

## EAST LEE COUNTY NEWS | DANIELS CORRIDOR

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### A Rudder

Butch Swank | butch@goodladandswank.com | President, SWFL Business Alliance + Owner, Goodlad & Swank Insurance, LLC



A while back, I wrote an article about the real benefit to young people using “Yes, ma’am and No, sir.” My point was that these days, it’s almost an oddity to hear a kid demonstrate that level of respect, and the ones that do are well-received and should go far in life. We’re hamstringing our kids by not teaching them many of the fundamental rules of society. For this article, I’d like to address a similar point: How can we better provide guidance to kids who were never given it? When you hear a “Yes, ma’am,” the automatic assumption is that this kid was either raised in the South or was taught by someone who cared for them to respect their elders. Let’s face it: respect is a core foundation of our American culture. It is both hard-earned and easily lost. That is why we revere it. Respect for others and yourself signals that you are well-adjusted to society and likely have the fundamental skills to succeed. Not having it, statistically speaking, rarely ends in a happy and fulfilling life.

To me, this implies that a kid who never uses these phrases: 1. Is actually disrespectful and thinks they’re on the exact same level as any adult they’re talking to, or 2. They were never taught to do so in the first place. A while ago, I was on an elementary school advisory committee. Over my time there, during our discussions, we got to hear some great stories and some sad ones. One that stands out is a brilliant kid the teachers really cared for but struggled to educate. The kid would openly share with his teacher that he was encouraged to play video games and get high upon returning home rather than study. Of course, for privacy reasons, the committee was never told the kid’s name, and at the time, I thought, what could I even do to help fix this? It bugs me to this day to think we can so often hear of a tremendous wrong yet have no mechanism to help. This was an elementary student, so what does that mean – he was maybe eleven years old? Yeah, it really is heartbreaking. But, please also consider the parents. How were they raised? In nature and life, patterns repeat themselves. Parents tend to raise their kids just as they were raised. I also got the sad impression that this kid was not a one-off or a highly unusual experience for the teachers. Man, imagine having to navigate that daily in your professional life. Teachers have a rewarding job, but Good Lord, it must also be emotionally draining sometimes. They simply do not get the credit they deserve. I know, I know, there are some scumbag teachers out there, but we should never let the very

few bring down the many. The broader point is that we’re currently sending so many kids out into the real world, effectively rudderless, with no knowledge of how to navigate it.

What does all this mean? To me, it means we, as a culture, are failing our youth – you know, the next generation to inherit this amazing experiment in freedom, which is the USA. To keep this brief, I peg the blame on two things. First, our culture has not just allowed but actively encouraged a perpetual childhood. For example, “Adulthood is hard” is a common phrase heard now. Yeah, no sheet! (This is a family show, so I won’t type what I’m really thinking) Of course, being an adult is hard. It is a daily struggle to navigate life’s challenges while maintaining family and work relationships. If you have children, the complexities can become even more challenging to manage, and we all suffer from the sky-high prices of the current economy. To remedy this, I think we should begin as early as middle school to provide real-world skills and tools to students. Here are some starter suggestions: What is a checking account? What are bills? How do I manage money? Why does my paycheck look smaller than “it’s supposed to?” What are taxes? How do I buy a home? How do I behave when meeting new people? Do I really have to shake people’s hands? Is it a good idea to ask for a raise or promotion after my second week at a new job?

It’s quite clear that our school systems don’t even try to impart that kind of wisdom to kids today. The principals and teachers deserve no blame in my book, which leads to my second point. I’ll share two facts I recently learned. Did you know that nationwide, between 2000 and 2019, the number of school administrators increased by 87.6%, while the number of teachers went up by only 8.7%? Here’s another disturbing fact for you. In 2018, there were 264,240 administrators nationally compared to 1,415,580 elementary school teachers. Think about it this way: do we really need one administrator for every six teachers? I recently attended an artificial intelligence tech manager’s presentation on what’s cooking in that world. (A lot, it was very interesting), Back to business, in passing, the speaker said he manages one hundred or so people. That means in the education world, we have sixteen managers for one hundred teachers, and this guy, dealing with cutting-edge AI software, can (very)successfully manage one hundred? Something is clearly broken in our education system, and radical change is needed. I’d also like to point out that none of this unhealthy bloat was deliberate or done with bad intentions. Quite simply, pretty much all administrative government institutions

inevitably grow too big over a long enough time period. Think of the story of the frog in the kettle of cold water with the stove just lit. Initially, the frog is comfortable and has no idea he is on the menu. It should be dawning on us that we’re the frog, and instead of doing the backstroke, we should begin attempting to convince the cook to go vegan. “Brussel sprouts taste way better than frog legs, trust us!”

That’s a terrible analogy, but you get my point. So many administrators only seem to end up pulling teachers every which way except their primary task of enabling the next generation not just to survive but also flourish. So, let’s begin to rethink HOW we teach kids and let’s also rethink where to allocate the money school districts get. As a businessman dealing with numbers daily, I say a great place to start would be to quickly bring the number of administrators back down to a reasonable level by analyzing real-world performance and retaining the highest performers, shifting that now excess payroll money to vastly raise teacher pay, while being sure to keep the high-performing teachers, all this would then attract all the natural-born teachers who have rightly stayed away from teaching because of sth currently. Yes, of course, I am oversimplifying things, but I believe my point is valid regardless, and we’ve got to start somewhere. These two solutions, if solely focused on, can yield immediate and positive results for our kids, adults, culture, and America as a whole. For some reason, the saying “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” has always annoyed me, but an exception is required in this case. Our school systems are clearly “broke,” and we damn sure need to fix them. Each and every one of these kids deserves to have the educational and cultural rudder our society has failed to provide so many for far too long. To wrap it up, please consider that without a rudder, it is impossible to change direction.

