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EAST LEE COUNTY NEWS | DANIELS CORRIDOR

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Lee County's Promise of Preservation Faces Its Biggest Test Yet

Special to East Lee County News

Southwest Florida has been losing its natural defenses at an alarming rate. As compiled by the South Florida Water Management District, Lee County lost 31% of its wetlands between 1999 and 2023. A related study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found that from 1996 to 2010, the county lost 38 square miles of wetlands and 54 square miles of total land cover—a rate exceeding the national average.

Wetlands are more than just landscapes: they are critical buffers against hurricanes, natural filters for drinking water, vital habitats for wildlife, and destinations for outdoor recreation. Yet development pressures continue to erode them, often under the promise of "mitigation" through wetland banking. Critics argue this system rarely provides true acre-for-acre replacement, instead calculating "ecological units" that result in a net loss.

CONSERVATION 20/20: A PROGRAM UNDER THREAT

In 1996, Lee County residents made a remarkable choice. By referendum, they voted to tax themselves through a 0.5-mill levy to buy and preserve environmentally sensitive lands. The initiative, known as Conservation 20/20, became one of the most successful and popular local programs in county history. For nearly three decades, it has safeguarded some of the region's most valuable natural resources.

But today, that legacy is under threat. During an economic downturn in the mid-2000s, commissioners absorbed the levy into the county's general fund. A 2015 ordinance was passed to reassure the public, requiring the fund to stay between \$40 million and \$100 million. Yet in the most recent budget cycle, commissioners sidestepped replenishing the fund, arguing that the ordinance does not specify when replenishment must occur. Because of this maneuver, the program has already lost over 500 acres of nominated land that could not be restored.



Photo: Front Wetlands Of Prairie Pines Preserve

WEAKENING OVERSIGHT AND TRANSPARENCY

The threat isn't just financial. Oversight and public trust in the program have also been eroded:

- The **Advisory Committee** now tilts heavily toward developers and real estate, despite the ordinance's requirement for balance with scientific voices.
- Public participation has been narrowed. Citizens no longer get agendas, cannot present visuals during meetings, and their comments are stripped from the official minutes.
- Subcommittees that once provided detailed review were dissolved and never replaced, leading to questionable decisions such as allowing **saw palmetto berry harvesting** in preserves until residents objected.
- Preserves have been opened to utility and infrastructure projects, including stormwater ponds, water wells, and even hurricane debris dumping.

THE LONG-TERM RISKS OF INACTION

If the erosion of Conservation 20/20 continues, Lee County faces serious long-term consequences:

- Higher Flood Insurance Costs:** Without wetlands to absorb stormwater, flooding becomes more severe, leading to skyrocketing insurance premiums for

homeowners and businesses.

- Declining Water Quality:** Wetlands act as natural filters. Their loss means more nutrients and pollutants entering rivers and estuaries, fueling red tide, algal blooms, and threatening both public health and marine life.
- Loss Of Tourism Revenue:** Lee County's natural beauty is a cornerstone of its economy. As water quality declines and green spaces vanish, so too will eco-tourism, recreational fishing, and outdoor recreation dollars.
- Weakened Storm Resilience:** In the face of stronger hurricanes, reduced conservation lands mean higher risks to life, property, and infrastructure. Wetlands are natural levees—once gone, they cannot be easily or cheaply replaced.
- Biodiversity Collapse:** From gopher tortoises to wading birds, countless species rely on protected lands. Without strong conservation, these species face shrinking habitats and population decline.

These risks are not distant possibilities—they are unfolding now, and each decision to underfund or undermine the program compounds the problem for future generations.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The stakes are high. With 86,000 new rooftops in the pipeline, Lee County's growth is accelerating

faster than ever. Conservation lands are not luxuries—they are infrastructure that reduce flooding, safeguard drinking water, and strengthen storm protection. Every acre not protected today becomes tomorrow's lost opportunity.

Other Florida counties have recognized the urgency and expanded their conservation efforts. Lee County risks going in the opposite direction, weakening a program that was once a model for citizen-led environmental protection.

A CALL TO DEFEND THE PROGRAM

Conservation 20/20 remains popular with the public, but its future depends on vigilance. Residents can:

- Attend public hearings and meetings to demand that the fund be replenished.
- Hold commissioners accountable for decisions that jeopardize the program.
- Speak up in elections to ensure conservation remains a priority in county leadership.

Conservation 20/20 was built on vision and community commitment. That vision is now under threat—not gone, but in danger of being hollowed out. The choice facing Lee County is whether we allow short-term interests to weaken a program that protects our land, water, and future—or whether we come together once again to defend it. 🐾

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Warren Buffett's \$800 Million Bet On Florida Homebuilding: A Warning Sign For Our Communities

Katrina Salokar | East Lee County News

Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway recently made a massive **\$800 million investment in Lennar**, with a smaller \$191.5 million stake in D.R. Horton. Both are giants of the sprawl machine that's remaking Florida's landscape one subdivision at a time.

Buffett isn't a stranger to housing—Berkshire already owns **Clayton Homes**, the nation's largest manufactured homebuilder. So why double down now?

WHY BUFFETT MIGHT BE MOVING NOW

- **Population & Political Winds:**

Florida remains the fastest-growing state in the U.S., with a pro-development political climate that routinely sides with builders over residents and local governments. If you believe the state will keep paving over land to make way for endless subdivisions, investing in Lennar and D.R. Horton makes cold, hard sense.

- **Housing as a "Safe Haven":**

With volatility in tech and banking, housing is often seen as a stable bet—especially in growth states where regulation is light and demand is high. Buffett is a master at reading when industries are "protected" by political and market tailwinds.

- **Government Greenlights:**

State leaders continue to fast-track permits, undercut local planning authority, and push back against environmental restrictions. That means fewer roadblocks for the very companies Buffett is now backing.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FLORIDA

For residents, the implications are stark:

- **More Sprawl, Less Planning:**

Investments of this size don't just reflect confidence in the market—they fuel it. Lennar and D.R. Horton will now have the capital (and the Wall Street confidence) to push harder and faster into our farmland, wetlands, and open space.

