

Estero Development Report

Volume 9, Number 11, Issued June 2010

Edited by the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL)

**For More Information about Estero
...see www.esterofl.org**

This Report is available on the Estero Community website at: <http://esterofl.org/eccl/EDR/>

June Opportunities for Citizen Participation In Protecting Estero's Quality of Life

| Date | Time | Event | Location |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|--|---|
| Tuesday, June 8 th | 9:30 a.m. | Final BOCC vote on the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program for the DR/GR | 2 nd floor Board Chambers 2110 Main Street in downtown Ft. Myers |
| Tuesday, June 8 th | 5:00 p.m. | First Estero Fire Rescue District Meeting For further information see http://esterofire.org/ | Estero Fire Rescue Headquarters... Three Oaks Parkway south of Corkscrew |
| Wednesday, June 9 th | 5 p.m. | Estero Design Review Committee meeting. See the full agenda at http://esterofl.org/edrc/agenda.asp . | Estero Community Park |
| Wednesday, June 16 th | 9:30 a.m. | BOCC final consideration of the Alico West request to be removed from the DR/GR | 2 nd floor Board Chambers 2110 Main Street in downtown Ft. Myers |
| Friday, June 18 th | 9 a.m. | Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Meeting...For the agenda see http://www.mpo-swfl.org/agendas.shtml | Regional Planning Commission Building, 1926 Victoria Street in downtown Ft. Myers |
| Monday, June 21 st | 6 p.m. | Estero Community Planning Panel. For the agenda see... http://esterofl.org/ecpp/ecpp_meetings.htm | Estero Community Park |

Index

| Page | Subject |
|------|--|
| 1 | Calendar |
| 2 | Estero Community Website |
| 2 | Commissioners Unanimously Reject Resource Conservation Holdings (RCH) Mine |
| 3 | Report on Bonita Springs Utilities (BSU) Finances and Bond Issue Plans |
| 5 | Proposed Changes in the Estero Parkway Wal-Mart Zoning |
| 7 | The State Department of Community Affairs (DCA) Finds the County DR/GR Comprehensive Plan Amendments to Be In "Non-compliance" |
| 10 | South Lee County Hospital Committee Update |

Estero Community Website The community groups sponsoring the site are:

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

Commissioners Unanimously Reject Resource Conservation Holdings (RCH) Mine

On Wednesday, May 26, the Lee County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to deny the [mine zoning application](#) presented by Resource Conservation Holdings LLC (RCH), overturning the recommendation for approval of the Hearing Examiner on the case.

The Board responded unequivocally to the testimony of Lee County staff and many Estero residents who had previously testified before the Hearing Examiner. In addition about 150 urban and rural Estero residents showed their support by attending the six hour hearing.

As in its initial report Lee County staff recommended denial of the zoning change, detailing the many ways that the Hearing Examiner had erred by failing to recognize how the development proposal would not meet local, state and federal air, water and noise pollution standards; would have negative impacts upon the County's drinking water supplies; how the development would negatively impact the surrounding community with safety, noise and pollution caused by a big increase in truck traffic; ignored evidence of wildlife habitat on the site, and the fact that there is no need or more mines above those already approved in order to satisfy the regional market demand for limerock construction products.

The RCH property is located on Corkscrew Road, approximately 6 1/2 miles east of I-75. It is adjacent to two wetland mitigation banks which are also primary foraging habitat for wood storks, the Flint Penn flow way, Lee County well fields and 1,000 feet away from several homes.

RCH was proposing to mine 400 acres of their 1,365 acres of land to a depth of 110 feet for decades to come. Their plans also included a 180-foot tall drag line, a cement plant, an asphalt plant and an 85-foot tall rock crushing building. They predicted it would require 2,400 dump truck round trips daily to transport the product produced by this mine, or a truck trip every 15 seconds during peak hours. These trucks would be traveling on Corkscrew Road and other Estero roadways.

The application to mine this property was made prior to the County's 2008 mining moratorium and the state's approval of the new DR/GR Comprehensives Plan that limits future Lee County limerock mining to the Alico Road corridor until 2030.

A Lee County Circuit Judge determined the new rules did not apply to this mine, which led the RCH application being subject to 22 days of testimony before a Hearing Examiner last year.

