

# HOW DID WE GET HERE?



**WHY IS DEVELOPMENT SO FAST AND  
INFRASTRUCTURE SO SLOW?**

**GREATER ESTERO COMMUNITY REPORT  
QUARTER 2 - 2026**




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# THE GREATER ESTERO COMMUNITY REPORT

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The 2nd Report of 2026.

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# HOW DID WE GET HERE? WHY IS DEVELOPMENT SO FAST AND INFRASTRUCTURE SO SLOW?

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Written by Allan Bowditch, President, Engage Estero.

- **Why are there so Many Developments Taking Place in Greater Estero?**
- **Why Can't They be Stopped?**
- **Why is the Road & Traffic Infrastructure Lagging Behind the Developments?**

Greater Estero is experiencing growth unlike anything in its history. New residential communities, apartment complexes, commercial centers, medical facilities, and mixed-use developments seem to appear everywhere residents look. For many longtime residents, the pace of change can feel sudden and overwhelming, especially as traffic congestion, construction activity, and pressure on public services continue to rise.

Yet this growth is not accidental. It is the result of decades of planning decisions, market demand, population growth across Southwest Florida, and development rights established years ago under Lee County regulations and Florida law.

One of the most frequent questions asked by residents is: "Why can't these developments simply be stopped?" The answer is more complicated than many people realize.

Most projects now moving forward are proposed on land previously designated for development by county-approved comprehensive plans, zoning approvals, and legally recognized property rights.

Once development rights have been granted, local governments are limited in their ability to deny projects that meet existing regulations. Florida law strongly protects private property rights, and counties can face significant legal and financial consequences if they attempt to block projects that comply with approved land-use rules.



At the same time, Greater Estero's popularity continues to fuel demand for housing, services, healthcare, retail, and employment centers. Southwest Florida remains one of the fastest-growing regions in the state, attracting retirees, working families, seasonal residents, and businesses alike.

Estero's location between Naples and Fort Myers, combined with access to Interstate 75, Southwest Florida International Airport, universities, and beaches, has made the community especially attractive for continued investment and development.



As more people arrive, pressure increases to build the homes, roads, utilities, schools, and commercial services needed to support that growth.

Residents also frequently ask why roads and traffic improvements seem to lag far behind the pace of development. The primary reason is that transportation infrastructure requires years, and often decades, of planning, funding, engineering, environmental review, land

acquisition, and construction.

Major road projects depend on complex coordination among Lee County, the Village of Estero, the Florida Department of Transportation, regional planning agencies, and state and federal funding sources. Meanwhile, new developments can often move from approval to construction much more quickly. The result is a frustrating imbalance in which population growth and increased traffic arrive long before major roadway improvements are completed.

These challenges have created understandable concern throughout Greater Estero about congestion, quality of life, environmental impacts, public safety, and the community's future character. However, understanding how growth occurs and the legal, economic, and infrastructure realities behind it is essential for residents who want to participate effectively in shaping future decisions.

The accompanying information in this report will explain these issues in greater detail and outline the opportunities residents still have to influence planning, transportation priorities, conservation efforts, and the long-term future of Greater Estero.

Engage Estero is committed to doing all it can not only to support and provide information to residents in Greater Estero, but also to take the lead in advocating for development and road infrastructure issues where necessary. For example,

We have recently spoken out against the proposed development of a 5-story condominium building and a multi-story car park at the Coconut Point mall, with the removal of the cinema building.

- We lobbied County Commissioners about the dangers posed by the unprotected turn light at US-41 and Williams Road, which had caused the deaths of 5 individuals 2 years ago. This change was recently implemented, so no turns are allowed across the north or south lanes after the green arrow turns off. A red arrow is now in place, preventing subsequent turns.
- We have supported communities that will be affected by increased noise from the widening of I-75 between Corkscrew Road and Immokalee Road from 6 to 10 lanes. We have written to FDOT and explained the need for a continuous wall through the Brooks Communities, citing two recommended products.



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# WHY RESIDENT INFLUENCE ON DEVELOPMENT IN ESTERO IS SOMETIMES LIMITED

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## **Understanding the true factors behind development choices.**

Many residents have long been concerned about the pace of development taking place in Estero and along East Corkscrew Road outside the municipality. Engage Estero receives numerous questions about why The Village cannot stop the development so that the road infrastructure can catch up.

Engage Estero's senior executives, who reside locally, also agree that it would be helpful to restrict the developments, given that at present Lee County does not have the funds to address many of the changes needed to alleviate congestion and safety concerns. We hear the following questions repeatedly,

- Why can't the Village simply stop a project?
- Why can't the Estero Planning, Zoning, and Design Board demand major changes from developers?
- "Why were these developments approved in the first place?"