- **Infrastructure Strain:**

Schools, roads, and water sys-

tems are already overwhelmed. More unchecked development will deepen these crises.

- **Stronger Developer Influence:** Buffett's billions send a signal that the pro-development agenda in Florida isn't weakening—it's getting stronger, and backed by the biggest names in global finance.

Buffett's stake is more than a financial bet—it's a reflection of the **imbalance of power in Florida**.

While communities are fighting for sustainable growth, clean water, and livable neighborhoods, Wall Street sees Florida as a land grab. And with state government rolling out the red carpet, the only question left is: **will citizens push back hard enough to stop Florida from being sold off one subdivision at a time?**

KEY GROWTH REGIONS AND MARKET STRATEGIES

- **Southeast:** This is D.R. Horton's largest and most robust market. In the fiscal year ending September 2024, the Southeast region generated the company's highest homebuilding revenue.

Florida remains a major focus, with active communities in Fort Myers, Cape Coral, Jacksonville, and Pensacola.

- **Texas:** The company has a significant presence in Texas markets, particularly in and around Houston. This is one of the largest and most consistent housing markets in the U.S.

- **California:** D.R. Horton has communities across California, including the Inland Empire (Riverside-San Bernardino), Bakersfield, Fresno, and Los Angeles.

- **Mountain West:** The Las Vegas market is a target growth area, with several new communities underway.

- **Expansion through acquisition:** The company also enters and expands in attractive markets through strategic acquisitions. For example, it acquired Truland Homes in 2023 to boost its presence in Baldwin County, Alabama, and Northwest Florida.

WHAT ELSE IS IN IT

FOR THEM

Large, publicly traded builders like Lennar, D.R. Horton, and others have built out entire ecosystems around the core act of selling you a house. These "secondary income streams" are often embedded in the transaction, creating long-term revenue for the builder even after the sale. Many critics see them as predatory or extractive.

1. CAPTIVE MORTGAGE & FINANCING

- Most big builders operate their own in-house mortgage companies (e.g., Lennar Mortgage, DHI Mortgage).
- Buyers are often heavily incentivized—or subtly pressured—to use the builder's financing by dangling upgrades, lower interest rates, or closing cost credits.
- These mortgage arms generate substantial profit on top of the house sale and may steer buyers into loans that benefit the builder, not necessarily the buyer.

2. TITLE & SETTLEMENT SERVICES

- Builders frequently own or partner with title companies.
- Just like with financing, buyers are incentivized to use them. This adds another revenue stream for the builder, even though buyers might find cheaper or more favorable terms elsewhere.

3. HOME INSURANCE & WARRANTIES

- Builders sometimes funnel buyers into preferred insurance providers.
- "Extended warranties" or mandatory HOA-style service contracts can become recurring revenue streams. These are marketed as protections but can carry high premiums and limited coverage.

WHY IT MATTERS IN FLORIDA

Florida's political climate makes this even more concerning:

- **Weakened consumer protections** → fewer checks on steering buyers into affiliated companies.

- **Fast-tracked development approvals** → more leverage

for builders to bundle land, housing, and services.

- **High in-migration demand** → buyers often feel they have no choice but to accept whatever the builder offers, no matter how lopsided.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

The scale of Wall Street's investment in Florida homebuilding can feel overwhelming, but local residents are not powerless. Communities across the state have begun to organize, push back, and demand smarter growth. Here are some ways you can get involved:

- **Stay Informed:** Follow local planning board and county commission meetings where zoning changes and development approvals are decided. These are often where the most consequential decisions are made.

- **Speak Up:** Public comment matters. Attend hearings, write letters, and share your concerns about infrastructure, water quality, and overdevelopment with elected officials.

- **Support Strong Growth Policies:** Back candidates and policies that prioritize balanced growth, conservation, and infrastructure investment before more building approvals are handed out.

- **Protect Consumer Rights:** Demand stronger oversight of predatory builder practices, from mortgage steering to mandatory HOA contracts.
- **Build Coalitions:** Join or form local groups that bring together residents, civic organizations, and environmental advocates to push back against unchecked development.

Change doesn't happen overnight, but citizen action can—and often does—reshape the conversation. If Buffett's billions are a sign that the development machine is only getting stronger, it's also a wake-up call for Floridians to decide what kind of future they want for their state. 🐾

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Troubled Bridge Over Muddy Waters

Amanda Cochran

When people think of "old Florida" in Southwest Florida, small historic cow towns like Alva, Fort Denaud, and LaBelle often come to mind. These communities sit near the point where four counties—Hendry, Glades, Lee, and Charlotte—meet at what is known as the "quad-point." For now, these areas remain among the most rural and sparsely developed in the region.

Two historic bridges serve residents of this quad-point area within Lee County: the Alva Bridge that runs along Broadway in the heart of downtown Alva and the Wilson Pigott Bridge that crosses the Caloosahatchee on State Road 31.

The original Alva Swing Bridge, built in 1903, was the first permanent bridge in Alva and, for a time, provided the closest river crossing to Fort Myers. It was eventually replaced by the current two-lane Alva bascule bridge, which opened in 1969. Now 56 years old, the bridge remains under restricted use, with both speed and weight limits carefully monitored.

The most heavily traveled bridge in the area, however, is the two-lane Wilson Pigott Drawbridge.

According to the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT):

"The Wilson Pigott Bridge was constructed in 1960 with a 50-year service life. Major renovations were completed for the bridge since it was built. The bridge has a low-sufficiency rating, which is a rating of a bridge's fitness to remain in service. The bridge also experiences frequent mechanical malfunctions, leaving the bascule span in the up position, which disrupts traffic flow and circulation in the area. The bridge also has sub-standard design elements. Among other things, the bridge has narrow travel lanes and shoulders and does not adequately accommodate non-vehicular travelers such as pedestrians and bicyclists. The bridge does not meet current U.S. Coast

Guard standards for horizontal clearance. Movable bridges present maintenance costs."