Lee County mines have supplied 80% of the total demand for limerock products used by the seven southwest Florida counties, from Sarasota County down to Collier County for the last 25 years. The mines in the Alico Road Future Limerock Overlay corridor can continue to supply 80% of these same areas' demand for these products through 2030 without adding any new mines elsewhere in the DR/GR.

Background

On April 7th the Hearing Examiner issued his report and recommendations on the RCH case. To the surprise of all in the Estero Community he recommended approval of the mine with a limited set of conditions, largely supplied by the applicant. The Hearing Examiners rationale supporting his decision appeared grossly inconsistent with much of the evidence developed over the last

several years in conjunction with the DR/GR comprehensive plan amendment recently adopted by the BOCC and in the final stages of approval by the state Department of Community Affairs.

On November 6, 2009 the Lee County Hearing (HEX) examiner gaveled the hearing on the RCH [mine zoning application](#) to an end. At 22 days, the Hearing is officially the longest in Lee County history.

The attorney for the East Corkscrew and Estero residents reports that the County Attorney did a very nice job with her closing arguments and clearly had gone to great lengths to do a good job with this case. In addition County staffers Matt Noble, Sam Lee, Chip Block, Becky Sweigert, Lee Werst, Susie Derheimer, Dr. Karuna-Muni, Aaron Martin and Andy Getch also performed above and beyond the call in preparing and handling the case. Additionally our case was substantially enhanced by the testimony of Lonnie Howard, the County Port Authority's groundwater expert.

Earlier a court decision ordered Lee County to schedule a public hearing to consider rezoning and mining permits for the proposed Resource Conservation Holdings Mine. Because of the court order, the application must be reviewed under the old mining rules rather than the more stringent Chapter 12 rules adopted by the County in September 2008.

The site is located on Corkscrew Road east of Flint Pen Strand and is immediately adjacent to the Southwest Florida International Airport Mitigation Park, the South Florida Water Management District Corkscrew mitigation bank, and an established rural residential cluster on Burgundy Farms Road. The recent County initiated DR/GR planning study identified the project site as environmentally sensitive and categorized it as a Priority 1 and Priority 2 Restoration area. The site is outside of the Primary and Secondary Preferred Mining Area as identified by the Dover Kohl and the DR/GR Steering Committee.

If this latest attempt to industrialize Corkscrew Road is approved, the decision would:

- establish a new development pattern and set a precedent for seven other rock mine applications pending on Corkscrew Road
- result in permanent adverse impacts to hydrology, surface water flow, and natural systems function of wetland and aquatic resources of regional importance
- adversely impact endangered and threatened species including the Florida Panther and Woodstork
- result in unacceptable impacts to community character and public safety by potentially adding as many as 2,000 dump truck trips per day to Corkscrew Road

Lee County staff recommended that this rezoning application be DENIED.

Ownership of the RCH Mine project includes Ascot Development which is also developing Midtown Estero, as well as Youngquist Brothers Excavating which operates an active rock mine on Alico Road.

Report on Bonita Springs Utilities (BSU) Finances and Bond Issue Plans

On May 21st Bob Lienesch presented the following report to the members of the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL) at its regular monthly meeting. Bob is former CPA with 11 years

experience with a Big Four Public Accounting Firm; 26 years with a large international manufacturer, including serving as its Controller, Treasurer and CFO (no utility experience) and is now retired and full time Estero resident. Bob compiled this report after reviewing many BSU financial reports, extensive discussions with BSU's financial staff and attending several recent meetings of the BSU Board.

