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## Group shares its 'lofty' transit ideas for Lee County with Bonita council members

By TARA E. McLAUGHLIN

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Imagine streets lined with storefronts instead of parking lots, and trains that connect Florida Gulf Coast University and the airports. Imagine the next wave of homebuilding centered on electric train stations instead of behind gates.

If the group called Reconnecting Lee County has its way, Lee County's development future lies in urbanization instead of sprawl, including a light rail and rapid bus system to connect some of the county's most vital services.

"We're trying to advance an alternative form of development," said land development attorney Mike Ciccarone, who heads the group of more than a dozen individuals from the public and private sector.

"There's nothing wrong with gated subdivisions. There's plenty of demand for that," he said. "We can't continue to develop only that to the exclusion of what all the experts tell us is coming."

What's coming is a trend that's been gathering steam in U.S. communities for about 10 years called transit-oriented development, walkable, sustainable communities near public transportation services, said Bill Spikowski, a planning expert.

The group has been meeting every week for about a year and boasts lobbying efforts responsible for the recent decision by the county's Metropolitan Planning Organization to apply for a \$48 million federal stimulus grant for mass transit.

Thursday afternoon, the group met in Bonita Springs to present and discuss its platform with interested City Council members. Janet Martin, John Spear and Bill Lonkart attended.

The city's policy makers have been or soon will be hashing out plans for the Bonita Springs' downtown and development in the environmentally sensitive lands called the Density Reduction Groundwater Resource.

Martin said she was encouraged by the group's ideas.

"I'm going to be able to walk to a train and get to Coconut Point (mall)," said Martin, who lives close to downtown Bonita Springs where a potential train stop was discussed.

She said some constituents have told her they aren't interested in public transportation until she reminds them about connections to the airport.

Spear said City Council is enthusiastic about mixed-use developments, which is used in transit-oriented centers, but it tends to make decisions that contradict the concepts.

"The two things that scare the hell out of us are density and height and the two things that create urban sprawl is low density and low height," Spear said.

The ideas are lofty and a long way off, Spikowski said, but planning needs to start now.

"This is as dreamy as the high-speed rail but ideas start somewhere," he said, adding that groups such as the Urban Land Institute and the National Association of Realtors "are basically telling us we need to prepare for it because economic conditions will drive us to it."

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