Of course, I am a businessman, and my personality cannot let this article purely be about social commentary. I’m only adding this because I have some exciting news to share. A few years ago, we formed the Southwest Florida Business Alliance, SWFLBA.com, which has had many successes. Our membership has grown to include several successful and influential business leaders. The organization has made over 1,400 contacts and coalesces an Executive Advisory Board of 47 subject matter experts who make themselves available to advise on all sorts of regional and State topics and who help write many of the articles that appear in this paper. The Alliance members believe that we are on the precipice of better things in Lee County, and we look forward to accomplishing something we can ALL be proud of. 🐾

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# Guest Opinion: Single Member Districts

The Honorable Matt Caldwell | Lee County Property Appraiser



Thursday, January 9, 2025 marked a historic day in Lee County history. By a vote of 6-1, the Lee County Legislative Delegation advanced a bill calling for a referendum in 2026 for five (5) single-member districts for the county commission! This is the closest opportunity that the voters of Lee County have had in over two decades. However, the work is not yet finished. This local bill still must go through the Local Government subcommittee and State Affairs Committee (at least), then onto the House floor for a vote of the entire body. Once passing there, it will go to the Senate, where the last real effort, led by Rep. Bruce Kyle, was killed in 2003 and 2004. Those of us who believe this is a critical reform for our county government eagerly await final passage of this bill. But that will not be the end. Although very rare, local bills are subject to Gubernatorial veto, the same as all state laws; watch for our opponents to push for that "solution". Considering that Governor Desantis hails from Northeast Florida and Pinellas County, where single-member districts are a familiar sight in the major urban counties, one can hope that he will see the wisdom in bringing this issue forward to a referendum in Lee County, now the 74th largest county (out of roughly 3,000) in the United States!

The idea that the voters of Lee County should have the right to vote on their form of government is a no brainer for most people, but the critics are working hard to mislead the public on this as well. First and foremost, Lee County never voted to be governed by a five member at-large commission. This form was imposed on all non-charter counties in 1947, when Lee County was smaller than 25,000 residents. In 1984, we made our position clear on this abuse of authority, by voting 57% to repeal that statewide preemption of home rule. But over the ensuing 41 years, we have yet to finalize the alternative we desire for ourselves. In 1988, there was a referendum on moving to the 5 single/2 at-large model, but forces conspired to hide it on the primary ballot, where it barely failed 52%/48%. When Lee County opted to become a charter county in 1996, the framers of our charter avoided this question and the only structural difference between our charter and a default statutory county is that our executive and legislative branches were legally separated, without creating an elected official to oversee the executive branch; a strange creature to be sure, but a debate for another time. The county commission

and charter review tackled the question of how best to organize our county legislature periodically since 1996. In 2000 and 2004, the charter review debated this issue heavily, without resolution. In 2008, the charter review voted 11-2 to reject the five at-large system but failed to gain a 10-vote consensus for the system to propose for replacement. That same year the county commission took up the 5 single/2 at-large proposal again, but it failed on a tie 2-2 vote.

But as frustrating as the 11th hour Senate maneuvers were in 2003 and 2004, the 2016 charter review is perhaps the most infamous example of how manipulation prevails in this debate. It was clear going into that cycle that there were at least 10 votes prepared to bring the 5 single/2 at-large proposal to the voters. But county commissioners directly interfered with their appointees, ultimately resulting in an 8-7 vote; and yes, while that was still a majority, the goalpost was set at 9 votes for passage. Taking all of this experience together, it is little wonder that advocates for single-member districts concluded that the local process is rigged against us. Thus, we invested only a cursory effort into the 2024 charter review process; the fix was in before we even put our shoes on. It should be noted that still today, the county commission only mustered a 3-vote majority for a letter of opposition to the legislative route in 2024. This history was clearly not lost on the legislative delegation. Every member has lived through this saga personally over the last four decades; they have seen firsthand that this issue will not get a fair vote unless they bring it forward. In an effort to present the issue as clearly as possible, the delegation has chosen to bring forward just five (5) single-member districts, with no provision for any at-large seats.

And that brings us to the latest ploy, to claim that somehow our legislators are imposing this from on high. Of course, that claim is absurd on its' face, as the bill calls for a referendum, the same kind of referendum that the voters were given in 2014 when they approved moving the school board to a 5 single/2 at-large system. But more importantly, it reveals the hypocrisy of this crowd, many of whom claim deep fidelity to the Constitutional order of our republic but then attempt to undercut that very same order. Lazy civics teachers will present our system as one organized as Federal to State to Local, much like is found in Britain or Germany. But that is not the case. It is the States who are the plenary (unlimited) power government in America. The States created the Federal government, with enumerated (limited) powers, and

it is the States who create the local government. Lee County did not spring forth from the forehead of Zeus; the Legislature created it and still today has the power to dissolve Lee County, without a referendum, if they see fit. The opposition hopes that the voters are too ignorant to understand this; I, for one, do not hold so low an opinion of my fellow citizens.

In my testimony last Thursday, I spoke on the fundamental injustice of at-large districts, and I referenced that they are racist in origin. And while I have no reason to believe that the proponents of the status quo today are driven by the same energy, it is fanciful to pretend that this is not the entire basis of their imposition in Florida. This is an established fact in multiple legal proceedings in recent decades. They are, by their very nature, designed to suppress the voters' will. And they still achieve that goal today. Look no further than the fact that in the last 23 election cycles, at least 14 times the winner of the local district has lost because of the at-large vote.

And finally, I outlined that even the Founders of this Nation understood the critical nature of this issue. James Madison, in Federalist 56, wrote about the structure of legislative bodies, and discussed the fact that the House of Commons in Britain was at that time mixed between single-member and at-large/multi-member districts. Referring to the latter he shares:

"It cannot be supposed that the half thus elected, and who do not even reside among the people... can add anything either to the security of the people against the government, or to the knowledge of their circumstances and interests in the legislative councils. On the contrary, it is notorious, that they are more frequently the representatives and instruments of the executive magistrate, than the guardians and advocates of the popular rights. They might therefore, with great propriety, be considered as something more than a mere deduction from the real representatives of the nation."