BSU BACKGROUND

- Member owned water and waste water utility serving 40,000 customers in BS and parts of Estero for 40 years
- Jim Strecansky from Estero is one of 9 board members
- After years of significant volume growth, revenues have averaged about \$34 M for last three years as rate hikes have effectively offset volume declines
- BSU operated profitability for a number of years (except for a \$.5 M operating loss in 2008) and with positive operating cash flows (e.g., EBITDA \$15 M in 2009)
- Rate increases since 2002 have achieved a compound annual growth rate of over 6%, although there was no rate hike in 2009 and current rates of \$6.93 are comparable with other local water utilities
- Planned rate increases that exceed the local CPI require approval of the City of Bonita Springs
- BSU currently has \$165 M of "A" rated outstanding debt, including \$25 M of bank lines of credit coming due 9/30/10
- Cash of \$45 M, the \$165 M debt, and \$191 M surplus supports the \$308 M net plant investment

MEETING AND CORRESPONDENCE WITH MANAGEMENT

- Met with Debbie Bautista, Director of Finance and Jim Strecansky on May 7; thereafter exchanged multiple e-mails on follow-up questions
- Attended last two board meetings
- Have concluded that the board and management have enacted significant budget reductions in the last two years (e.g., 2 year wage freeze, reduced staffing, reduced overtime, and reduced use of outside contractors)
- Have the cost reductions been enough given the economic downturn?

CURRENT ISSUE

- Current maturity of the \$25 M bank line and the 2012 maturity of \$26 M of long term bonds, along with expected interest rate increases, suggests refinancing in the non-AMT Industrial Revenue Bond Market
- Planning a 27 year \$51 M bond with an expected 5.0-5.5% interest rate (issuance will actually reduce debt)
- Public bond market is difficult (rating agencies under fire; bond insurance companies being downgraded)
- Moody's and S&P are expecting improved coverage ratios (from 1.10% on BSU current debt to 150% by 2015)
- By forecasting the 150% by 2014, BSU hopes the rating agencies will hold the "A" rating and thereby minimize interest expense over the long term
- Independent rate consultants recommended to BSU directors a **5.5%** utility rate hike in **3 year** succession

BOARD ACTIONS

- Board has met privately on a number of occasions to reduce budgets further, downsize the offering, and use surplus cash to reduce the rate hike to **3.5%** beginning 9/1/10, 9/1/11 and 9/1/12
- Once again, have they made all the tough cost reduction decisions available to them?
- May 18, Board voted 8-1 (Sharkey objecting) to recommend to Bonita Springs a **3.5%** hike in **3 year** succession
- If the City of Bonita Springs approves, marketing of the bonds could begin as early as mid-August.

PERSONAL OBSERVATION

- Board has worked diligently to seek the best outcome for the utility and its customers in this difficult market
- Strecansky supports the decision
- The Board has been ably served by their Director of Finance, Ms. Bautista and her advisors

Proposed Changes in the Estero Parkway Wal-Mart Zoning

On May 24th several members of the Estero Community Planning Panel (ECP) and the Estero Design Review Committee (EDRC) met with [Wal-Mart](#)'s project architect and engineer to discuss how Lee County and Estero Comprehensive Plans and Land Development Code provisions should be used to modify Wal-Mart's new, smaller store plans. The meeting produced a lively discussion and many good ideas that Wal-Mart's architect will incorporate into two draft proposals that will be discussed at a second meeting between these parties, probably sometime in late June. The next steps in the process will be as outlined below.

Earlier Activities/Background

On April 20th representatives of the Estero Community Planning Panel (ECP) and the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECL) met with representatives of Wal-Mart to learn about their plans for the Wal-Mart store zoned for the northeast corner of US 41 and Estero Parkway in 2003. Wal-Mart has not constructed this store because their zoning prevents them from starting construction until six-laning of the segment of US 41 adjacent to the store has begun. The US 41 widening project is expected to start later this year, in November or December.

The stores representatives indicated at this meeting that Wal-Mart's corporate leadership has approved a new, smaller store format for development throughout the country. All their new stores will be much smaller than in the past. They are seeking to rezone this site for a 150,000 square foot store instead of the currently zoned 208,000 square foot store. In addition they would like to add three out-lots to the site plan, using some, but not all, of the surplus space included in the present zoning. The present plan includes one out-lot on the corner of Estero Parkway and US 41. The standard design of their new stores varies greatly from the Mediterranean design approved by the County for this site, however they agreed that the corporate design would have to be substantially modified in order to comply with Estero's appearance standards imbedded in Chapter 33 of the Lee County Land Development Code.