The answer is fundamentally due to timing, property rights, and Florida law.

With the public's concerns in mind, we thought we would try to explain the difficulties we face.



## The Background to this Issue

When Estero incorporated as a village on December 31, 2014, it did not begin with a blank slate. Long before incorporation, many large tracts of land had already been purchased by developers and investors. In numerous cases, zoning classifications, density allowances, development orders, and permitting approvals had already been established under Lee County regulations. Developers had often invested substantial sums of money based on those approvals and the expectation that they would be allowed to build according to the rules in place at the time.

Because of this, the Village inherited many projects with certain “legal rights” prior to Estero's incorporation as a municipality. This comes about if a developer:

- legally acquired land,
- obtained approvals,
- invested substantial money,
- and relied on existing zoning rules,

**Under Florida law, property owners and developers possess significant legal protections once approvals have been granted and investments have been made in reliance upon those approvals. These are commonly referred to as “legal rights.” This means that even if current residents, Village officials, or board members would prefer a different outcome today, the Village often cannot simply revoke or eliminate those rights without exposing taxpayers to potentially costly legal challenges.**



## The Role of the Estero Planning, Zoning, and Design Board.

As a result, Florida's local governments are generally required to approve projects that comply with existing zoning, adopted regulations, previously granted entitlements, and applicable development standards. The law does not allow municipalities to deny projects solely because they are unpopular or because residents oppose growth. If a proposal meets the existing legal requirements, the Village's discretion can be far more limited than many people realize.

This is also true for the [Estero Planning, Zoning, and Design Board](#). While it plays an important role in reviewing projects and protecting community standards, its authority is limited. The Board can often work with developers to improve landscaping, buffering, architecture, traffic circulation, pedestrian connectivity, lighting, and environmental protection. It can recommend conditions and encourage better overall design. However, it usually cannot remove legally approved density, rewrite existing

development rights, or deny a project that otherwise complies with governing regulations and prior approvals.

In many cases, the Board’s role is less about deciding whether development will occur and more about influencing how that development will ultimately look and function within the community.

If a proposed development:

- complies with zoning,
- meets adopted codes,
- follows approved densities,
- satisfies engineering requirements,
- and aligns with prior development orders,

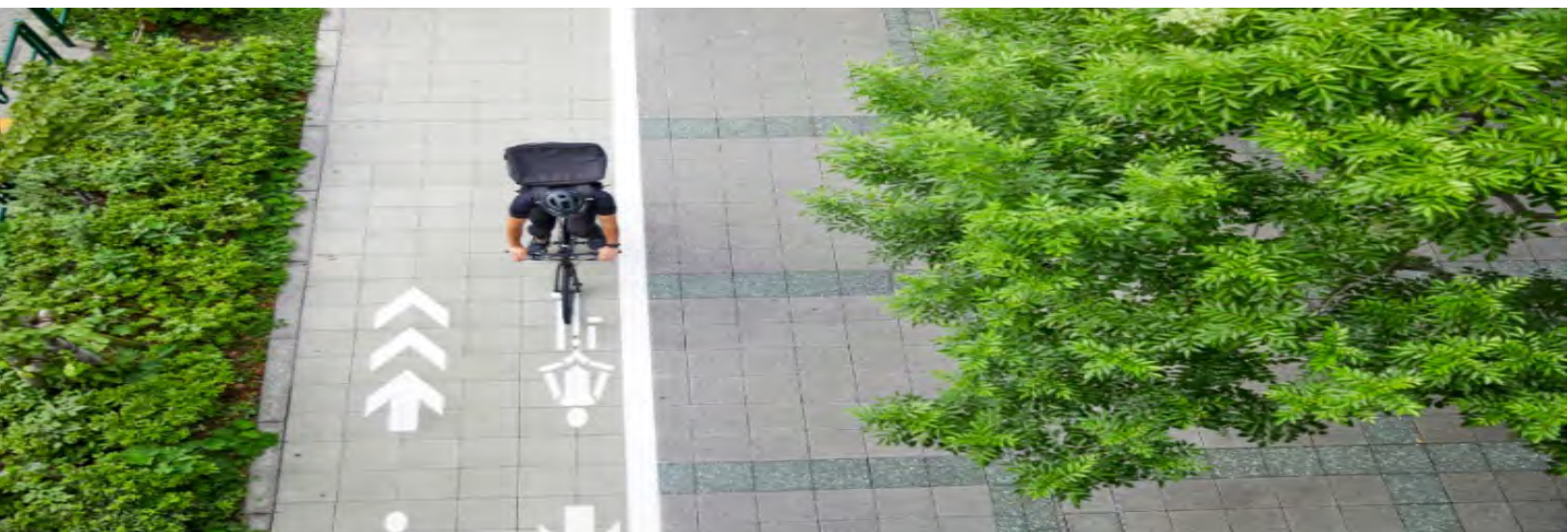
The Village usually cannot arbitrarily deny it.