As we embark upon this new day, I am secure in the knowledge that we find ourselves in fidelity with the very author of our republic. I encourage you to share this opportunity to support five (5) single-member districts fro our county commission with every voter you know in Lee County. Even once the bill passes, the real work will begin as we head to the vote in 2026. Our opponents will not rest on their laurels, and we must not as well. 🐾

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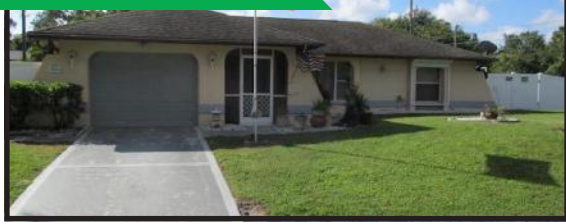


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# What's Hookin' in Southwest Florida by Eddie Yerdon

Capt. Eddie | Tight Lines, [www.facebook.com/eddie.yerdon](http://www.facebook.com/eddie.yerdon)

Hello, Folks!

It's time for Tight Lines with Capt. Eddie, with hunting season wrapping up, it's time to swap out the rifles for rods and reels and embrace everything the SWFL fishing has to offer. There's no better way to unwind and reconnect with nature than by heading out to your favorite spot, setting up camp, and soaking in the serenity of the great outdoors. Whether you prefer the shoreline or an island getaway, now's the time to gather your gear, pack up the cooler, and embrace the crisp, cool nights that make this season so special. And don't worry about the skeeters—they're not bad this time of year.

While you're out there, be sure to bring along the essentials: a good skillet, some oil, cornmeal, and a pinch of salt and pepper. Why, you ask? Because there's no meal finer than a fresh catch fried up cracker-style. There's something magical about cooking what you catch right there by the water—an experience that fills your belly and feeds your soul. Now, let's talk about what's biting!

Saltwater Trout are everywhere, and some of them are absolute trophies! These fish are plentiful this time of year, making them a prime target for anglers of all skill levels. Remember, the daily limit is three per person, and one of those can measure over 19 inches. Hooking into a big one is always a thrill, and when you fry them up fresh, there's nothing like that flaky, flavorful goodness. Crappie fishing is heating up, too! These fun and feisty fish are biting especially well about a week before the full moon, so timing is key. Keep an eye on the calendar—January 13th and February 12th mark the next full moon. These are the days when the bite will be at its peak, so plan your trips accordingly. Bring the kids or a few friends, and you're bound to fill your cooler in no time. Sheepshead are also putting on a show, and if you're looking to target these striped, toothy fighters, head over to St. James City. They're everywhere right now, but this area is hot, producing especially good numbers. The minimum size is 12 inches, and you're allowed to keep up to 8 per person. Sheepshead are excellent table fare and a blast to catch, especially if you're using shrimp or fiddler crabs as bait.

For those looking to mix things up, there's action to be had when you fish on the Caloosahatchee, around I-75 Bridge, where anglers report good catches of reds and snapper. These species are always a treat, whether you're fishing for sport or dinner. A bit of patience and persistence can lead to a full stringer and a bait of great stories to share.

Fishing this time of year is more than just casting a line—it's about immersing yourself in the experience. The cool breezes, the quiet rustle of the water, and the joy of reeling in a fish make every outing memorable. Whether you're an old pro or just getting back into it, now's the time to embrace the season, explore new spots, and make the most of what Mother Nature has to offer.

So gather your poles, load up the boat or the truck, and get out there. With trout, crappie, sheepshead, reds, and snapper all biting, there's no shortage of excitement waiting for you on the water.

Stay safe, enjoy the adventure, and don't forget to share your catches—both the big ones and the ones that got away. 🐾



# It's A New Year. How About A New Attitude Toward Landscaping?

Marlene Rodak | President, Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society

The new year brings resolutions – some realistic, some not. One to consider is making your landscaping friendlier and lighter on the environment.

What does that mean?

1. Perhaps you can reduce irrigation by installing native plants that (once established) need less supplemental water. Now that's a timely concept because many communities have wells that are drying up. Low water pressure has also become an issue for local hospitals and other businesses. So, imagine if everybody started watering less, or not at all: we could significantly increase our water supply.

You use well water, you say? Well (pun intended), that water isn't free. As aquifer levels drop, many will need to drill deeper wells. Even if your well is deep, the water quantity can affect the County, which means we are all paying for it. The more we build on lands that historically have recharged our underground water supplies, the worse the situation becomes. (Not to mention how bad the traffic from that development has gotten.) Plus, well water is a bit stinky and discolors sidewalks and driveways. Of course, since irrigation generally occurs at night, maybe we all might sleep a little more soundly if we didn't awaken to the sprinklers kicking on. More sound sleep could certainly help us be friendlier, too.

2. Perhaps we can use fewer chemicals in our landscapes. Oh no! What if you have an insect eating your plant? What if grubs overwhelm your sod? I say, "YAY!": It is 2025. Let's realize that the planet will suffer if we do not make space for insects and pollinators. If you like butterflies, you must tolerate caterpillars because they become the butterflies you love. If you want to see birds in your yard, you must provide caterpillars and other insects for them to eat. The point is, the planet is a system of ecosystems with many interdependent parts. So, let's make peace with creepy crawlies, and that includes snakes. They are all, like us, just trying to get by. It is on us to be careful and respectful of the other creatures who share this planet.

3. Hire good people. Ask your landscapers questions. If they don't know the answers, ask them to find out or find people that do know the answers. The local chapters of the Florida Native Plant Society are here to help them (and you) FOR FREE! They simply need to spend the time and effort learning. Right now, there are far too few landscapers who know native plants. We need more!

Demand it.

4. Overall, let's try to respect nature a little more. It's not all about color. There are plenty of colorful native plants, but there are also plants that smell heavenly. There are plants that attract and support beautiful butterflies, birds and bunnies. Exotic plants have a role in the landscape, but they should be focal points, not the foundation. As you plan and plant your yard, take time to learn more about native plants. There are a few thousand of them!

Of course, The Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society and your local native plant nursery are here to help. You can learn more about native plants at [FNPScoccoloba.org](http://FNPScoccoloba.org). You can also visit River Oaks Preserve, 9541 Broadway Ave E, Estero, on Sundays and Tuesdays from 9-1 to see our up-and-coming demonstration gardens, shop at our nursery, and talk to knowledgeable people who want to help you. Don't forget to grab some of our illustrated literature to help with your wonderful new year's resolution. 🐾





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# Our Flavors: Exploring Southwest Florida’s Local Dishes

Arthur Ingram

Southwest Florida boasts a bounty of fresh flavors shaped by sun-drenched coastlines and warm breezes. Even longtime residents can stumble on dishes they’ve never tried, from frog legs to “swamp cabbage.” Each local specialty connects to the region’s natural setting and storied past, offering surprising tastes that sometimes catch even seasoned Floridians off guard.

