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An Open Letter To Alva: Grow What Matters

James Kennedy | East Lee Wildlife Stewardship Group



As Alva continues to grow, we need to ask ourselves deeper questions—not just what's possible but what's worth protecting and how we can preserve the quality of place that's special.

innovation, land stewardship, and community resilience. This isn't nostalgia. It is a strategy. It's about building a future that honors the land, sustains our economy, and keeps our community whole, well into the future.

Preservation isn't about standing still. It's about moving forward without losing our way.

There's no denying that change is coming to our corner of Lee County. Roads are widening and cutting new paths. New homes are springing up along pasture lines, in skeletal groves, and in once wild places. Traffic is painfully slow, where rumbling tractors were once the only reason for slowdowns. But for those of us who live here, not just to sleep, but to put down roots and raise families, this place means more than the sum of its parts.

If you're a long-time landowner, a homeowner, or someone who deliberately chose Alva for its quiet strength—its open fields, oak hammocks, and generational ties—you already understand what's at stake. Alva isn't just another name on the development docket. It's a living chapter of Florida's rural heritage, and we only get to write this chapter once.

There's a false narrative frequently echoed that communities like ours face a binary choice: either lock everything down in amber or open the floodgates to unchecked growth. But that's not the whole truth. We are not powerless in the face of development. We have choices. And those choices matter more now than ever.

The real challenge is to preserve Alva's rural soul while embracing the right kind of growth—growth rooted in agricultural

Imagine a future where our young people don't have to leave to make a living. Where they return home to farm on various scales, innovate, and build small businesses that enable them to control their destiny. We can make that possible by investing in micro-agriculture and regenerative farming practices that improve the land rather than degrade it. Think farm-to-table operations, heritage crop cultivation, and small-scale food production that serves our neighbors and protects our environment.

We should support the next generation of soil-based entrepreneurs—people who treat land as more than inventory and food as more than a commodity. This means building infrastructure for local farmers markets, food hubs, and agricultural co-ops that keep dollars in our community and put fresh produce on our tables.

Eco-tourism is another opportunity waiting to be cultivated. Our natural areas—our riverways, trails, wildlife corridors—can support guided tours, educational experiences, birding, and kayaking adventures. These aren't just leisure activities—they're economic drivers that align with our values and strengthen our identity.

A healthy, functioning greenbelt isn't a

barrier to progress. It's the foundation of it. It safeguards our water quality, provides natural storm buffers, supports wildlife, and increases property values over time. It makes Alva, Olga, Fort Denaud, and Buckingham something greater than ZIP codes. It's what makes them home—imbued with character and gifted with soul.

We do not have to rubber-stamp every upzoning request or density increase just because it's framed with buzzwords like "smart growth" or "mixed use." Many of which have been co-opted by an industry with a voracious disregard for the consequences of its lack of restraint. The truth is, sprawl isn't progress. It's the erosion of everything that drew people here in the first place.

If we're not intentional, we'll wake up one day surrounded by the same strip malls, gas stations, and cookie-cutter subdivisions that stretch from Miami to Tampa. And once we've paved over the last pasture or clear-cut the final stand of trees, we won't be able to get them back. No developer, no matter how well-meaning, can recreate what took nature centuries to grow.

Alva has something money can't manufacture: space, authenticity, and memory. And when you sell that off for a quick return, you're not just losing land—you're losing legacy. You're trading heritage for impermanence.

That's not just a bad deal—it's irreversible.

So let me be clear: I'm not against growth. I'm for the right kind of growth. Growth that respects the land. Growth that empowers working families and farmers. Growth that

preserves our history while creating a future worth inheriting.

I stand for growers and ranchers over speculators, community gardens over cul-de-sacs, and long-term legacy over short-term profit.

Let's not be the generation that gave Alva away. Let's be the ones who protected it and led it wisely into the future. That cultivated something stronger. That said, yes to what matters and no to what doesn't.

Let's preserve the rural fabric that makes this place more than just land. Let's grow smarter, not faster.

