,238,274 | 330,764 | 89 |
| 2009 | 31 | 11,988,196 | 386,716 | 74 |
| 2010 | 38 | 7,277,277 | 191,507 | 79 |
| 2011 | 21 | 3,285,432 | 156,449 | 81 |

The County permit information used in this report may be found at <http://www.lee-county.com/dcd/Reports/EsteroReports.htm>.

Estero's Permitted Commercial Building Exceptionally Weak

During February, permits totaling \$213 thousand were issued for Estero [commercial buildings](#). Unlike last month's sizeable increase, February's figure is the lowest monthly total in a year. As shown in the following table, Estero's commercial development started to expand rapidly in 2004 and peaked in 2006 with a total of \$185 million. Since then, total commercial investment in Estero has fallen precipitously.

| Year | Year-to-Date | Annual Total |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 2000 | \$6,224,692 | \$77,250,835 |
| 2001 | 10,191,033 | 44,116,526 |
| 2002 | 1,913,907 | 23,135,139 |
| 2003 | 1,011,631 | 23,234,725 |
| 2004 | 1,079,434 | 60,859,820 |
| 2005 | 5,214,576 | 111,037,977 |
| 2006 | 56,324,955 | 184,709,240 |
| 2007 | 33,162,359 | 157,614,045 |
| 2008 | 15,674,464 | 39,261,677 |
| 2009 | 3,628,999 | 9,752,556 |
| 2010 | 360,340 | 9,322,546 |
| 2011 | 3,392,431 | ? |

The only major projects permitted so far this year are:

\$2,052,000 for [Cayo de Estero](#), and
\$ 656,000 for [Meadows of Estero](#).

Reminder: The building values understate the cost of each residence or commercial building because they exclude the value of the underlying land.