Below is a survey of characteristic fare often found in fish markets, produce stands, and down-home diners. Those who haven’t sampled everything may discover a new favorite.

## Stone Crab Claws: Gulf-Born Gold

Stone crab claws stand out on Florida’s Gulf Coast, especially near Everglades City. According to state data, 99% of U.S. stone crabs come from Florida waters. Fishers remove one claw and return the crab to the sea, allowing it to regenerate within about a year, and this practice helps maintain crab populations while delivering delicious meat to diners.

Typically served chilled with a tangy mustard or mayo-based sauce, stone crab claws can be messy to crack—so keep a napkin handy. Opinions differ on the best sauce recipe, but all agree the delicate sweetness deserves center stage.

## Grouper Sandwich: Coastal Comfort

Grouper sandwiches greet visitors in beachfront cafés and casual waterfront joints. A Gulf-caught fillet, battered or blackened, goes on a soft bun with lettuce, tomato, and tartar sauce. Grouper’s mild flavor and firm texture make it a crowd-pleaser.

Local fish houses label fresh daily catches, so it pays to ask when the fillet was landed. Coleslaw or hush puppies often complete the meal, and that sunset view comes free of charge.

## Key Lime Pie: Tropical Tang

Long tied to Key West, Key lime pie is just as popular in Southwest Florida. Egg yolks, condensed milk, and sharp Key lime juice unite in a graham cracker crust. Key limes, typically smaller than Persian limes, impart a vibrant citrus punch.

Debate arises over whether whipped cream or meringue should top the custard. Either way, the result is a pale yellow slice that’s both creamy and bright—an unmistakable taste of Florida sunshine.

## Cuban Sandwich: Pressed Perfection

Florida’s Cuban sandwich, popularized in Tampa’s Ybor City, layers roasted pork, ham, Swiss cheese, pickles, and mustard on Cuban bread. Some Tampa versions add salami, but the true magic is the press: heated compression yields a crisp exterior and melty interior.

In Southwest Florida, many spots follow the Tampa style, though some omit salami. Whether paired with black beans and rice or plantain chips, this sandwich endures as an irresistible favorite.

## Alligator Tail: Swampy Savors

Seen in certain inland grills, fried or grilled alligator tail bites come from Florida’s swampy interior. The

meat falls somewhere between chicken and fish in taste and texture, often served with spicy dipping sauces to highlight its mild flavor.

At first deemed a novelty for tourists, gator tail now symbolizes a nod to Florida’s wetlands and heritage. Newcomers should note its slightly chewy texture—take small bites and savor the experience.

## Gulf Shrimp: Tidal Treasures

Florida’s warm Gulf waters help shrimp develop a distinct sweetness. Boiled, fried, or grilled, they appear on countless local menus. Some seafood markets sell shrimp fresh off the boat with shells intact, a small chore that often rewards you with the best flavor.

A “peel-and-eat” platter with cocktail sauce is a classic. Those craving heat can opt for blackened or Buffalo-style shrimp, a lively twist on a local staple.

## Florida Spiny Lobster: Seasonal Sensation

Florida spiny lobsters differ from northern ones, holding most of their meat in the tail. Lobster season runs August 6 through March 31, plus a brief mini season in July. Local divers pluck these lobsters from reefs, and availability varies.

Spiny lobster tails often get the grill treatment with a citrus or garlic marinade. Some chefs serve it chilled with cocktail sauce, while others favor the pairing of melted butter. Its mild, sweet flavor mixes effortlessly with tropical notes like pineapple or mango.

## Smoked Mullet: Old-Florida Fare

Though less glamorous than grouper or snapper, mullet has long fed Gulf Coast communities. Smoking this oily fish lends it a richly layered flavor. Smoked mullet finds its way into dips or appears simply on crackers.

Shops near fishing docks sometimes advertise mullet “fresh from the smoker,” recalling images of small-town gatherings. Anyone reluctant to try it may be won over by the first savory, smoky bite.

## Swamp Cabbage: Hidden Harvest

“Swamp cabbage” is made from the sabal palm, Florida’s state tree. Inland areas prize its faintly sweet, nutty crunch, serving it raw or in stews. LaBelle honors this heritage each February with its Swamp Cabbage Festival.

Because harvesting it means cutting into a tree’s core, swamp cabbage isn’t common at big grocery stores. Some smaller produce stands, however, keep a supply on hand for those who treasure this old-Florida tradition.

## Florida Mango: Sunny Sweetness

The region’s balmy climate nurtures mango trees, especially around Pine Island, home to the annual Mango Mania festival each July. Markets carry cultivars like ‘Kent,’ ‘Tommy Atkins,’ or ‘Keitt,’ each with unique levels of sweetness and fiber.

From tangy salsas and smoothies to baked treats, mango fits into countless recipes. At peak season, the bright fruit’s floral aroma nearly dominates local produce stands, welcoming buyers with sunshine in

every bite.

## Frog Legs: Wetland Wonders

Frog legs, sourced from local marshes or frog farms, appear fried or sautéed on certain inland menus. Their texture and flavor resemble mild chicken wings. Despite their novelty, some diners consider them comfort food.

Roadside diners often serve frog legs with hush puppies and coleslaw. Bones can be a surprise for first-timers, so a careful nibble is wise. Once you’re past that, the dish may earn a spot on your must-try list.

## Guava Dessert: Tangy Treats

Guava, once wild across Florida, remains a cherished ingredient in jams and pastries. Some bakeries spotlight it in pastelitos, milkshakes, or pies. Its sweet-tart essence and rosy hue bring a tropical flair to both rustic and refined desserts.

Whether enjoyed as an ice cream swirl or a filling for flaky pastries, guava speaks to the state’s multicultural roots. That floral aroma stirs nostalgia, especially among those who grew up eating it in backyard gatherings.