Because when the land is gone, it's gone.
And no developer can return it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Kennedy is a Florida-based photographer, U.S. Navy veteran, and offshore surveyor whose work at Tortoise Ranch Gallery captures the rugged beauty of Florida's rural landscapes and fading heritage. Deeply rooted in East Lee County, Kennedy blends art, advocacy, and storytelling to preserve his home state's wildlands, working communities, and historic character. A founding member of the East Lee Wildlife Stewardship Group and a contributor to East Lee County News and The Roar, he works to protect wildlife corridors, resist unsustainable sprawl, and amplify the voices of Florida's rural heart. His photography has been exhibited throughout Southwest Florida, offering a powerful visual record of what we stand to lose—and why it's worth fighting for. 🐾

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It’s So Dry Here Even The Tap Water Is Dehydrated.

The Cocoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society

Just when you think it can’t get any drier out there, it does.

At River Oaks Preserve in Estero—home to the Cocoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society—the north branch of the Estero River has stopped flowing. That’s more than just a warning sign. It’s a call to action: stop wasting water on lawns that were never meant for Florida’s climate.

Right now, you might see landscapes held together by irrigation alone. Exotic yards are being propped up by sprinklers, but many lawns are still browning where sprinkler heads are clogged or misaligned. It’s clear—our traditional lawn-and-irrigation model just doesn’t work here.

Meanwhile, native plant yards are surviving with little to no supplemental water. Yes, you read that right. Many native landscapes have

their irrigation systems completely turned off. And while even these plants can show signs of drought stress during dry spells, they’re built to endure. Some, like the Jamaica caper (*Quadralla jamaicensis*), are blooming beautifully, feeding pollinators and lifting spirits with their resilience.

Wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), often called an “indicator plant,” is another example. When it begins to wilt—especially in sunny spots—it’s a sign your whole yard might need water. But give it a drink, and it perks right up. Even now, the wild coffee planted in shade is blooming, offering nectar to pollinators and bright red berries for birds. The red fruit against the glossy green leaves even adds a festive touch.

So what can you do to create a yard that works with Florida instead of against it?

Start by cutting back on turfgrass. Most Florida lawns are planted with species like St. Augustine or bahiagrass—varieties that require constant irrigation, fertilizer, and pesticides to maintain their unnatural green carpet look. That effort comes with high environmental and financial costs.

Instead, try converting portions of your lawn into a “freedom lawn” or incorporating native groundcovers like frogfruit (*Phyla nodiflora*) or sunshine mimosa (*Mimosa strigillosa*). These plants thrive without irrigation, support pollinators, and offer food and shelter for wildlife. You’ll save money and enjoy a yard that’s both beautiful and functional.

You’ll also be building resilience. Native yards are better equipped to handle hurricanes and flooding. With deeper roots and stronger structure, they hold up better in extreme weather. And by avoiding chemi-

cals, you reduce risks to soil, water, and your health. Pesticides can harm beneficial insects, pollute waterways, and contribute to long-term ecological damage. Florida deserves better—and so do you.

You don’t need to go 100% native. Exotic plants can still have a place in your yard—use them as focal points where they can shine. But let Florida’s native flora do the heavy lifting. They’ve evolved here for a reason.

If you’re ready to learn more, visit River Oaks Preserve. This 12-acre property, owned by the Village of Estero and managed by the Cocoloba Chapter, offers trails, demonstration gardens, and a nursery full of native plants. It’s open Sundays and Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.—and it’s a great place to start building a yard that actually belongs in Florida. 🐾



Psychotria Nervosa



Coffee Plant, Coffea Arabica



Quadralla Jamaicensis Flower



Quadralla Jamaicensis Seed

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Far left, Monica Gow, Tyler Caggiano, Abby Briggs, Thomas Gow, David Gow, Jon Potokin, Chris Caggiano, Amy Caggiano, Patrick Lyden, Crystal Lyden.



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David vs. Goliath in Alva: Residents File Legal Challenge Against Controversial Duke-Cary-Povia Rezoning

Special to the East Lee County News

In a bold stand for rural preservation, residents of Alva have taken legal action to challenge a rezoning decision that threatens to forever alter the character of their historic community.

On March 5, 2025, the Lee County Commission voted to approve a massive rezoning request by Neal Communities to build 1,100 clustered housing units on nearly 800 acres of land along North River Road (CR 78). The approval allows for high-density development with 35- and 40-foot-wide lots — a striking departure from the rural standards Alva residents have fought to protect for generations.