Does anyone remember the 1969 song by Paul Simon, Bridge Over Troubled Water? Today, the Wilson Pigott Bridge feels more like a "Troubled Bridge Over Muddy Waters."

Within the past two weeks, September 9, 2025, and again on September 15, 2025, the Wilson Pigott Bridge was forced to close unexpectedly so crews could repair a "temporary" repair of a metal plate that had been holding up the damaged steel grate system supporting the drawbridge. These unexpected closures caused hours of traffic backups, leaving residents frustrated and stranded. More closings are planned in the near future for additional repairs. It should be noted that this bridge is a vital evacuation route, and sudden and frequent closings raise urgent concerns about critically delayed response times for emergency medical services.

Residents have also argued that stricter weight restrictions should be implemented immediately to reduce stress on the bridge and avoid further last-minute emergency repairs. Meanwhile, FDOT officials acknowledge the bridge's failing condition but note that replacement funding is still in process. Current plans project that work will not begin until 2029, with construction expected to take four to five years.

But the 65-year-old failing bridge is really just a symptom of a much larger problem.

In recent years, multiple applications and hearings in Lee and neighboring counties have sought to rezone agricultural land for both high-density development and intensive mining. If approved, these rezonings will generate thousands of daily trips—not only from thousands of new residents but also from hundreds of fully-loaded industrial trucks. All of this future traffic will join the current traffic and funnel onto the already congested two-lane CR 78, then onto SR 31, and ultimately across the

failing two-lane Wilson Pigott Bridge.

The consequences for Northeast Lee County are profound. The surrounding road system infrastructure, including the 65-year-old Wilson Pigott Bridge, is grossly inadequate to handle such demands.

For years, concerned residents of Northeast Lee County have united to present credible, well-reasoned arguments at every public hearing on proposed land-use changes in Alva, urging county leaders to act with responsibility. The specific concerns of the public have been clear and consistent: longer emergency evacuation times that endanger lives, inadequate emergency services to support large-scale growth, increased flood risks with devastating consequences, and above all, direct threats to public safety.

Yet, time and again, the Lee County Commissioners have brushed these concerns aside, insisting that road system planning falls solely under the authority of the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT). However, when asked about the timeline for the funding and construction of SR 31 improvements at Bayshore Road, Patricia Pichette of the FDOT Communications Department explained otherwise:

"In Florida, decisions about which roads are improved or built often start at the local level—with cities and counties identifying what their communities need most. These local governments work with residents, planners, and engineers to figure out which intersections, highways, or bridges need attention. Once they've set their priorities, they share those ideas with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT). FDOT then looks at all requests from across the state and compares them to available funding...."

If FDOT relies on counties to set priorities, then the real question becomes: what priorities has Lee County actually submitted? Commiss-

sions continue to deflect blame onto the state, yet FDOT's own process makes clear that it is local governments who start the conversation.

Furthermore, rather than standing up for their constituents, Commissioners insist their hands are tied by "the law." Too often, they invoke fear of litigation under the Bert Harris Act as justification for approving irresponsible growth, while disregarding the long-term safety and well-being of residents. The Bert Harris Act was designed to protect property owners from government overreach, not facilitate "upzoning" for influential out-of-town developers seeking increased density, intensity, and profits.

By contrast, commissioners in neighboring counties (Hendry, Sarasota) have recently demonstrated the courage to reject projects when they were incompatible with responsible growth.

Recently, members of the Northeast Lee County community have filed a legal challenge against the county's most recent decision in Alva to allow upzoning that directly endangers residents. At the heart of the challenge is one simple but urgent concern: life safety, life safety, life safety. Despite raising this message repeatedly, residents have been ignored.

Growth should never come at the expense of public health, safety, or welfare. That principle is the first and most important responsibility of any government and should be at the center of every decision the County Commission makes.

The Northeast Lee County community is not opposed to development. The residents support sensible, responsible growth—but only when it is paired with the necessary infrastructure to ensure safety and quality of life. What we need are leaders willing to stand up for their constituents, prioritize infrastructure, and put life safety ahead of unchecked development.

Northeast Lee County deserves better. 



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A New Model for Autism Education Is Blossoming in North Fort Myers

By Katrina Salokar, East Lee County News

PETER'S ACADEMY OFFERS HOPE, HELP, AND A HANDS-ON FUTURE FOR FAMILIES

In the heart of North Fort Myers, something extraordinary is taking root—a fresh, faith-based approach to autism education that's transforming lives one student, one family, and one farm chore at a time.

Welcome to Peter's Academy, a nonprofit Christian school and home education program that blends therapy, agriculture, life skills, and love to create a full-spectrum support system for children with autism and co-morbid disabilities. Open enrollment is now underway at www.petersacademyfl.com, and for local families seeking not just education but transformation, this may be the answer they've been praying for.

A SCHOOL THAT FEELS LIKE HOME

What sets Peter's Academy apart? For starters, it doesn't look like a typical school—it's a real house on a working farm, nestled on three serene acres, filled with over 40 friendly animals with babies coming, and structured like a loving, functional home. The goal: help children learn not just reading and math, but how to live.

"Book work isn't all they need. We teach kids how to fold laundry, do dishes, care for animals, and grow food," says founder and educator Rebecca Lemieux, a single mother of autistic twins. "We want to give them independence, dignity, and faith. We've recently added safe for all, peer learning for high school age children."

Each classroom has no more than six students,

with a teacher and assistant in every room, creating the kind of one-on-one environment many children on the spectrum need to thrive. The curriculum combines Christian Liberty Press and Accelerate Christian Education materials with experiential learning tools—from kitchen skills to horseback riding and animal husbandry.