There appeared to be agreement between the parties on the following process for developing the rezoning proposal:

- One or more workshops between Wal-Mart's architects, engineers etc, and the members of the ECPP and the Estero Design Review Committee (EDRC) to develop a working draft proposal;
- Several meetings with the residents of communities adjacent to the site. This would include the two communities most involved in the existing zoning, The Vines and Breckenridge. In addition Wal-Mart would meet with the new communities along Estero Parkway: Osprey Cove, Belle Lago, the Cascades and the Reserve of Estero.
- Public presentations to the ECPP and EDRC.

Once this process is complete the proposal will then be submitted to Lee County where the following steps are necessary for approval of the rezoning:

- The proposal is reviewed by the County's Community Development staff and a staff report is prepared and sent to a Hearing Examiner with copies available to the public,
- The Hearing Examiner conducts a public hearing on the application and prepares a report based on the hearings that includes a recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC),
- Finally, the BOCC conducts a hearing on the matter and votes to approve, deny or approve with conditions the application. Only persons who testify before the Hearing Examiner may testify before the BOCC.

2009 Discussion with Wal-Mart

On September 11, 2009 the ECCL sponsored a workshop on the existing zoning for the Estero Parkway/US 41 Wal-Mart store in order to inform the thousands of Estero residents who now live along Estero Parkway, but were not in the community during 2003-04, when the site was zoned. About 60 Estero residents from these communities, the Vines, Breckenridge and other Estero communities attended.

In addition to the ECCL, Skip Block, the County Community Development staffer assigned to the case, Neal Noethlich, Chair of the Estero Community Planning Panel (ECP) at that time of the zoning and Chris Smith who represented the Vines when the property was zoned were available to discuss the plans and answer residents' questions. Subsequent to the meeting the Boards of The Vines and Breckenridge, the two communities closest to the store site and most involved in 2003 and 2004, voted to resist changes in the existing zoning.

To learn about the history of this major Estero zoning negotiation see [http://www.esterofl.org/eccl/EDR/estero_development_report_October_2004.htm#Estero Parkway Wal-Mart Progress Report](http://www.esterofl.org/eccl/EDR/estero_development_report_October_2004.htm#Estero_Parkway_Wal-Mart_Progress_Report) and http://www.esterofl.org/Issues/wal-mart_estero_pkwy.htm

During August 2009

On August 26, 2009 several representatives of Wal-Mart met with members of the Estero Community Planning Panel (ECP), the Estero Council of Community Leaders and residents of The Vines and Breckenridge to discuss proposed plans for rezoning their property on the northeast corner of US 41 and Estero Parkway. The major elements in their proposal would:

- Reduce the size of the Wal-Mart store by about 40,000 square feet
- Add three out-lots along US 41 for stores that would offset the reduced size of the Wal-Mart store,
- Substitute a new standard Wal-Mart design for their store for the existing “Estero” unique design that was negotiated by the community over a period of two years in 2003 and 2004, and
- Amend the “super-concurrency” provision in the existing zoning that requires construction of the store to begin only after the widening of US 41 in this area has been finally approved and funded.

The State Department of Community Affairs (DCA) Finds the County DR/GR Comprehensive Plan Amendments to Be In “Non-compliance”

Developments during May

On May 11th the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) sent the County a “Statement of Intent to Find a Portion of the [Comprehensive Plan Amendments](#) Not in Compliance”. The only area where DCA found the County out of compliance is its Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program. In general they found this program to lack the kind of specificity that they would like to see in such a program. Meanwhile the County has developed a detailed TDR program to amend its Land Development Code. This proposal has recently been reviewed by the County Land Planning Agency and is scheduled for further review and approval by the BOCC during June.

DCA’s finding of “Non-compliance” triggers negotiations between DCA and the County and an Administrative Hearing conducted by the State Division of Administrative Hearings. Interested parties can file to intervene in this process, a procedure that allows them to participate in what otherwise would be private negotiations. In addition new issues, not those specified by the Non-compliance” notice can be raised and included in the final agreement. We understand that many of the DR/GR landowners are planning to intervene. As a result the ECCL voted unanimously at its May 21st meeting to file an application to intervene in this process in conjunction with The Conservancy and the Brooks Concerned Citizens.