## Wild Hog: Hearty Heritage

Introduced by Spanish explorers in the 16th century, wild hogs roam Florida’s forests and wetlands, both nuisance and mealtime opportunity. Gamy meat responds well to brining and bold seasoning. Some rural restaurants serve it when supply allows, or it can be sourced through local hunters.

Slow-cooked, roasted, or made into sausage, wild hog imparts a robust taste. Paired with swamp cabbage or other local sides, it provides a rustic treat that goes beyond everyday pork chops.

## Where to Explore and How to Taste

Locals may know half these dishes by heart but remain curious about the others. A visit to a hidden fish market or inland produce stand can uncover fresh favorites. Checking seasonal availability—like spiny lobster season—helps, and smaller grocers may stock local shrimp or mangoes for home cooking.

Asking around yields insider tips: fishmongers will detail the daily catch, and longtime neighbors recall the fair’s frog leg booths. These shared secrets often inspire new aromas in home kitchens, proving even seasoned residents can discover fresh delights.

## A Closing Note on Local Flavor

From stone crab claws to frog legs, Southwest Florida’s cuisine unites land and sea, tradition and invention. Its identity emerges from foods shaped by climate and generations of shared recipes. By venturing outside familiar fare, locals deepen their appreciation of the region’s rich heritage and culinary creativity—one vibrant, sun-kissed bite at a time.

*Arthur Ingram is a pseudonym representing artificial intelligence algorithms and human writers working together in SW Florida. Trey English provided prompting, editing, and fact-checking for this algorithm-written article*





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# Tails From The Garden: An Unexpected Helper

Kara Tyler-Julian | Biologist

In the forgotten back corner of a suburban yard, many small weeds are sprouting. Overlooked by the homeowner who is otherwise occupied. These small weed sprouts are spotted, however, by a family of small rodents. The movement at the back of the yard attracts my attention and I notice this mother and her two little ones grasping the weed sprouts in their tiny front paws and delicately plucking them from the ground by their roots. They would then contentedly consume the entire plant- roots and all before moving onto the next sprout.

The “weed” was the native wildflower *Bidens alba*, better known by its common name of Spanish needle. It can be quite aggressive where it is allowed to spread thanks to its prolific seeds that stick to the clothes or fur of any creature that passes. This scene occurred about one year into our adventure of gardening with native plants to support wildlife and it was clearly working! However, I wasn’t yet familiar with this species of rodent that was lending me a hand in tending my garden. Being ever the studious biologist, I had to immediately identify this organism and discover its origins, life history, and behavior. Was this a native Florida creature, or one of the hundreds of invasive animals plaguing our ecosystems by no fault of their own? After all, it is humans who have introduced these many exotic species to our state where the animals are then forced to carve out an existence in a foreign land motivated only by their instinct to survive. Perhaps invasive isn’t a fair term to describe these creatures but rather “misplaced” might be more fitting.

After photographing and observing the creature I conducted a search online. I concluded based on the physical appearance of the “hispid” coloration and the way that the rodents hopped rather than scurried that my new friends providing

the free weed control were the native Hispid cotton rats (*Sigmodon hispidus*). I was overjoyed to know that these were native rodents finding a home in my garden, rather than one of the invasive species of rats that can cause damage to human structures and spread the plague. The hispid cotton rats are omnivorous with a healthy preference for leafy greens, i.e. herbaceous vegetation, such as the young Spanish needle sprouts that they were eating. Hispid cotton rats can be found in a wide range of habitats but seem to prefer grassy areas with some shrubby overstory, which is what our yard was at the time. In the pine flatwoods areas their population can vary from 2 to 47 rats per hectare and usually have a home range between one half to one acre, which meant that this small family was likely the total population in our yard and the neighboring lots. The invasive rat species tend to make their nests on or in human structures and present in much higher numbers of individuals, so this small family of respectful native rodents was a much-preferred sighting.

The hispid cotton rats are one of the native species of wildlife that have been found sheltering in the burrows of gopher tortoises. They are a food source for many native predatory birds, snakes, and even panthers. Being a small, ground-dwelling prey item means that they are also vulnerable to attack by non-native feral and outdoor house cats. Indeed, the presence of housecats in our outdoor environments presents a severe threat to our native wildlife species including small rodents, birds and reptiles. A great way to help protect and support native wildlife in addition to planting native plants and conserving habitat is to keep all pets indoors and supervise them when they are outdoors in fenced-in yards. As their native habitat continuously shrinks, we must do everything we can to be respectful neighbors to the wildlife that we share our neighborhoods with. 🐾



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# Six Mile Cypress Slough 2025 Photo Contest Now Accepting Entries

**Steve Parker | Friends Board Member/Public Relations**

Entries are now being accepted for the Friends of Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve 2025 Photo Contest honoring Carolyn Babb. The deadline is January 31, 2025.

The contest is limited to amateur photographers and only digital entries can be submitted. Photos must be of native species and must have been taken at the Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve, which includes Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve North.

This past spring, the Friends of Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve Board named the photo contest in honor of the late Carolyn Babb, a longtime volunteer and Friends member who founded the contest in 2009.

Registration and entry submissions should be made on the Friends website, [www.sloughpreserve.org](http://www.sloughpreserve.org)

First, second and third place winners will be awarded in three categories: Plants and Landscapes, Birds, and Animals. A Grand Prize winner will be awarded to the photo the judges deem best overall.

In addition to the regular adult contest, there will be separate contests for youths and staff members. Youth entries are eligible for the Grand Prize.

Hoping to foster a greater love and appreciation of nature and conservation among young people, the Friends group is allowing youths ages 17 and under to participate for free. The entry cost for adults is \$15 for Friends members and \$25 for non-members.

The 2024 Grand Prize photo was taken by Grace Waller, who said she had taken up photography as a hobby just months earlier. Her photo showed a mother raccoon clutching her youngster in a tree.

Winning photos from past years can be viewed on the Friends website, [www.sloughpreserve.org](http://www.sloughpreserve.org), and in the Interpretive Center at the Slough. The Center is

open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day except Mondays. Admission to the Center and the Boardwalk is free with paid parking, which is \$1 an hour or \$5 for an entire day.

Last year, a total of 244 photos were entered by 103 different photographers.