MORE THAN A SCHOOL— A LIFELINE FOR FAMILIES

Peter's Academy was born from one mother's struggle to find an educational environment where her nonverbal son, Peter, could be safe, understood, and supported in every area of his life. Today, that same vision is becoming a haven for other families, too.

"There's so much stress on special needs families," says Lemieux. "Appointments, therapies, transportation—it's exhausting. Here, we welcome therapists to come to the school so parents don't have to shuttle their kids all over town."

Students can receive speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavioral support, and more right on campus. The school's flexible calendar is designed with working parents in mind, particularly those navigating life with a single income or multiple children.

PRACTICAL SKILLS. REAL-WORLD OUTCOMES

Peter's Academy isn't just about getting through the day—it's about preparing children for life after school. From running a farm stand at Babcock Ranch to learning water safety, the school equips students with tools to succeed in

a world that's often not built with them in mind.

Why agriculture? "Many kids with autism can't work in traditional environments," Lemieux explains. "But they can raise chickens, grow vegetables, and collect eggs. They can sell what they produce through contactless systems, like a farm stand or driveway table, and feel proud of their accomplishments."

This entrepreneurial approach offers a powerful path forward: self-sufficiency with safety, purpose, and pride.

SCHOLARSHIPS, SUPPORT, AND OPEN ARMS

Peter's Academy is a certified nonprofit and is currently applying for Florida's Step Up For Students and AAA Family Empowerment Scholarships, including the Personal Education Plan (PEP). These programs can cover a significant portion of tuition for qualifying families.

And yes, they are now accepting applications anytime.

BUILT ON FAITH, BACKED BY COMMUNITY

This is more than an academic institution—it's a ministry, powered by compassion, prayer, and a belief that every child is a masterpiece in progress. Lemieux, who also has a background in veterinary care, missionary work, and teaching high school, says her long-term goal is not just to educate students through 12th grade, but to build a replicable model that other communities can adopt, keeping a small school environment where

students can thrive.

"We want to change the way society sees children with autism," she says. "They have gifts. They have value. They just need the right setting to shine."

And the results so far? Her own son, once completely nonverbal, now answers questions about his name and address with confidence and clarity.

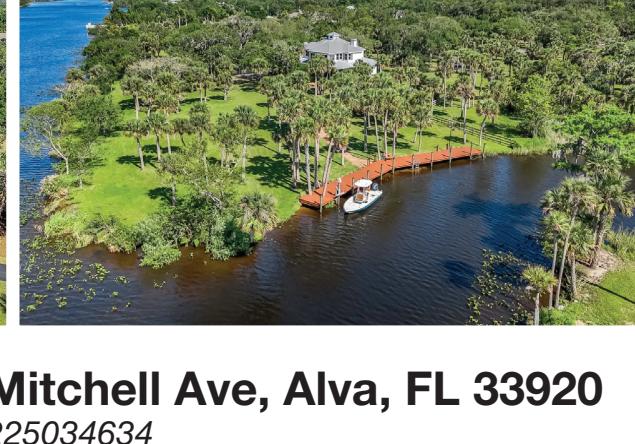
A CALL TO ACTION

If you or someone you know is raising a child with autism and looking for something more—more heart, more help, more hope—visit www.petersacademyfl.com or call 239-722-9897. You can also find them on Facebook and Instagram: @PetersAcademySchool.

Peter's Academy is planting something powerful in Southwest Florida for all ages: not just seeds in the soil, but seeds of independence, joy, and transformation—for the children, the parents, and the future. Because every child deserves a place to grow.



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MLS #: 225034634

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Tommy Lee Cook & The Buckingham Blues Band To Headline Downtown Fort Myers Fall Fest On Halloween Night

Get ready for a powerhouse Halloween lineup as Tommy Lee Cook & The Buckingham Blues Band team up with arena-rock revivalists Maiden Cane for the inaugural Fall Fest at 2400 First Street. The celebration kicks off Friday, October 31, with gates opening at 5:30 PM. Festivalgoers can expect more than great music—costume contests, food trucks, local vendors, and family-friendly fun promise to make this a new River District tradition.

THE HEADLINERS

Tommy Lee Cook & The Buckingham Blues Band - Comes on stage at 8PM, with guest appearances by with guest appearances by Roger Olette (vocals) and Missy Bailey "Glenda Fell" (vocals) and more.

Tommy Lee Cook has been a force in the Florida music scene for decades. After transforming the Buckingham Blues Bar into one of the state's premier stages, he continues to deliver the kind of fiery, soulful performances that put Southwest Florida on the blues map. Cook, alongside his seasoned bandmates—including Rex Bongo, Harry Cassano, Scott Kamener, Arne England, Tbome Fonk, and Andrei Koribanics—channels influences from Chicago blues to southern rock legends like the Allman Brothers.

Maiden Cane - Takes the stage first shortly after the festival gates open.

Maiden Cane channels the power of '70s and '80s arena rock—Journey, Bon

Jovi, Styx, and more—bringing stadium-sized energy to downtown Fort Myers. "Maiden Cane has the big sound, epic energy, and showmanship that makes you feel front row at a sold-out arena," said Tommy Lee Cook. "That raw power and nostalgia is exactly the electricity we want at Fall Fest."

EVENT DETAILS

- Date:** Friday, October 31, 2025 (Halloween Night)
- Time:** Gates open 5:30 PM
- Location:** 2400 First Street, Fort Myers, FL (Entrances on Jackson & First Street)
- Tickets:** Adults \$20 • Teens (13-17) \$10 • Kids 12 & under FREE

Whether you come dressed to impress for the costume contest, bring the family for an evening of fun, or just want to soak up incredible live music, Fall Fest 2025 promises to be the place to be this Halloween.

