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Eastern Collier County RLSA: How Growth, Traffic, and Taxes Will Impact Our Environment and Quality of Life

In 1999, the State of Florida issued a Final Order mandating Collier County to create a program that would better protect natural resources in eastern Collier County. The Final Order required that the program accomplish the following: 1) protect agricultural lands by preventing the premature conversion to other uses, such as development 2) direct incompatible uses away from listed species habitat and wetlands; and 3) avoid sprawl-type development by creating compact, walkable, mixed-use communities. Unfortunately, the current growth plan for Eastern Collier County, called the Rural Lands Stewardship Area or RLSA, fails meet the required goals of the mandate. Development under the RLSA program will instead result in opposite outcomes of what the Final Order required. The outcome will be sprawl and negative impacts to our environmental resources, on a scale that is best described as “mega”.

The following provides a synopsis of the current RLSA growth program’s fatal flaws and why the RLSA plan needs to be improved. The current plan would result in the following:

- **Mega-Taxes:** In their report, “The Fiscal Implications of Development Patterns: Rural Lands Stewardship Area, Collier County,” Smart Growth America estimates that Collier County will needlessly spend \$3.3 billion over 20 years in EMS services, school busing, school construction and staffing, and road construction, if the current growth plan for Eastern Collier is not modified toward sustainable development patterns. This equates to \$165 million tax dollars wasted each year for 20 years.
This means Collier County would likely have less money for:
 - Infrastructure to protect coastal properties from flooding and storm surge
 - Schools
 - Parks
 - Construction and maintenance of urban roads and bridges
- **Mega-People:** The expected build-out population for Eastern Collier County will be 370% greater than the population the public was told when the plan was adopted. When the plan was adopted, the public was told that the projected build-out population of Eastern Collier County would be approximately 80,000 new residents; after adoption it was revealed that the growth plan (RLSA) could accommodate over 300,000 residents.
- **Mega-Size:** The current growth plan for Eastern Collier County allows 250% more development than the public was told when the plan was adopted. When the plan was adopted the public was told that 16,800 acres would be developed in Eastern Collier



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County; after adoption it was revealed that the growth plan could accommodate approximately 43,300 acres of development, equivalent to more than 20 Pelican Bays or two Fort Lauderdale!

- **Mega-Homes:** The current growth plan for Eastern Collier County allows approximately 58,000 more homes than what the public was told when the growth plan was adopted. When the plan was adopted the public was told that approximately 36,466 homes would be developed in Eastern Collier County; after adoption it was revealed that the growth plan could accommodate approximately 94,000 new homes.
- **Mega-Roads:** The RLSA landowners proposed 200 miles of new and expanded roads for Eastern Collier County that would cost approximately \$7.8 billion in 2015 dollars. With inflation, this would rise to over \$12.5 billion by 2040. The cost to build the road network is 15 times more costly than to purchase lands in Eastern Collier for preservation, based on the applicant's value of the land.
- **Mega-Traffic:** The current growth plan for Eastern Collier County would add 225,000 vehicles to Collier County's roadway network. This would also add 825,000 daily vehicle trips to the road network. This means that daily trips on individual roads would increase. As an example, daily vehicle trips on Oil Well Road would increase from 6,788 daily trips to 50,366. This is similar to the amount of current daily traffic on Airport Road, south of Pine Ridge. As another example, traffic on Immokalee Road would increase 7.9 times over today's levels of traffic.
- **Mega-Wildlife Fatalities:** Dr. Reed Noss, an expert on mega-permits, says that the increased traffic volume from the landowners' proposed road network poses a grave risk to most of the 19 endangered and threatened species that inhabit Eastern Collier County, including the endangered Florida panther.
- **Mega-Panther Fatalities:** Using U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service methodology, the Conservancy estimates that the landowners' proposed roadway network would result in roadkill deaths of over 1,200 panthers within 50 years. By build-out of Eastern Collier, one panther would be killed every ten days! Since there are less than 230 panthers left in the wild, this could lead to the extinction of the Florida panther.
- **Mega-Habitat Destruction:** Over 47,000 acres of primary panther habitat would be vulnerable to development. Landowners have already proposed a development plan that would impact approximately 20,000 acres of this essential panther habitat. In addition to habitat destruction, travel corridors for mammals, such as the Florida panther would be fragmented.
- **Mega-Destruction of Agricultural Lands:** By allowing development within primary panther habitat, the current plan for sprawl consisting of low-density towns and villages, would needlessly make an additional 41,000 acres of agricultural lands vulnerable to development.
- **Mega-Wetland Destruction:** By allowing development within primary panther habitat, the current plan for sprawl, consisting of low-density towns and villages, would make an additional 6,000 acres of wetlands vulnerable to development.
- **Mega-Quality of Life Issues:** The anticipated build-out population of around one million people in Collier County, with 300,000+ living in the RLSA, would certainly result in more