Resident frustration with growth is completely understandable. Many people chose Estero for its natural beauty, community character, and quality of life. Concerns about traffic congestion, flooding, school capacity, environmental impacts, and overdevelopment are real and important. At the same time, many of the projects under discussion today stem from planning decisions, land purchases, and approvals made years — and sometimes decades — before Estero incorporated.

In many respects, the Village is working to manage and improve development patterns that it inherited rather than created.

Having said that, there are issues that the Planning, Zoning, and Design Board (PZDB) can address, such as:

- request design improvements
- recommend buffering and landscaping,
- influence architectural appearance,
- encourage traffic mitigation,
- improve pedestrian connectivity,
- negotiate community enhancements,
- and recommend conditions of approval.



## Can the Public and Engage Estero Do Anything to Address and Possibly Change a Development?

Although there are legal limits on what can be stopped outright, resident participation still matters greatly. Even with legal limitations, resident participation remains significant. Public involvement can influence:

- project design quality,
- landscaping and buffering,
- traffic circulation improvements,
- pedestrian and bike connectivity,
- environmental preservation,
- lighting and signage,
- architectural standards,
- stormwater protections,
- and future comprehensive planning policies.

Residents also shape:

- future elected leadership,
- long-term land use policies,
- redevelopment standards,
- conservation priorities,
- and updates to Village codes.

**Constructive participation often achieves more than opposition alone.**



### Village of Estero

[Subscribe](#) to the Village emails which post alerts and summaries of all Village Council and Planning, Zoning and Design Board meetings.

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### Lee County

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View [agendas and meetings](#) online.

## Why Resident Frustration Is Understandable

Seeing rapid growth can create real concerns about:

- traffic,
- school capacity,
- flooding,
- environmental impacts,
- aesthetics,
- and strain on infrastructure.

Those concerns are legitimate.

Estero is managing growth decisions inherited from an earlier era. This is not defeatist, but it would be rash for the Estero Village Management and Council to reject developers' plans out of hand, as doing so would incur substantial legal penalties and erode our hard-won position as the municipality with the lowest property tax rate in Florida!

## Engage Estero Will Continue to Acknowledge Residents' Concerns and Obtain the Optimal Outcome Whenever Possible

The organization will continue working to ensure we maintain trust and credibility among our residents:

- acknowledge resident concerns first,
- explain the legal realities clearly,
- avoid sounding defensive,
- emphasize transparency,
- and focus on where community input still has meaningful influence.

We believe that residents will be more likely to stay engaged when they understand the situation that we face:

## In Conclusion

Ultimately, the future of Estero will continue to be shaped by a balance between existing legal realities and the community's vision for responsible growth. While the Village cannot undo many development rights established before incorporation, resident involvement remains essential to guiding how Estero evolves.

Through informed participation, constructive dialogue, and ongoing civic engagement, residents can continue to play an important role in preserving the character, beauty, and quality of life that make Estero such a special community. Engage Estero will continue to lead the way, as we have for over 25 years.

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# WHY IS THE ROAD AND TRAFFIC INFRASTRUCTURE LAGGING BEHIND THE DEVELOPMENTS

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By Allan Bowditch, President Engage Estero

## Introduction

In several prior community meetings and articles, Engage Estero has tried to address this important question. However, given its importance, we will also address the issue in this Greater Estero Community Report.

At Engage Estero's April 17 Community and Member Meeting, residents gathered to hear Don Scott, Executive Director of the Lee Metropolitan Planning Office, discuss traffic congestion and future road improvements. The meeting focused on transportation updates, the impacts of future development, and the long-term expansion of the interstate corridor.



You can watch the full April 17 Engage Estero Community and Member Meeting on YouTube.

Click here: <https://esterotoday.com/event/apr2026/>

The strong turnout of more than 130 residents underscored how deeply these issues affect daily life in Estero. Traffic congestion affects commutes, school travel, emergency response times, and local businesses. Major highway construction affects mobility, safety, noise levels, and the character of surrounding neighborhoods.

## Why is there a "Lag" Effect on Road Infrastructure?

Scott explained why transportation infrastructure so often lags behind development. Construction costs have risen dramatically over the past two decades. Legislative changes have limited the extent to which developers can be required to fund roadway improvements.

At the same time, road expansion projects can take many years to complete because of environmental reviews, right-of-way acquisition, utility relocation, permitting requirements, and stormwater management regulations.

Estero has grown much faster than its transportation network for a few interconnected reasons:



- 1. Rapid population growth and development**

Over the past two decades, Estero transformed from a quieter, unincorporated area into a major residential and commercial corridor. Large master-planned communities, shopping centers, and institutions like Florida Gulf Coast University accelerated traffic demand faster than roads could be expanded.

