

Big Cypress - a good time to pause

Whether good times or bad, pursuing the development of an area considered environmentally sensitive is most certainly challenging. There are many levels of environmental sensitivity and in Southwest Florida, any project that ventures into panther habitat can expect significant resistance.



On the Mark

By Mark Strain

The Town of Big Cypress has been in the works for years. The landowners have spared no cost to involve the public, hire all kinds of experts and move well into the permitting process. Their efforts started many years ago during more prosperous times in our county. Since big planning takes big timeframes, their procedure through the permitting maze is not nearly completed. All that changed last week, when the owners put a halt, assumed to be temporary, on their plans for this new town in the rural area of Collier County.

It is not good timing for a new town right now, for that matter it is not good timing for any development, new or existing. That a new town would be financially feasible in the very near future is unlikely, given the amount of existing inventory and projects sitting idle in our area. Whether there are environmental concerns or not, considering our current economy, moving forward at this time might not be the best decision.

Ironically, even with a better economic situation, challenges have been mounting for new developments in areas considered sensitive to the endangered Florida panther. There are nu-

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merous studies written about what it takes for the panther to survive and recover and they all center on preserving layers of habitat, of which the panther seems to have three. The most sensitive is aptly named "primary" then "secondary" and finally a "dispersal" area, each collectively working with the other.

Most of the rural area of Southwest Florida ends up being considered as either primary or secondary habitat. Developments hoping to build in primary habitat have attempted to mitigate their damage to this habitat by conserving some other sensitive areas elsewhere. Within the area that was outlined as The Town of Big Cypress there is a significant amount of what mapping indicates is primary habitat.

A recent technical report, paid for by many of the large landowners in eastern Collier County and completed in October of last year, was an attempt to finally clear up the questions and concerns relating to panther habitat in the Rural Lands Stewardship Area in eastern Collier County. The report was the work of six expert scientists in panther biology and landscape ecology; they were assembled to proceed with the study independent of any agencies or private influence.

While the summary of their conclusions lacks detail, the more detailed backup in the 156 pages of their report raises some important questions concerning how panther habitat preservation should be considered in our rural area. The report recommends conserving over 38,000 more acres than currently planned, no interchanges at I-75 in the Everglades or DeSoto boulevards areas and even though supportive of a cap on the overall amount of developable acreage, it recommends that "... future development occurs first in Open Lands that are within the Secondary Zone before lands within the Primary Zone are considered for conversion to urban uses."

With all of this scientific detail, one item that seems to be consistently omitted in the discussions on panther habitat is how to define it in a measurable and consistent way. The mapping used to determine what is primary and secondary habitat fails to provide an easily understood standard that can be consistently applied. For example, that area defined as primary habitat is in open and active agricultural fields. Panthers use the fringe of farm fields that border their upland prime habitat and thus, the fields also contribute to their habitat, but just how far into the fields should be considered protected lands? If such a measurement was known it would provide much-needed consistency.

Last week, a lawsuit was filed by several organizations concerned with the panther's survival and recovery. Their suit disputes the allowance of more development in primary and secondary habitat. Based on the difficult economy, a new report that has yet to be implemented and this recent lawsuit, a planned development such as Big Cypress should be cautious until the controversy surrounding how and to what extent panther habitat can be used is resolved.

As a Estate Resident (Off 8th Street NE) behind the proposed Randall Blvd. Proposed center, with many friends in the area and orange tree, this article by your chairman of the collier county planning commission is very clear, don't count on the collier family to 6 lane land Randall Blvd. and we don't want the enormous traffic that this center will bring, the developer is blowing smoke, I don't ever remember getting an invite to any of their meetings. I can't believe that you commissioners are falling for this old developer trick, hide facts, make up facts, option the property don't buy it, get it rezoned then flip it for big bucks, and leave the residents to deal with the aftermath.