Other Recent Activities

On April 21st the ECCL, The Conservancy and several Estero communities sent a detailed letter to the state Department of Community Affairs urging them to approve most of the provisions in the County’s plan. The only exceptions were suggestions to:1) remove the “Rural Communities”, including Edison Farms, from the plan, and 2) remove the additional Florida Rock properties that were added by the Board at the last minute from the Future Limerock Mining Overlay.

On Wednesday, March 3rd the BOCC voted to send three DR/GR Comprehensive Plan ordinances to the State Department of Community Affairs (DCA) for their determination of compliance or noncompliance. The Board made two significant changes in the plan as presented by Lee County staff prior to this vote.

First they voted to delete the “rural communities” located along Corkscrew Road and on the Edison Farms property from the plan. This action will reduce the amount of residential sprawl in the DR/GR, reduce the amount of infrastructure that the County would have to add over the years as these communities were completed and increase the effectiveness of these large properties as sending areas in the planned Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program. Under the TDR program the residential development rights on these properties will be exported to receiving areas in the DR/GR along SR 82 or to areas in need of higher densities outside the DR/GR.

Secondly, the Board approved adding another section of Florida Rock land to the Future Limerock Mining area. This land lies immediately east of the Future Limerock Mining area recommended by the County’s consultant and staff. It has been the subject of extensive litigation for nearly two decades but has been characterized in all the planning documents as a Priority One Conservation Area.

Next Steps

The timeline of the DCA approval process is as follows:

When the Notice of noncompliance is forwarded to the Division of Administrative Hearings an Administrative Hearing process is started. In this proceeding, the County’s Plan Amendment is considered to be not in compliance, thus the burden of proof lies upon the County to prove that it is in fact in compliance.

The Administrative hearing process is quasi judicial proceeding and, like many law suits, settlements are always a possibility. If a settlement is not achieved earlier in the process, the final decision will be made by the Governor and his cabinet.

A settlement or a final order from the Governor will more than likely require additional plan amendments to enact the settlement or final order.

In addition, there are several parts of the DR/GR Comprehensive Plan that will require the Board to adopt amendments to the County Land Development Code (LDC). These will include County Board approval of a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program that will authorize the transfer of development rights on major DR/GR properties (“sending areas”) to other parts of the County, called “receiving areas”. The sellers of those development rights would still be able to farm, conserve, rehabilitate or sell those lands after being compensated for the residential development rights that they have sold.

Background

On January 15th the Florida Department of Community Affairs (DCA) completed their review of the DR/GR Comprehensive Plan amendments and transmitted them to Lee County.

In general DCA’s comments and recommendations were quite limited given the scope of the County’s Plan changes. They had only seven objections, most of which would strengthen, rather than weaken, the environmental protections included in the plan. In addition they recommend

that the Edison Farms property not be the site of a rural residential community..."Use the TDR program to transfer development from properties along Corkscrew Road and the Edison Farms tract to more appropriate locations in the Mixed-Use Communities along State Road 82."

Not only does DCA agree with plans to keep all limerock mining in the Alico Road corridor they suggested that the process for expanding the Future Limerock Mine area be made more open to public input.

On Thursday, February 4th the County Community Development Department conducted a stakeholders meeting to discuss some of the LDC changes, primarily dealing with the proposed Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program being developed by the County's consultants. On February 16th, after the regular Board meeting, the BOCC received a presentation on the proposed LDC changes.

On October 28, 2009 the BOCC voted to transmit the proposed [DR/GR Comp Plan Amendments](#) to the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) in Tallahassee for their review. The amendment package approved by the Board contains only a few changes to the recommendations of Lee County staff which the ECCL and our coalition of civic and environmental groups strongly support.

The Future Limerock Mining overlay included in the amendment was the most controversial and important provision, and fortunately this map, that concentrates mining in the Alico Road industrial corridor, was improved intact. As approved the Future Limerock Mining Overlay does not include any of the eight pending Corkscrew Road limerock mining rezoning applications. Thus, if the State does not seek to change the Mining Overlay and the courts uphold the plan change, none of these property owners will be able to apply to mine their land until 2030. The plan also contains many provisions for conserving and/or restoring many of these lands so that they can play a major role in restoring the area's flowways, recharging our future water supply, preventing flooding along our rivers and streams and improving the water quality in these streams and in Estero Bay.