ABOUT THE BANDS

Tommy Lee Cook & The Buckingham Blues Band

Tommy Lee Cook, originally from Danville, Virginia, but long a fixture in Southwest Florida since childhood, brought his deep love for blues and southern rock to Fort Myers after service in the Air Force and a stint teaching. He purchased the Buckingham Blues Bar in 2002, transforming it into a re-

Special to East Lee County News



spected premier destination for blues and original music in Florida. His band, the Buckingham Blues Band, includes musicians Rex Bongo (guitar, vocals), Harry Cassano (keyboards, vocals), Scott Kamener (guitar), Arne England (slide guitar), Tbome Fonk (drums, vocals), and Andrei Koribanics (drums). Buckingham Blues Bar Influenced by Chicago electric blues, Albert Collins, Delbert McClinton, and southern rock legends like The Allman Brothers, Cook brings both grit and virtuosity to his guitar and vocal performances. Buckingham Blues Bar

Maiden Cane

Formed in the summer of 2013 by

bass player Jim Kiefer and guitarist Joey Gilbert, Maiden Cane is a six-piece powerhouse rock group from Southwest Florida. maidencane.com+2Creative Community Promotions+2 The band specializes in recreating the high energy of classic arena rock from the 1970s and 1980s, performing songs from bands like Journey, Bon Jovi, Styx, Def Leppard, Kansas, Boston, and many others, delivering album-accurate versions with full showmanship. Creative Community Promotions+1 Their members are seasoned musicians with a history of sharing stages with rock legends, and Maiden Cane has opened for acts including Eddie Money, Night Ranger, Quiet Riot, Molly Hatchet, and more. ♪

Lee County's Future Depends On The Math: Residents Call For An Urban3 Study

Local Voices Push For Fiscal Transparency In Growth Decisions, Building On East Lee News' Call For Smarter Planning.

Special to East Lee County News

We all know Lee County is changing—fast. Neighborhood after neighborhood, road after road, subdivision after subdivision, we're watching rural get edged out, schools strain, roads clog, and bills creep up. East Lee residents have spoken: in "Smart Growth or Growth?" we raised the alarm about traffic, water quality, loss of greenspace, and the rising cost of maintaining roads and utilities. In "This Isn't Smart Growth: Why Alva Deserves Better," we saw how a 1,100-home subdivision proposed for North River Road and Owl Creek would stretch public safety, strain an aging wastewater facility, and alter what Alva has always been.

Here's the bottom line: growth isn't the problem. Unchecked, unplanned growth is.

WHY THE TIME IS RIPE FOR

AN URBAN3 FISCAL "MRI"

Recent work by **1000 Friends of Florida** underscores what many East Lee readers already feel in their bones: the cost of sprawl isn't just environmental or aesthetic—it's deeply financial. Their fiscal priorities show low-density, spread-out development frequently costs more in long-term infrastructure, road maintenance, water and sewer, and public services than it generates in tax revenue.

Lee County is leaking money—not because of nefarious intent, but because of how we plan (or don't). In "Is Lee County Leaking Money?", East Lee News pointed out the mounting costs of maintaining ever-longer roads, stormwater and sewer infrastructure, utilities, and emergency services. We need a tool that doesn't just tell us how many units can go where, but

shows us whether we can afford them.

An **Urban3 value-per-acre study** would give us the fiscal maps, the scenario analysis, and the forecasting tools to know where growth pays for itself and where it doesn't.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- Taxpayers carrying long-term infrastructure costs.
- Natural and rural spaces lost to pavement.
- Declining quality of life: traffic, floods, higher taxes.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Contact Your Commissioner:** urge

them to commission an Urban3 study.

- Speak Up At Public Comment:** ask for the fiscal maps before any rezoning.

- Join Your Neighbors:** collective voices move the dial.

- Support Rural Preservation Tools:** TDRs, easements, agritourism.

- Stay Informed:** follow East Lee News and 1000 Friends of Florida for updates.

Lee County has always been a place people come to for space, beauty, water, and a slower rhythm. We can preserve that while still growing. But preserving that future means being brave enough to do the math. Let's get the fiscal truth first. ♪

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Pet Wellness at Every Stage of Life

Dr. Veja Tillman, DVM | Just 4 Pets Veterinary Wellness Center

Pet wellness is a lifelong journey that evolves with age, lifestyle, and health status. Whether you're caring for a playful puppy, a curious adult cat, or a wise senior dog, understanding the essentials of wellness at every stage helps ensure a longer, healthier life for your companion.

PREVENTATIVE CARE: THE FOUNDATION OF LIFELONG HEALTH

Preventative care is the cornerstone of pet wellness. It begins with early-life vaccinations, parasite prevention, and nutritional guidance for puppies and kittens. These initial steps help build a strong immune system and set the stage for healthy development. As pets mature, annual wellness exams become essential for monitoring weight, dental health, and behavioral changes. These visits allow veterinarians to detect subtle signs of illness before they become serious, offering a chance to intervene early and improve outcomes.

Senior pets benefit from more frequent checkups—often every six months—as age-related conditions like arthritis, kidney disease, and cognitive decline become more common. Preventative care also includes dental cleanings, weight management, and tailored nutrition plans to support aging bodies. By staying ahead of potential health issues, pet owners can help their companions enjoy a longer, more comfortable life.

PARASITE CONTROL: PROTECTING PETS INSIDE AND OUT

Parasites pose a year-round threat to pets of all ages. Fleas, ticks, heartworms, and intestinal parasites can cause discomfort, disease, and even death if left untreated. Monthly preventatives—available in oral, topical, and injectable forms—are a simple yet powerful way to protect pets from these risks.

Veterinarians can help pet owners choose the right products based on species, age, lifestyle, and geographic location. Regular fecal exams and heartworm tests are also part of a comprehensive parasite control strategy. Keeping your pet parasite-free not only protects their health but also safeguards your home and family from zoonotic diseases.

EXERCISE: FUELING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLNESS

Exercise is essential for maintaining a healthy weight, supporting joint health, and preventing boredom. Puppies and kittens benefit from play that builds coordination and social skills, while adult pets thrive on structured walks, games, and agility activities. Regular physical activity helps prevent obesity, strengthens muscles, and improves cardiovascular health.