traffic and congestion throughout the County, which could negatively affect residents' quality of life.

- **Why we oppose the "5-year Recommendations":** Recommendations proposed during the first "5-year" review (2007-2008) should be denied, as they do not direct development away from critical natural resource areas and would further increase the excessive amount of credits that could translate to even more low-density towns and villages. This could result in additional sprawl. Sustainable planning directed to environmentally compatible locations is a better solution than the proposed 5-year recommendations.

Eastern Collier County RLSA: A better way forward for our natural resources and quality of life

The Conservancy advocates for sustainable development patterns for growth in Eastern Collier County (RLSA). In conjunction with the implementation of [Conservancy's 2018 RLSA Vision Map](#), which directs development away from essential habitat for the endangered Florida panther, we support solutions for sustainable development patterns as provided in [Conservancy's RLSA Report](#) and "Toward Better Places: Community Character Plan for Collier County, Florida."

We support sustainable development in Eastern Collier County for the following reasons:

- **Tax Savings:** If Collier County implements a sustainable development plan, the County could be fiscally neutral. Smart Growth America estimates that Collier County will SAVE \$3.3 billion over 20 years in EMS services, school busing, school construction and staffing, and road construction, if the current growth plan for Eastern Collier is modified toward sustainable development patterns of compact development with higher densities. This equates to savings of \$165 million tax dollars each year for 20 years.
This means Collier County would have MORE money for:
 - Infrastructure to protect coastal properties from flooding and storm surge
 - Schools
 - Parks
 - Construction and maintenance of urban roads and bridges
- **Smaller Size:** Our sustainable development plan would reduce the size of towns and development areas; thereby, saving land and natural resources.
- **Increased Panther Habitat Protections:** Our sustainable development plan would provide additional protections for 47,000 acres of primary panther habitat which are vulnerable to development. Our plan also removes the need for new roads that cross primary panther habitat.
- **Increased Protections for Agricultural Lands:** Our sustainable development plan would provide additional protections for 41,000 acres of agricultural lands that are vulnerable to development.

- **Increased Protections for Wetlands:** Our sustainable development plan would provide additional protections for 6,100 acres of wetlands that are vulnerable to development.
- **Increased Protections for Listed Species:** Our sustainable development plan would provide greater habitat protections for 19 endangered, rare, and threatened species.
- **Less Congestion:** Our sustainable development plan promotes an interconnected street network with more travel routes; thereby reducing traffic congestion.
- **Less Need for Roads:** Our sustainable development plan places development closer to existing roads and infrastructure and condenses the development areas, requiring less need to build new roads or expand existing roads within Eastern Collier.
- **Less vehicle miles traveled:** Our sustainable development plan reduces the need for long drives to stores and other essential services by requiring that the town and village centers are closer to neighborhoods.
- **Fiscally neutral development:** Our sustainable development plan would better ensure a fiscally neutral tax base, so that tax dollars are not needlessly squandered on an increased need for services and infrastructure created by sprawl, in the form of low-density towns and villages.
- **Greater choices for travel:** Our sustainable development plan would require an interconnected street network for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders.
- **Housing Choices:** Our sustainable development plan promotes housing choices based on "Toward Better Places: Collier County's Community Character Plan".
- **Higher tax revenue:** Our sustainable development plan promotes building up, not spreading out; which would increase the tax revenue for Collier County but consume a smaller amount of acreage.

For more information, go to our webpage on Eastern Collier:

<https://www.conservancy.org/our-work/policy/eastern-collier-county>

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