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DeSoto's boom tests Coffey's planning résumé

While Babcock Ranch gets a lot of attention, quiet little DeSoto County is poised to double in size in the coming decade. Catching up on the planning required to accommodate such growth is Job One for new

County Administrator Craig Coffey.

"We're right in the middle of redoing our comprehensive plan," said Coffey, who is a planner by training. "It's one plan after another."

Charlotte County residents are familiar with the modest development taking place in the Lake Suzy area, just over the county line, but Coffey said that was just one of three major growth areas that could add more than 30,000 people to the county's current population of 34,892.

Projects in the southeastern part of DeSoto near U.S. 17 and State Road 31 could add between 20,000 and 25,000 people to the county, Coffey said. Developments along County Road 769 (Kings Highway) already are popping up, with more expected in coming years. Two project already approved will add up to 4,000 people to the county. Even Arcadia is poised for growth, with upward of 12,000 new residents expected in and around the city, Coffey projected.

The boom will require a rewrite not only of the local comprehensive plan, but of state and federal population projections. The state Legislature projected DeSoto County would have only 39,251 people by 2015, a 12.5-percent hike. If Coffey's estimate holds true, DeSoto's growth could be six times as strong.

The skyrocketing price of land is one factor in DeSoto's boom. Ranchers and citrus grove owners are finding it hard to resist offers ranging from \$20,000 an acre to \$70,000 an acre, Coffey said. The ongoing slump in the Florida citrus business is another part of the equation. Faced with meager profits or even losses from citrus operations, landowners know they can cash in on the land boom.

Growth is forcing DeSoto to address issues its western neighbors have struggled with for years -- stormwater management, transportation, parks and preserves and utility expansion.


"We've been so small we haven't tackled them yet," Coffey said. "They have a lot of expertise over there (in Charlotte County), and we look at them for some advice."

The County Commission's thorny debate over expanding a water line to the new Wal-Mart distribution center of U.S. 17 is a harbinger of future decisions.

One decision commissioners don't seem to be wrestling with is an approaching vote to impose DeSoto's first impact fees. Even as Charlotte County is considering a 251 percent increase in residential impact fees, DeSoto is only months away from implementing its impact fees, which could be as high as \$11,000 per unit. DeSoto's fee schedule is based on the size of homes, so many new units will pay less than that, Coffey said. DeSoto's impact fee will include funding for schools.

While impact fees won't differ much between the two counties, one planning tool Charlotte uses may actually benefit DeSoto: TDU or density transfers. With the option to simply hop across the county line, developers may eschew Charlotte for DeSoto, Coffey speculated.

"Once they get along our border, it's harder for them to administer that," he said.

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