Senior pets may slow down, but gentle movement—like swimming or short walks—can improve mobility and reduce stiffness. Mental stimulation through puzzle toys, scent games, and training.

Dr. Tillman also supports cognitive health at every age. A well-exercised pet is not only physically healthier but also happier and better behaved.

While nutraceuticals can complement traditional treatments, they should always be used under veterinary guidance to ensure safety and effectiveness. When chosen wisely, they can play a valuable role in maintaining wellness and preventing disease.

Read the full article on our website at www.Just4PetsFL.vet/blog/

ABOUT DR. VEJA TILLMAN, DVM

Dr. Tillman is a 2002 graduate of Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine. Her veterinary practice and work experience focuses on health and wellness of pets. She is the owner of Just 4 Pets Wellness Center and can be reached at 239-270-5721. 🐾



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Unite Lehigh: A Community Coming Together

Katrina Salokar | East Lee County News

Growth is nothing new in Lehigh Acres. We've been watching new homes, new storefronts, and new families arrive in waves for years now. But with all that growth has come a simple, pressing question: how do we make sure the people who live here actually have a say in what our future looks like?

That's the spark behind Unite Lehigh, a new website and community hub built to bring neighbors, businesses, and civic voices together under one roof. The site, UniteLehigh.com, is more than just a page of updates — it's designed to help residents cut through the noise, find out what's really happening, and take action where it counts.

A LOCAL TOOL FOR LOCAL VOICES

Instead of chasing rumors on social media or digging through county agendas, residents can now find local planning and zoning updates, school district news, and commission decisions all in one place. There's also a business directory and an events calendar, making it easier for people to connect with one another.

"Lehigh Acres is at a crossroads," said board member, Alain Capucci. "We can either watch decisions get made for us, or we can pull together and be part of the process."

NOT JUST INFORMATION — INVOLVEMENT

Unite Lehigh isn't just about reporting the news. The site includes sample letters for public comment, guides on how to speak at county meetings, and a space for residents

to share their own stories. The message is clear: it's not enough to know what's going on — we have to show up and be part of it.

Already, small business owners and community groups are paying attention. They see the effort as a chance to bring neighbors closer and make sure Lehigh's voice is heard beyond its borders.

LOOKING AHEAD

The hope is that Unite Lehigh becomes more than a website. Organizers picture it as a foundation for a stronger civic identity, one that ties into larger regional efforts around smart growth, conservation, and opportunity.

"Lehigh Acres has always been full of potential," said Butch Swank,

President of the Southwest Florida Business Alliance. "Now it's about making sure that potential doesn't slip away. If we don't shape our future, someone else will."

GET INVOLVED

Anyone who lives or works in Lehigh Acres can take part. Visit UniteLehigh.com, sign up for updates, and find ways to get involved. Whether it's showing up at a meeting, writing a letter, or simply staying informed, the idea is that every voice adds up.

Lehigh Acres has never lacked for energy or growth. What Unite Lehigh is trying to prove is that, when we come together, we can turn that growth into something lasting — a community with both roots and a voice. 

Lehigh Community Services Wins \$10,000 Grant To Power Disaster Relief Efforts

Katrina Salokar | East Lee County News

Lehigh Community Services, a trusted nonprofit serving Lehigh Acres since 1977, is celebrating a major win that will boost its ability to respond during disasters. Thanks to overwhelming community support, the organization has secured a \$10,000 grant from Safeco Insurance and Liberty Mutual, awarded through a nationwide contest.

The award was presented at 9 a.m. on Monday, September 22, at Al Deleon's office, located at 2814 Lee Blvd, Suite 19 in Lehigh Acres. Deleon, a local Safeco agency partner, nominated Lehigh Community Services for the funding, which will officially launch the nonprofit's new Emergency Generator Fund.

A COMMUNITY-POWERED VICTORY

again the strength of community backing.

"This isn't just about equipment — it's about keeping hope alive when everything else goes dark," said Al Deleon. "By supporting Lehigh Community Services, we're ensuring no one is left without help in their time of greatest need."

Powering Relief When It's Needed Most

The \$10,000 grant will fund the purchase of a commercial-grade generator for the Lehigh Community Services food pantry and senior meal program. In a region where hurricanes and power outages are inevitable, the generator will ensure refrigerated food stays safe, seniors continue receiving hot meals, and the nonprofit can remain open when residents need it most.

The project also includes the installation of an Emergency Charging Station, giving families a safe place to power phones and reconnect with loved ones during outages.

A LEGACY OF SERVICE

Lehigh Community Services has long been a cornerstone in East Lee County, serving more than 50,000 people each year through food distribution, senior meal delivery, literacy and tax assistance, and outreach to the unhoused. The organization is also known for holiday food baskets and year-round support that helps struggling families regain stability.

Now, with this new investment, the nonprofit is positioned to extend its mission of ensuring no one faces an emergency alone.

CALL FOR CONTINUED SUPPORT

While the Safeco/Liberty Mutual grant is a major milestone, more funding is still needed to fully realize the Power of the Community Project. Donations and grants will help sustain operations and expand the scope of emergency preparedness for future disasters.

For more information or to donate, visit www.lehighcommunityservices.com. 



