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School's out on Burnt Store plan

Five "final" versions. Eighteen months of meetings, reviews, approvals. A blueprint for development affecting more than 6,500 landowners in a 22,370-acre area.

The Burnt Store Area Plan has earned its praise as a model of collaboration among builders, residents, community groups and government agencies.

But Tuesday, the plan took some knocks before it was approved unanimously by Charlotte County Commissioners.

Commissioners critiqued the voluminously detailed document for scant references to new school financing and challenged figures it used to project infrastructure costs.

Those questions prompted a discussion of impact fees and fostered a renewed realization that under existing financing schedules, new development is not paying for itself.

"As a county, you guys have to look into adopting school-impact fees," said Dan DeLisi, of the Burnt Store Improvement Initiative, a primary architect of the plan.

"The builders are going to shoot me for saying that," he quickly added.

DeLisi knows what he's talking about from both sides of the fence. He's not only the director of planning for The Bonita Bay Group -- one of the region's largest developers -- but serves on the state's Impact Fee Review Task Force.

With the Growth Management Act mandating development "concurrency" while, simultaneously, "diminishing" revenues, DeLisi said Charlotte County has little choice.

Commission Chairwoman [Sara Devos](#) agreed.

"Let me say how disappointing it is to see that we only have five paragraphs in this entire discussion that relate to school impacts," she said. "Do I have to wait for new development for the need to be there? New growth has to pay for schools."

And new growth is certainly coming to the Burnt Store corridor between Punta Gorda and the Lee County line.

The plan provides broad land-use guidelines and policies, but not development-specific proposals.

It includes establishment of a Burnt Store Zoning Overlay District, amends the county's Urban Service Area and creates two new land-use designations -- village residential and limited development.

DeLisi said the broadened Urban Service Area links up with a similar service area on the other side of the Lee County line.

"It's really filling the gap rather than extending into new areas," he said.

The plan was hailed as a "landmark" cooperative effort among community leaders, directors of homeowners associations, elected officials, county planners, state officials and environmental leaders.

County planners and the Burnt Store Improvement Initiative, a coalition of property owners along Burnt Store Road, spearheaded the effort.

"This is the culmination of a long process," DeLisi said. "A significant amount of data and analysis went into it."

The plan was approved by the state's Department of Community Affairs after several objections were addressed.

DeLisi said the DCA's criticisms ranged from "minor nitpicky comments" to specific concerns about coastal high-hazard areas, environmental issues, and compliance with new growth-management requirements.

While the plan's designers satisfied state concerns, DeLisi could not assuage Commissioner [Matt DeBoer](#)'s distrust of the document's financial analysis.

"The real impact on our infrastructure needs is going to be greater than what is stated in this report," DeBoer said.

The plan indicates the county already has a revenue source for the \$140 million necessary for infrastructure improvements over the next 15 years, he said.

However, that money is being calculated "using general fund revenues for infrastructure needs, and we don't do it that way," DeBoer said.

The plan's financial analysis is "making assumptions and I find those assumptions incorrect," he said.

DeBoer concurred with DeLisi's and Devos' contention that revenue shortfalls will need to be filled by imposing new developer fees and increasing existing ones.

"Those sources have to be tapped," he said.

DeBoer said the county should hire "someone to do our own financial analysis" of the plan.

But it is a plan -- and a good one at that, Devos said, before commending all who worked together to craft it.

"This is a wonderful document," she said. "It was an extraordinary task."

The area in the plan is framed on the south by the Charlotte/Lee county line, on the east by U.S. 41, on the north by Tuckers Grade and the west by Charlotte Harbor.

The plan will incorporate development already under way in the area, including Tern Bay Development's recently approved 231-unit project on 475.3 acres within the 1,778-acre Tern Bay Development of Regional Impact


area, approximately three miles north of the Lee County line.

DeLisi said Bonita Bay Group will soon submit a similar development agreement to the county.

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By JOHN HAUGHEY

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