In response, on Friday, April 4, 2025, attorney Ralf Brookes filed a Writ of Certiorari, a legal motion seeking to overturn the County Commission’s decision. This critical legal challenge, brought forth by concerned Alva residents, is rooted in one goal: to stop irresponsible overdevelopment before it irreversibly changes the soul of Alva.

A DEVELOPMENT OUT OF PLACE

The alarming deviations approved within the rezoning allows for:

- 4,300 sq. ft. lots, less than half the size of those in Lehigh Acres or Cape Coral
- Setbacks of just 5 feet, with equipment pads leaving only 6 inches from property lines
- Encroachments near Trout Creek, reducing required setbacks from 20 feet to 10 feet

These deviations from Lee County’s own development code are not just technicalities—they are dangerous departures from sound planning principles.

THE PEOPLE SPOKE. THE COUNTY DIDN’T LISTEN.

Throughout the rezoning process, hundreds of Alva residents attended hearings, submitted testimony, and provided significant insights on water management, infrastructure limits, traffic safety, and wildlife protection.

Despite this overwhelming public opposition, county staff and legal advisors sided with the developer. Then, in a move that many saw as a betrayal, the District 5 Commissioner — who represents Alva — made the motion to approve the rezoning, with Commissioner Hamman quote, “happily,” seconding the motion.

A BROKEN PROCESS?

Many are now questioning whether this process was ever fair:

- The same departments recommending approval answer to the commission itself.
- The developer’s lobbyist for this project is the campaign manager for four out of five commissioners.
- One commissioner’s private company had recently completed work for the developer near the rezoned site.
- Campaign donations from the developer flowed to the very commissioners who voted to approve the project.
- Neighbors reported being told by the developer’s reps that the decision was already made and they “shouldn’t bother showing up” to rezoning hearings. One Commissioner appointed the developer’s planning representative to the Lee County Development Code Advisory Committee, a board that exists to guide changes to zoning and development regulations in Lee County.

THE REAL COSTS

- This rezoning, if allowed to stand, will:
- Triple Alva’s population north of the river
 - Add thousands of vehicles to a fragile two-lane road with a history of serious accidents
 - Strain aging infrastructure, including a 65-year-old bridge and overburdened sewer systems
 - Increase water withdrawals during a time of growing scarcity
 - Endanger critical wildlife habitats and increase flood risks

This is not about preventing growth. It’s about ensuring sensible, sustainable development that protects lives, property, and the environment.

THE LEGAL FIGHT FOR ALVA’S FUTURE

The Writ of Certiorari seeks to restore accountability. It argues that the County Commission violated their obligation to protect public health, safety, and welfare by approving a project that does the opposite.

As of now, this legal challenge represents the most significant step Alva residents have taken to stand up against unchecked development.

COMMUNITY OVER CAMPAIGN CASH

Recently, other commissioners from neighboring counties have shown the courage to say NO to developers when projects are incompatible with responsible growth:

- Sarasota County rejected rezoning near the Celery Fields, 5–0.
- Fort Denaud residents defeated a mining

rezoning.

Lee County residents deserve the same level of integrity from their elected officials.

FROM THE FRONT LINES

“This isn’t just about Alva. It’s about the integrity of the entire development process in Lee County,” said one longtime resident. “When campaign cash outweighs community input, democracy is in danger.”

HELP US PROTECT ALVA

The community of Alva maintains that they are not anti-growth. They are pro-community. And they believe that Alva’s rural charm, heritage, and safety are worth protecting.

If you’d like to support the legal fight, please consider donating to the Protect Alva Fund through the green link at AlvaFL.org.

Questions? Email us at AlvaInc.FL@gmail.com

Let’s hold our leaders accountable. Let’s protect what makes Alva special.

To learn more about how you can protect Alva and support fair district representation in the next Lee County Commissioner election, see the article on page 6 for details and next steps.

In the latest example, Amanda Cochran, Board Member of Alva Inc., one of many committed to preserving the rural heart of Southwest Florida, was a recent candidate for Lee County Commission. She won District 5 with 65% of the vote but lost the election due to the county’s at-large voting system—a consequence of not having Single Member Voting Districts at the time. 🐾

Orange River, Then And Now: A Fisherman’s Tale Of Change And Hope

Captain Eddie Yerdon

I’ve been asked to share a little about the Orange River—and I suppose I’m qualified, having lived on it since 1966. Back then, it was some of the best bass fishing Florida had to offer. My dad used to row up and down the river to catch bream for dinner. Honestly, he didn’t have to go far—the fishing behind the house was just as good. But there’s something about a boat ride that makes the whole thing feel special.