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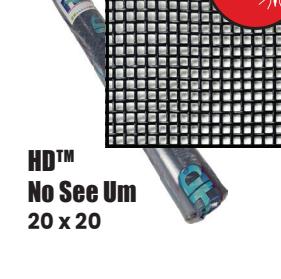
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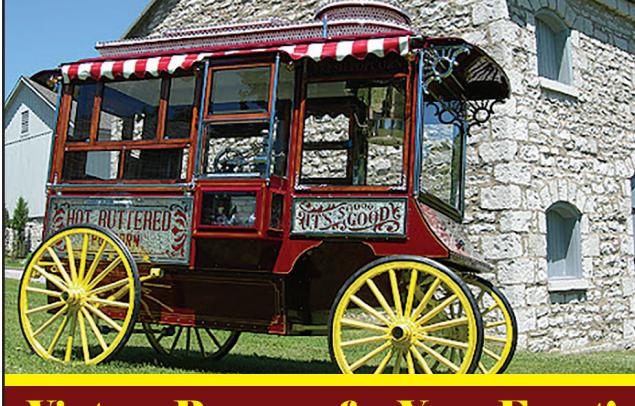
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Nick Bonacolta 239-887-0468 nbonacolta@gmail.com

POPULAR 2/2 + DEN VISTANNA VILLA



Popular Vistanna Villa 2 bedroom 2 bath with den that may be used as a THIRD BEDROOM, EXTENDED LANAI IN THE REAR 12 x 19 overlooking the golf course with plenty of privacy, common resort style pool plus a playground area, gated entry, excellent location just minutes to SR 82, I-75 and Ft Myers, newer luxury vinyl plank floors throughout, solid surface countertops in the kitchen with breakfast bar, pantry and stainless steel appliances including a French door refrigerator and brand new built in microwave, CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR NEW IN 2017 AND NEW WATER HEATER NEW IN 2017, primary bedroom in the rear with plenty of natural light, large walk in closet, ensuite primary bath with dual sinks with newer faucets, new commodes and tiled walk in shower, newer granite top in the guest bathroom with new commode as well, indoor laundry area with full size washer and dryer, plenty of room in the screened double garage with pull down stairs for storage and laundry tub, screened front entry door as well, screened from the front to the rear for excellent cross ventilation on those nice days. NO AGE RESTRICTIONS. Pets OK. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$239,900

Charlie Bonacolta 239-994-1062 charlisold@gmail.com

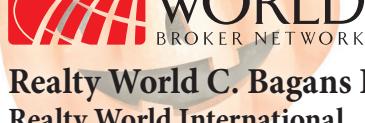
AFFORDABLE 3/2 + DEN - NO AGE RESTRICTIONS



Affordable 3 bedroom 2 bath home with a large den that may be used as a 4TH BEDROOM, ALMOST 1800 SQUARE FEET OF LIVING AREA, NEW DIMENSIONAL SHINGLE ROOF IN 2023, NEW CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR IN 2019, NEW WATER HEATER IN 2022, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER, quiet low traffic community in neighborhood atmosphere, ceramic tile and newer luxury vinyl plank flooring in the bedrooms and den, cathedral ceilings and plant shelves, breakfast bar and pantry in kitchen with all appliances, LED lighting throughout, newer entry door with pocket screen, primary bedroom with private access to the lanai, walk in closet, private ensuite bathroom with shower and separate water closet, indoor laundry room with washer and dryer, 16 X 9 screened lanai overlooking the nicely landscaped yard with two oak trees for shade. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS LOCATED IN THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$260,000

Charlie Bonacolta 239-994-1062 charlisold@gmail.com



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4/2 ON OVERSIZED FENCED CORNER LOT



FOUR BEDROOM TWO BATH home located on an oversized FENCED BACKYARD, CORNER LOT, NEW DIMENSIONAL SHINGLE ROOF IN 2018, NEW 3 TON CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR IN 2024, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER, LUXURY VINYL PLANK FLOORS NEW IN 2019, cathedral ceilings, plant shelves, DECORATIVE CROWN MOLDING, spacious kitchen with all appliances, breakfast bar and pantry, indoor laundry room, primary bedroom with large walk in closet, private ensuite bathroom with newer vanity, sink, lighting and fixtures, three guest bedrooms located on the other side of the home for privacy, guest bathroom has newer vanity, sink and fixtures as well, ADT security system with 6 cameras, plenty of room in the backyard, 35 X 8 screened lanai with plenty of privacy, newly added exterior LED lighting in the soffits, walking distance to schools yet minutes to SR 82, I-75 and Ft Myers. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$295,000

Charlie Bonacolta 239-994-1062 charlisold@gmail.com

4 BED/ 3 BATH POOL HOME IN COUNTRY CLUB ESTATES



FOUR BEDROOM THREE BATH POOL HOME WITH 2333 SQUARE FEET OF LIVING AREA IN COUNTRY CLUB ESTATES, NEW DIMENSIONAL SHINGLE ROOF IN 2018, NEW WATER HEATER IN 2020, NEW CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR IN 2020, WHOLE HOME KOHLER AUTOMATIC GENERATOR WITH IN GROUND PROPANE TANK, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER AND GREAT VIEWS OF THE WATER AND WILDLIFE WITH THE ABLE CANAL IN THE BACKYARD (LARGEST CANAL IN LEHIGH), FENCED BACKYARD with plenty of privacy, screened front entry porch, 23 X 26 oversized garage, covered lanai overlooking the pool area and the canal, plenty of room for entertaining, NEWER CUT-AND-HAMMER ELECTRICAL PANEL BOX, newer insulated windows with roll down, accordian or panel shutters, ROLL DOWN STORM SCREENING FOR THE PATIO, SPACIOUS IN GROUND POOL, WITH CHILD PROTECTIVE REMOVABLE FENCE, ceramic tile floors in the kitchen with newer LUXURY VINYL PLANK FLOORS THROUGHOUT the rest of the house, open kitchen with breakfast bar and double pantry space, plenty of cabinets and counter space, stainless steel appliances, pass through to pool area, formal living room and dining room plus a family room open to the kitchen with a breakfast nook, sliders to the pool/patio area from the family room, living room and primary bedroom, pool with a separate 4th bedroom for guest etc., oversized guest bedrooms with plenty of space, second guest bathroom has been completely remodeled with granite top with dual sinks, soft close doors and drawers in the oversized vanity, built in light panel in the lighted mirror, new commodes in every bathroom, new fixtures etc., primary bedroom features access to the pool/lanai, private ensuite bathroom with dual sinks, dressing area and plenty of closet space, large indoor laundry room with extra cabinet/counter space. Quality shines throughout in this "Michigan built home". Quiet low traffic street in an excellent neighborhood atmosphere, well maintained community great for walking the dog or the taking an early morning or after dinner stroll. Located just minutes to I-75, Ft Myers and the International Airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$369,900