The photo contest honors Carolyn Babb, who died in December 2023. She served seven years as president of the Friends Board, the longest tenure of any president.

“She wore many hats at the Slough through the years,” said Theresa Roake, Friends Board secretary, “and had a hand in pretty much everything the Friends organization has accomplished over the past 20-plus years.

“As the Board looked for a way to honor her lasting legacy at the Slough, we looked to one of her other passions. The Slough truly inspired her love of nature photography. She was seldom seen without her camera and shared this love with other photographers at the Slough.”

And that, Roake said, inspired her to create the photo contest in 2009, with the first winners announced in January 2010.

The Friends organization is a nonprofit citizens group that provides support for the Slough’s staff and volunteers. Membership levels in the Friends organization start at \$10 for students and \$25 for individuals. More information about the photo contest and membership is available on the Slough Friends website at [www.sloughpreserve.org](http://www.sloughpreserve.org)

Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve is over 3,500 acres of wetland ecosystem with a boardwalk trail and Interpretive Center. Animals like otters, alligators, turtles, wading birds, and more live at the Slough year-round. Others, like migrating birds and butterflies, use the Slough as a feeding area or a winter home. The Slough is managed by the Lee County Department of Parks and Recreation and is open daily from sunrise to sunset. 🐾



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# The JANUARY 2025 EVENTS CALENDAR

## Montage Women's Club

Rita Artwohl | President & Publicity Chair, Montage Women's Club

The Montage Women's Club is a social and philanthropic club open to all women residing in Lee County. We normally meet on the fourth Thursday of each month. Our February meeting will take place at the Hilton Garden Inn (Captiva Ballroom), 12600 University Drive in Fort Myers, corner of College Parkway at the Summerlin Road overpass. Meetings begin at 11:30 am with a short social period followed by lunch at Noon followed by an informative speaker program and a short business meeting. Within the organization are various interest groups for members' participation. Membership is open to both year-round and seasonal residents. We welcome you to visit Montage for a luncheon.

Our next meeting will be held on Thursday, February 27, 2025. Our speaker will be Ms. Jan Farrington who will be sharing details of her "Be Kind" project. She truly believes there is a lot of good in this world, and she always wants to believe that it starts with kindness. Ms. Farrington, a retired high school special education teacher, has been recognized in conjunction with this project on National TV. Luncheon fee will be \$30.00 per person, and you always have a choice of either a regular menu entree and/or a vegan/plant-based entree.

If you would like to attend a Montage meeting, make a reservation, or need further information, please call Rita Artwohl at 239-703-7787. Reservations cut-off to attend this meeting is Noon, Thursday, February 20th. 🐾

## 100% Chance Of Snow In Lehigh!

Shaleza Rouse | Rise Christian Church

Come join us on January 25th for Rise Christian Church's Winterfest! Entry is free to this family friendly event, featuring a 30-foot snow slide, snow to play in, games, bounce houses, giveaways and live music. Join your community in supporting local vendors and food trucks, meet your neighborhood librarians and firefighters (truck included!), and play with adoptable pets on this evening to remember! The event runs from 5:00pm to 8:00pm at 50 Bell Blvd.



For more information go to [www.risefl.org](http://www.risefl.org) 🐾

## Minnesota Twins Spring Training Box Office Opens January 11th

Matt Hodson | Director, Business Communications, Minnesota Twins Baseball Club

The Minnesota Twins announced today that the Lee Health Sports Complex box office will officially open for the 2025 spring training season at 10:00 a.m. ET this Saturday, January 11, with tickets on sale for each of the Twins' 17 spring training home games. Single game tickets, along with season, group and Pick Your Pack plans, are available for purchase online now at [twins.com/tickets/springtraining](http://twins.com/tickets/springtraining).

Byron Buxton, Carlos Correa, Royce Lewis, Pablo López and the rest of their Twins teammates are set to convene for the club's 35th spring training in Fort Myers, with all 17 home games at Lee Health Sports Complex featuring at least one special ticket offer, promotion and/or special event:

- Meal Deal (17 games): Grandstand ticket, hot dog and Pepsi.
- Salute to Service (5 games; February 22 and 27, and March 7, 14 and 25): Veterans, active military, first responders, EMTs, firefighters, healthcare workers and teachers can purchase up to four (4) tickets at half price in the Home Plate View or The Porch seating levels (sold only at the Lee Health Sports Complex Box Office with a valid ID).
- Senior Day (5 games; February 22 and 28, and March 5, 13 and 24): Fans 55 and older receive a Home Plate View seat, hot dog and Pepsi.
- Lee Health Kids Day (3 weekend games; February 22, and March 2 and 16): Fans 12 years of age and younger are invited to run the bases after the game.
- Minnesota Day, presented by Mauer Auto Group (1 game; March 2): The annual event features a pregame tailgate – the only time tailgating is allowed at Lee Health Sports Complex – prior to the Twins vs. Rays game.
- NEW – Pickleball Ticket Package (1 game; March 7): Fans who purchase this special package will receive a ticket to the Twins vs. Braves game and an exclusive Twins pickleball paddle!
- NEW – Golf Ticket Package (1 game; March 13): Fans who purchase this special package will receive a ticket to the Twins vs. Pirates game, plus an exclusive Twins golf headcover!
- Fireworks Night (1 game; March 14): Fans are invited to stay for a Friday night fireworks extravaganza following the Twins vs. Rays game.

The Twins' 2025 spring home schedule includes three games against the Boston Red Sox (March 8, 16 and 20); a February 25 visit from the New York Yankees; three contests vs. the Pittsburgh Pirates (February 27, March 13 and March 24); two games apiece against the Atlanta Braves (February 22 and March 7), Baltimore Orioles (February 28 and March 5) and Tampa Bay Rays (March 2 and 14); and single games vs. the Philadelphia Phillies (March 10), Detroit Tigers (March 18), Toronto Blue Jays (March 22) and Colorado Rockies (March 25).