- 2. Road projects take many years.**

Major transportation improvements require extensive planning, environmental review, engineering, land acquisition, and state and federal approvals. By the time projects are completed, traffic volumes may already exceed projections.

- 3. Dependence on a few major corridors**

Estero relies heavily on corridors such as Interstate 75, U.S. Route 41 (Tamiami Trail), and Corkscrew Road. When growth concentrates around a limited number of arteries, congestion compounds quickly.

- 4. Funding limitations and prioritization**

Transportation funding in Florida is competitive and often prioritized at the regional level. Fast-growing suburban areas sometimes lag because infrastructure budgets are spread across many counties and statewide projects.

- 5. Car-oriented land use patterns**

Estero developed primarily around automobile travel, with limited public transit and relatively low-density suburban design. As a result, nearly every new household adds more vehicle trips to the same road system.

- 6. Seasonal traffic pressures**

Southwest Florida experiences significant winter population growth driven by seasonal residents and tourism. Roads may seem adequate in summer, but they become overwhelmed during peak season.

- 7. Growth outpaced incorporation and governance changes**

Before Estero incorporated as a village in 2014, much planning authority rested with Lee County Government. Infrastructure coordination sometimes lagged behind the pace of private development approvals.

In short, Estero's transportation lag is largely the result of extremely rapid suburban growth colliding with slow-moving infrastructure planning, limited roadway redundancy, and a heavy reliance on automobiles.

## The Financial Realities

According to Scott's presentation, the cost of constructing a new four-lane urban interstate rose from about \$5.96 million per mile in 2004 to nearly \$23.9 million per mile in 2024. Widening a two-lane urban road to four lanes increased from roughly \$4.28 million per mile to \$11.5 million per mile over the same period. Even resurfacing costs have more than tripled.

Funding has not kept pace. The federal gas tax has remained unchanged since 1993, and only the state portion of Florida's fuel tax includes a cost-of-living adjustment. Lee County already levies the maximum local option gas tax, yet transportation demand continues to outpace available resources.

Scott explained that Lee County currently has about \$70 million per year available for capacity and bridge projects, while the county's identified transportation priorities total roughly \$2.5 billion in present-day costs.

That funding gap helps explain why residents often experience worsening congestion years before improvements are completed. Development arrives quickly, traffic volumes rise, and infrastructure improvements struggle to keep pace.

One potential solution discussed at the meeting was a charter county transportation sales surtax of up to one percent, which would require voter approval via a countywide referendum. Based on current estimates, a full one-cent surtax could generate approximately \$245.9 million in annual countywide revenue, including an estimated \$8.57 million share for Estero.

Whether residents support such a measure is ultimately a political decision. Still, the discussion underscored a growing reality: if communities want infrastructure delivered more quickly, new funding sources may need to be considered. Unfortunately, a vote on this issue is unlikely before 2028.



## Conclusion

In the end, the infrastructure challenges facing Estero are not unique, but they are especially visible in a community that has experienced rapid growth over a relatively short period. Roads, intersections, schools, drainage systems, and public services cannot be expanded at the same pace as new homes, shopping centers, and residential developments are built. The result is congestion, delays, and strain on daily life that many residents now experience firsthand.

Yet the situation is not without solutions. Residents can play an important role in shaping their community's future.



Public participation in local planning meetings, transportation hearings, and village council discussions can influence how growth is managed and where infrastructure dollars are prioritized.

Citizens can also advocate for smarter long-term planning, including road expansion, improved traffic synchronization, better public transit options, mixed-use development, and stronger coordination between developers and local government.

In addition, residents can support policies that mandate infrastructure improvements to keep pace with new development rather than waiting years to react. Regional cooperation among Lee County Government, the Village of Estero, and state transportation agencies will also be critical as Southwest Florida continues to grow.

Engage Estero personnel are in close contact with the Lee County Commissioners, Lee County Manager David Harner, and the various Departments of Transportation. In addition, there are regular meetings with Estero Manager Steve Sarkozy and various members of the Village Council, including Mayor Joanne Ribble and Deputy Mayor George Zalucki.

Ultimately, overcoming infrastructure lag requires patience, investment, and sustained civic engagement. Growth itself is not the problem; the challenge is ensuring that transportation and public infrastructure evolve alongside the community they serve.



To learn more about the various agencies involved in road development, and how to contact them, visit: <https://esterotoday.com/to-impact-greater-estero-traffic-problems-act-now/#involved>



To follow transportation issues, visit <https://esterotoday.com/category/transportation/>



For a list of who to call on transportation issues, go to <https://esterotoday.com/who-ya-gonna-call/>



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