Charlie Bonacolta 239-994-1062 charlisold@gmail.com

4 BEDROOM 3 BATH IN NE LEHIGH



Brand New Home in NE Lehigh, Excellent location in area of larger estate sized homes, MOVE IN READY 4 BEDROOM 3 FULL BATHROOMS with TWO MASTER SUITES, EXCELLENT FOR IN LAW QUARTERS, C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, PORCELAIN TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5 inch baseboards, impact resistant windows and doors, decorative glass in front entry door, covered front porch leads to large great room, high entry foyer with decorative glass shelf & lighting, high ceilings throughout with tray ceilings in the living room and master bedroom, shaker cabinets with soft close doors and drawers and crown molding on top, pendant lighting over breakfast bar, QUARTZ TOPS in kitchen and baths, stainless steel appliance package, large dining area off of the kitchen, spacious master bedroom with two walk in closets, private bath with dual sinks and tiled walk in shower with frameless glass door, all bathroom vanities have under cabinet night lighting, 4th bedroom guest quarters off of the kitchen area with it's own private bathroom, built in glass shelving in the linen closet as well as decorative glass shelving in the guest bathroom, indoor laundry room, screened lanai in the rear with tile floors overlooking the backyard, covered front porch with tile floors as well, auto irrigation on well, oversized double garage, pavers in the extra long driveway with plenty of parking, excellent location just minutes to schools, SR 80, I-75, Ft Myers and the International airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$389,900

Charlie Bonacolta 239-994-1062 charlisold@gmail.com

3/2 POOL HOME IN MARBLEBROOK



THREE BEDROOM TWO BATH POOL HOME BUILT IN 2019, located in an excellent neighborhood atmosphere of Marble Brook, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER, sidewalks, secure gated entry, walking distance to common clubhouse with resort style pool, fitness center and playground. Private Pool on the home was built in 2020 with spacious open deck with light grey pavers, electric heat pump for pool, salt water system and Baja deck in pool for sunning, BUILT IN FIRE PIT overlooks the FENCED BACKYARD with excellent views of the lake in the backyard as well as plenty of privacy by not having another home in the yard. HEDGES ARE ALLOWED ALONG THE FENCE LINE FOR PRIVACY, pavers in double driveway and walkways, NEWLY REMODELED KITCHEN WITH GRANITE TOPS, breakfast bar, BARNYARD DOOR over pantry with custom built in shelving and drawers, SAMSUNG STAINLESS STEEL KITCHEN APPLIANCES, decorative stone tile wall accents on the kitchen wall, back splash, under breakfast bar and around entry way, spacious living room with decorative wood accent wall overlooks the pool area, ceramic tile floors throughout with newer LUXURY VINYL FLOORS IN THE BEDROOMS with 5 inch baseboards, CROWN MOLDING, master bedroom located in the rear of the home with pool and lake views, private ensuite master bath with walk in closet, separate water closet, dual sinks and walk in shower, guest bedrooms located in the front of the home with upgraded vanity and fixtures in the guest bath, indoor laundry room with accent wall, built in cabinets and shelving with full size washer/dryer, double garage with auto opener, storm panels for openings, quiet low traffic street. The home is located near schools, Veteran's park and minutes to Downtown Lehigh for shopping etc. yet minutes to I-75, SR 82, Ft Myers and the airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$365,000

Charlie Bonacolta 239-994-1062 charlisold@gmail.com

4 BEDROOM 3 BATH IN SW LEHIGH



Brand New Home located in Southwest Lehigh, MOVE IN READY 4 BEDROOM 3 FULL BATHROOMS with TWO MASTER SUITES, EXCELLENT FOR IN LAW QUARTERS, C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, 32 X 32 POLISHED PORCELAIN TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5 inch baseboards, impact resistant windows and doors, covered front porch leads to large great room, upgraded front door with side light that opens up to moving in easy, high entry foyer with lighted decorative shelf, high volume ceilings throughout with tray ceilings in the living room and master bedroom, shaker cabinets with soft close doors and drawers, pendant lighting over breakfast bar, QUARTZ TOPS in kitchen and baths, stainless steel appliance package, large dining area with upgraded light fixtures, spacious master bedroom with dual walk in closets, private bath with dual sinks with upgraded light fixtures and built in controls in the mirror, tiled walk in shower with frameless glass doors, 4th bedroom guest quarters off of the kitchen area with it's own private bathroom, indoor laundry room, covered porch in rear overlooking the backyard, covered front porch as well, double garage with grey seal coated floors, excellent location just minutes to SR 82, I-75, Ft Myers and the International airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$379,900

Charlie Bonacolta 239-994-1062 charlisold@gmail.com

2 BEDROOM 2 BATH CONDO IN EAST GREENS



Spacious 1,700 sq ft condo in the quiet community of East Greens. Located just feet away from the heated community pool and clubhouse, recently updated master bathroom with new wood like tile floors, dual sinks, new walk in shower with new tile and glass sliding door, storm shutters on most of the windows, this community is located in the middle of the Lehigh Resort Golf Course, beautiful views throughout, new roof in 2016, ceramic tile and wood laminate floors throughout, extra large indoor laundry room with plenty of extra cabinets, laundry tub etc, breakfast bar and pantry in kitchen with all appliances, central water and sewer, covered carport parking, 55+ Community, plenty of space with a large den and a Florida Room, attached carport.

Offered At.....\$199,000

Nick Bonacolta 239-887-0468 nbonacolta@gmail.com

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