More information on the Minnesota Twins' 2025 spring training at Lee Health Sports Complex, including the full game schedule, is available at: [www.twins.com/springtraining](http://www.twins.com/springtraining). 🐾



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# Homebuyers Risk Their Biggest Investment By Forgoing Legal Counsel, LegalShield Survey Finds

Hollon Kohtz | Director of Communications , Legal Shield

- Nearly one-third of respondents with homebuying experience forced to back out of purchase due to legal issues
- Yet, 3 out of 4 fully rely on advice of realtors for real estate-related legal matters
- LegalShield provider lawyer: "...a lawyer is an essential safeguard"

A new national survey by LegalShield reveals that homebuyers are potentially risking their biggest investment by forgoing legal counsel when buying, selling, or renovating homes. Despite recognizing the value of legal guidance for major real estate transactions, survey results suggest that the majority of Americans forge ahead without a lawyer's expertise, risking costly mistakes. The survey found that nearly one-third of respondents (30%) had to back out of a home purchase due to issues like hidden defects, boundary conflicts, or title problems, many of which could have been identified by a lawyer's upfront review.

"Involving a lawyer early empowers you to ask the right questions, understand the fine print, and build in protections to prevent costly surprises or delays down the road," said Michael Fiffik, a real estate lawyer with Fiffik Law Group. "Legal guidance can be a powerful ally in the homebuying process."  
Bias baked in?

Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents (73%) held the misconception that real estate agents alone can sufficiently handle all legal requirements for a home purchase or sale.

"For a life event like buying a home, a lawyer is an essential member of the team, along with your lender and realtor," said Fiffik. "Without a lawyer's input, home buyers are exposed to preventable financial and legal nightmares."

## Legally adrift

Polling revealed that while 71% of respondents believe involving a lawyer would provide peace of mind, nearly half (46%) have never actually hired one. Half (50%) didn't use a lawyer during home buying, and 62% went it alone when selling.

"The majority go through this complex process without legal guidance from a lawyer, putting their life savings at major risk of costly mistakes and missed issues," said Warren Schlichting, CEO of LegalShield.

LegalShield is committed to making quality legal services accessible and affordable, empowering Americans to include a lawyer in their homeownership journey from the beginning.

"We encourage everyone to be proactive and consult with a lawyer well before making any decisions or taking action when it comes to your home," said Schlichting. "Early legal guidance can mean the difference between a smooth process and a costly ordeal."

## About this survey

The LegalShield survey was conducted on April 26, 2024, and surveyed 1,218 adults, ages 18 and older, who live in the U.S. The sample was balanced by age, among other demographic variables, according to the U.S. Census.

## About LegalShield:

For more than 50 years, LegalShield has provided everyday Americans with easy and affordable access to legal advice, counsel, protection, and representation. Serving millions, LegalShield is one of the world's largest platforms for legal, identity, and reputation management services protecting individuals and businesses across North America. Founded in 1972, LegalShield, and its privacy management product, IDShield, has provided individuals, families, businesses, and employers with tools and services needed to affordably live a just and secure life. Through technology and innovation, LegalShield is disrupting the traditional legal system and transforming how and where people receive legal guidance and services, with access to thousands of qualified, trusted attorneys and law firms. LegalShield and IDShield are products of Pre-Paid Legal Services, Inc. To learn more about LegalShield and IDShield, visit LegalShield.com and IDShield.com.

If you have questions about legal shield or would like to sign up. Please contact Katrina Salokar at 239-470-5611 or to sign up or go online to: [www.multipleintelligent.legalshieldassociate.com](http://www.multipleintelligent.legalshieldassociate.com) 🐾



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**VOICES of LEHIGH**

# East Lee Communities Return To “The Season – 2025”



**Mike Welch | voicesoflehigh.com—We Want to Hear From You!**

Recently on January 6th the East Lee Chamber hosted the Annual Pre-Session Legislative Luncheon featuring our state senators and hosted by our own State Senator Kathleen Passidomo. The senator highlighted continued infrastructure improvements in our area as well as increased funding from the Legislature on our ever expanding schools particularly in East Lee County.

In addition the Chamber hosted along with the Lee County Office of Economic Development a “Break the Ice” Conference for the discussion or adequate drinking water supply going into the future. Growth demands that we look at this as a region. Held on the January 10th – the utility and water supply operators of the region came together under the chair of Senator Passidomo. She asked them to begin to form study groups on the local/regional situation as Florida takes a closer look into our needs. The Senator emphasized that solutions and the way forward come from local experience and contribute to sound policy. The group will come back with frameworks and an outline by the fall of 2025. Both the Lee EDO and the East Lee Chamber of Commerce will continue to coordinate the project.

Speaking of the Chamber – don’t forget the Chambers’ Annual Gala scheduled for Saturday, March 29th at the Plantation Golf & Country Club. Details to follow. 🐾

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# More Thoughts Regarding Porch Piracy



**Lee County Sheriff Carmine Marceno**

With the surge in online orders comes an obvious rise in the number of packages left on doorsteps and porches...and the number of villainous individuals plotting to pilfer your parcels.

A national news agency recently reported that an estimated 120 million packages...\$12 billion worth of online orders... were stolen in 2024. This practice of theft has become so common that there are a number of online videos depicting competing porch pirates attempting to steal the same package. Additionally, there have been reports of piracy victims chasing these criminals, only to be injured in the process.

While less convenient, and perhaps a bit more tedious, there are a number of mechanisms that online shoppers can use to either deter, or completely prevent, these thefts. In years past, we recommended video doorbells with the belief that thieves would never attempt to steal when the act would be captured on video. That theory has proven to be inaccurate as one can go online and view thousands of porch pirates captured on video by way of these doorbells.

Many online sellers offer an option to “require a signature.” This will ensure the safe delivery of your package, however, this may require a number of delivery attempts if you are not at home. Major online retailers offer some form of package tracking. Being aware of an anticipated delivery affords you the opportunity to be at home or to ask a neighbor to pick up the parcel. Online sellers, such as Amazon, allow you to choose a pickup location instead of your home address. Similarly, “Ship to Store” offers the same level of security. 🐾

# Happy New Year From Lehigh Community Services

**Lehigh Community Services**

This is always a very busy time for everyone, we’re thinking of the needs of our community and our own families. Your generosity helps us provide for the less fortunate in our area. Lehigh Community Services has been in existence over 47 years. And we serve over 50,000 vulnerable adults & children annually.