This unanimous vote brings us one step closer to a master plan for the DR/GR which provides a balance to conflicting land uses in this rural area – providing adequate space and separation for rock mining, rural residential, agriculture, habitat, and water conservation uses.

We wouldn't be where we are in this effort without the help of some key civic and conservation groups including the Estero Council of Community Leaders, the Conservancy of SW Florida, the National and Florida Wildlife Federations, the Corkscrew Rural Community, Audubon of Florida, the Brooks Concerned Citizens and the Responsible Growth Management Coalition.

On September 24, 2009 the Lee County Board of County Commissioners heard a presentation by staff followed by public testimony concerning major proposed changes in the Comprehensive Plan for the 83,000 acre Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource (DR/GR) area just east of I-75 in Estero. Over a dozen representatives of Estero civic and community associations and region-wide environmental and growth management groups testified in support of the staff recommendations. A copy of this coalition's joint statement may be viewed at <http://esterofl.org/new/DRGR%20Joint%20Position%20Statement%20for%20BCC%20Transmittal%209-17-09%20Full%20Version.pdf> .

On May 20, 2009 Lee County released the "Proposed Lee Plan Amendments for Southeast Lee County...Planning for the Density Reduction/ Groundwater Resource Area (DR/GR)" and

posted it on their website at http://www3.leegov.com/dcd/CommunityPlans/SELC_DRGR/CPA2008-06/Proposed-Lee-Plan-Amendments-for-Southeast-Lee-County_May2009.pdf . This 72 page document details Dover Kohl & Partners, the County DR/GR planning consultants, recommendations for updating the County's Comprehensive Plan for the DR/GR. This extensive document, if approved by the BOCC and the Florida Department of Community Affairs (DCA), would provide the legal framework for concentrating mining in the Alico Road industrial corridor; DR/GR locations where residential development should be clustered; locations where agriculture should be encouraged and where and how the natural resources and ecology of the DR/GR should be preserved. Since then there have been numerous reports and staff analyses that have provided further in-depth support for this new plan for the DR/GR area. They can be found at the following website...
<http://www3.leegov.com/dcd/ComprehensivePlanning/SeLeeCounty.htm>

South Lee County Hospital Committee Update

On May 19th the [Freestanding Emergency Department Steering Committee](#) met to discuss how the Committee should proceed to forecast demand for services for a 24/7 Freestanding Emergency Department (FED) at the Bonita Community Healthcare site over the next 5 years. The Committee extensively discussed all sources of available data and how that data should be adjusted in order to produce the most accurate forecast. The balance of the meeting focused upon analyzing the alternative configurations of the FED and the cost of each of them consistent with the applicable State and Federal regulations. Subcommittees will continue to work on both of these projects during the period prior to the June meeting of the Steering Committee.

Earlier in 2010

On April 9th several members of the Freestanding Emergency Department Steering Committee traveled to Largo to visit another 24/7 Freestanding Emergency Department. Once again the managers of that facility provided the Committee with an abundance of information on their operations to date, both service wise and financial. This facility, although only two years old, is already profitable and experiencing business well beyond projections.

On April 15th the Steering Committee met again to discuss the market service area for a 24/7 Freestanding ER located on the site of the Bonita Community Health Center; the services to be provided by the facility; service to the facility by Lee County EMS (ambulance and helicopter service); procedures for estimating the future demand for service from the facility by transported and walk-in clients.

On March 18th the [Freestanding Emergency Department Steering Committee](#) met for the second time to discuss the antitrust, licensure and other legal aspects of establishing a 24/7 Freestanding Emergency Department (FED); the services that should be provided by this facility and those that should continue to be provided by the participating hospitals and what needs to be researched in order to estimate the present and future market for these services in its expected service area.

The meeting identified many of the challenges that must be overcome before a FED can be constructed in our community and the steps that we need to take to be successful in this effort.

On March 26th most of the Steering Committee traveled to North Port to tour Sarasota Memorial's North Port Medical Plaza 24/7 Freestanding ER that opened for business last

October. The facility is a combination Freestanding ER and a Walk-in Clinic with comprehensive laboratory and diagnostic/testing facilities. It is located in a bedroom community with a population of 50,000 at the far south end of Sarasota County. The area was considered an “underserved” community.