But, did you know we also make a dramatic financial impact on this community? We’ve had over a **million** dollars returned to this community for the last 10 years. You read that right, I said million. We manage this financial impact with the free income tax service we offer all year long. It’s not unusual to serve over 500 tax clients a month during tax season. It ain’t bragging if it’s true!

We have a vibrant Literacy program teaching people to read & write English. It’s inspiring. But we can always use more tutors. Our food pantry is a happening place. We serve clients by appointment on Mondays, Wednesdays, and the fourth Thursday of the month. We served over 12,000 children & adults in our food pantry so far this year. Meals on Wheels are distributed from our facility daily. They are prepared at Community Cooperative and delivered here for distribution. We also distribute baby & adult diapers. Did you know, we have a “homeless happy hour: daily from 1-2:pm? They receive cold sandwiches, chips/crackers fruit cups/bottled water, etc. are provided to the homeless, whatever we have available. Sandwich donations are always welcome! And we make available bread & sweets daily in our lobby from 1:pm-3:pm for anyone. This is very popular!

LCS has distributed over 350 Thanksgiving Baskets with the help of our partners. December was our annual Senior Christmas party at the Senior Center. We had contests: ugly sweater, crazy socks, and out of the world hats. Contest judges were the Lehigh Acres Fire & Rescue. It’s very festive event.

Our small staff, volunteers, and our board of directors make all this happen. Food stamp, Medicaid, & financial assistance occur weekly. I’m sure you understand our facility is well utilized. NO mortgage, & a 2 story food pantry. But like everyone else, our expenses rise faster than our revenue. Everything we do is FREE. So we need your help & resources to continue providing vital services to this community. We are able to serve, with the help of our partners like YOU. Rest assured you truly make a difference in our community, when you invest in Lehigh Community Services. Thank you in advance for your consideration!

**NOTE:** Our upcoming fundraiser is a Celebrity Waiter/Waitress Dinner being held on February, 8, 2025 at the Club in Gateway. We’d love to have you join us for this fun event. Please call our office at 239-369-5818 for more information. 🐾

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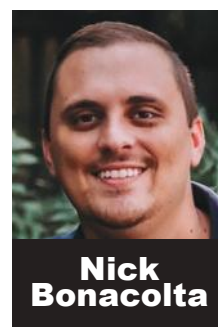
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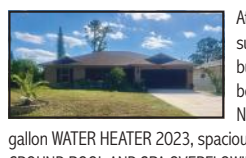


Brand New Home in Northeast Lehigh on a HALF ACRE LOT, MOVE-IN READY 3 BEDROOM 2 BATH WITH A DEN with a closet that may be used as 4th BEDROOM, CO HAS BEEN ISSUED, double door entry to the den for privacy, TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5" baseboards, impact resistant windows, covered front porch leads to large great room, high 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, glass tile backsplash, large dining area off of the kitchen, upgraded LED lighting throughout, spacious master bedroom with walk in closet, private bath with dual sinks and tiled walk in shower with glass tile accents, indoor laundry room, covered porch in the front as well as the rear overlooking the backyard, double garage with seal coated floors, extra long driveway with plenty of extra parking, excellent location on a quiet low traffic street just minutes to SR 80, I-75 and Ft Myers.

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

**3/3 BRAND NEW CONSTRUCTION-CITY WATER & SEWER**



Brand new construction built 2023, YOU CAN OWN YOUR OWN BRAND NEW HOME WITH 1837 SQUARE FEET OF LIVING AREA, UPGRADES GALORE WITH AN EXTRA FAMILY ROOM WITH PRIVATE THIRD BATHROOM FOR THIS PRICE, NOT TO MENTION CITY WATER AND SEWER. THESE ARE INDIVIDUAL UNITS. YOU OWN YOUR OWN SIDE, BRAND NEW, NEVER LIVED IN, excellent Mirror Lakes location, private low traffic location on a quiet dead end street, large covered front porch, open great room floor plan VOLUME CEILINGS THROUGHOUT with COFFERED CEILINGS, ceramic tile floors throughout with five inch baseboards, island/breakfast bar in kitchen with real wood cabinets, soft close doors and drawers, QUARTZ COUNTERTOPS, tile backsplash, large walk in butler's pantry with extra cabinets and countertop space, IMPACT RESISTANT WINDOWS AND SLIDERS, enclosed family room on the rear with a separate mini split AC system with private 3rd bathroom, excellent for guest or additional family members, master bedroom with coffered ceilings, large walk in closet, private bath with walk in shower with frameless glass door and dual sinks with plenty of vanity top area, 8 foot interior doors with brushed nickel hardware, open patio in the rear for grilling, plenty of room to add a pool on the back, indoor laundry room, double garage with opener and extra high door, READY FOR IMMEDIATE OCCUPANCY. C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED. Located just minutes to SR 82, I-75 and Ft Myers. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**OfferedAt.....\$349,900**

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**3 BR 2 BATH + DEN-UPGRADES GALORE**



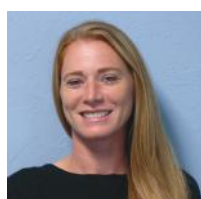
Upgrades galore! Huge 3 bedroom 2 bath home with a den that could be used as a 4th bedroom with a large screen porch in the back over looking a peaceful pond. New dimensional shingle roof in 2020, new AC unit in 2019, newer water heater in 2018, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER, Kitchen has been upgraded with elegant granite countertops and backsplash, built in cabinets, and newer stainless steel appliances. 2 large pantries. New wood laminate floors in the bedrooms, Large Master bedroom with walk in closet and sliding door access to the screened lanai, Spacious walk in shower in the master bathroom, Indoor laundry room with Washer and dryer included, Laundry tub in garage, garage floor has been sealed, guest bath has a shower/tub combo, Excellent location in a quiet neighborhood atmosphere just minutes to SR 82, I-75 and Ft Myers. No flood insurance required here. Lehigh is the highest elevation in Lee County.

**OfferedAt.....\$294,900**

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Property Manager



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- A MANAGEMENT PROGRAM THAT PROVIDES YOU WITH MONTHLY STATEMENTS & CHECKS
- END OF YEAR INCOME STATEMENTS & QUARTERLY INSPECTIONS

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