The leadership and staff at North Port were very generous with their information and time. Being such a new facility they shared with the Committee many of the obstacles they had to overcome in order to gain all the necessary approvals and prepare for an uncertain community response. They stressed the importance of community support throughout the approval and implementation phases. In the 6 months since the FED facility opened client use of the facility has far exceeded expectations.

On February 18th the fourteen member Freestanding Emergency Department Steering Committee met for the first time. The Steering Committee approved the following mission statement:

“Develop a plan and recommendations for a freestanding emergency department in the Bonita/Estero community”.

In pursuit of this outcome the Steering Committee will

- Identify gaps in emergency services provided to the community,
- Complete a five year projection of patient visits, revenues and expenses,
- Complete a capital budget and identify funding requirements, and
- Develop recommendations for next steps towards the development of a Freestanding ED.

On January 29th representatives of the Committee met with the Bonita Community Health Center (BCHC) Board to discuss how the owners of this facility would begin to implement a Freestanding ER on the BCHC property. About a week prior to the meeting Suzanne Bradach, Acting Executive Director of the Center, provided the Committee with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two hospital systems, NCH and Lee Memorial, that contains their “plan that provides the framework for the development of a freestanding ER” to serve the area.

The plan provides our Committee with three members on a broad based Committee, called the “Freestanding Emergency Department Steering Committee”, that would, over a period of about 6 months, do the research needed to address all the questions that must be answered prior to obtaining the approval of the project by the Boards of the two hospital systems.

On January 15 the Committee met with Kim Dickerson, the executive that manages the Lee County EMS system, to learn about their operations and how they interact with the Hospital systems while serving south Lee County. Mrs. Dickenson provided the Committee with detailed information about all the patients that have been transported by EMS to all area hospitals over the last two years.

During 2009

The EMS data indicates that the system received nearly 8,300 emergency calls from residents of the Bonita Springs and Estero Fire District area during 2008 and 2009. Over half of those that we transported by ambulance were sent to the NCH's North Naples Hospital on Immokalee Road. About 80% of these patients were Bonita residents. While nearly 1,000 Estero residents went to NCH's North Naples Hospital about 600 Estero residents were admitted to each of Lee Memorial Health Park and Lee's Gulf Coast Hospital.

Early in October the Hospital Committee received a response from the Bonita Community Health Center (BCHC) inviting the leaders of the Committee to meet with the BCHC Board as had been requested by the Committee (see below). This discussion is now scheduled for the next BCHC Board meeting in late January 2010.

In the meantime the South Lee County Hospital Committee, which consist of about 40 volunteers... many with strong health care backgrounds, has begun to plan and implement a community awareness and support program to demonstrate its unwavering commitment to obtaining a 24/7 Freestanding ER for the area as soon as possible. Thus far 37 community organizations have endorsed the Committee's efforts. The following are some of the prominent community organizations that have endorsed the Committee's efforts: The Bonita Springs and Estero Fire Districts; the City of Bonita Springs; the ECCL; Senior and Retired Physicians Association of Lee County; three civic and community service organizations; eight businesses and 22 residential community boards.

Anyone who would like to participate, recruit other local organizations or make suggestions to the committee may do so by calling or emailing Co-chairman Don Eslick at 273-9493 or doneslick@comcast.net .

Earlier in the year the prospects for a 24/7 Free-standing Emergency Department in the Bonita Community Health Center (BCHC) looked very bright. We were told that throughout the summer Lee Memorial and NCH, the co-owners of this facility, would discuss how this commitment could be implemented while retaining the existing shared ownership arrangement.

Unfortunately in late August the Hospital Committee learned that Lee Memorial and NCH had decided that their first priority had to be to work on making BCHC profitable and that the Emergency facility had to be placed on the "back burner". Upon learning of this decision the leaders of the Hospital Committee decided to send a letter to the Chairmen of the two systems seeking a meeting with the BCHC Board to learn firsthand what the intentions of the Board are regarding the south Lee County community being served by a 24/7 Freestanding ER in the BCHC.