The river was full of life. Bass, bream, and blue crab were abundant. My uncle always had traps set in the water. When the rains came—usually between May and July—he could pull in 18 to 20 crabs per trap in a single night. He built his own traps, too. Refrigerator racks worked great, though I can only imagine what he might have caught with the real deal.

But not all change is good.

When they built Harns Marsh, it altered everything. Saltwater started coming in, grasses vanished, and the marine life disappeared. The bream and bass fled upriver to places you just couldn’t reach anymore. I remember in 1987, I could catch 100 mullet in two throws of the net. They were delicious, if you soaked them overnight. My Uncle Harold used to smoke the best mullet around—people came from all over to taste it.

We had a favorite trick for catching the big snook—hook a bream under a bobber and wait. Kids like us camped out on the banks, using green tree frogs to catch yellow belly and channel catfish. And no, those weren’t saltwater cats back then—this was before Harns Marsh changed the flow.

But here’s the good news—something miraculous is happening. The river is starting to

come back to life.

The grasses are returning, and with them, the fish. New species too. Tilapia are thick in the water now (though they’re tricky to catch), and you can even find peacock bass from the Orange River Blvd bridge south toward the hut. Yes—south. The Orange River is one of the rare few in Florida that runs north.

More and more people are heading out to fish, and they’re catching big ones. Live shiners are still your best bet—bass, peacock, snook, they all love them. Head over to the bait shop in North Fort Myers at Pondella and Old 41. They’ve got everything you need. Find a shady spot, toss a shiner under a bobber, crack open your favorite drink, and enjoy the peace.

Bring a second rod too. Worms work great for cichlids and bream. And don’t be surprised

if a giant gar grabs on—that’s a fight you won’t forget. We’re even seeing more crabs again.

Back in the day, we’d tube from Lehigh to the house. That’s harder now with the dam, but when the rain comes heavy, the river still flows like it used to. The canopy overhead, the quiet banks, and the lack of houses—it’s pure tranquility.

We didn’t have fancy rods back then. Just real cane poles. Today’s kids will never know that kind of joy. They’ve got video games. We had the river. We were in the river. Catching turtles, walking the tracks to the trestles, and visiting friends along the way. That was the life.

And yeah, I miss it. Tight lines, everybody. 🐾



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Safer Roads Ahead: Lee County’s Plan To Save Lives

Katrina Salokar | East Lee County News

Lee County is working on a big new plan to make our roads safer for everyone — drivers, bike riders, and pedestrians. It’s called the Safe Streets for All Comprehensive Safety Action Plan, and it’s one of the most important transportation projects our community has ever taken on.

WHY THE PLAN IS NEEDED

Over the last five years, there were more than 500 fatal crashes and over 2,400 serious injury crashes in Lee County. That means almost nine people die every month on our roads. These aren’t just numbers — they represent friends, neighbors, and family members.

Each crash also comes with a big cost to the community — from emergency response to medical care and property damage. Experts estimate the yearly cost of these crashes is nearly \$2 billion.

WHAT THE PLAN DOES

With support from federal funding and the help of local governments, this plan lays out a strategy to make our roads safer through:

- Better road designs: Narrower lanes, more sidewalks, and safer intersections.
- Improved lighting: Many crashes happen at night, especially for people walking or biking.
- Slower speeds: Lowering speed limits and using roundabouts or stop signs to slow traffic.
- Public education: Teaching people about road safety, especially young drivers and families.
- Smarter enforcement: Using technology like speed signs or cameras in high-risk areas.

The goal is simple but powerful: zero deaths on Lee County roads.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Most deadly crashes happen on county and local roads, not highways. Dangerous places include areas where people walk or bike but there aren’t enough crosswalks or sidewalks. Roads with speed limits of 40–45 mph are especially dangerous for pedestrians and bicyclists.

A special map called the High Injury Net-

work (HIN) was created to show where most serious crashes happen. These locations will get attention first.

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

Planners didn’t just look at numbers — they talked to people. Over four major stakeholder meetings and two public events, local leaders, police, health workers, and residents shared stories, ideas, and concerns.

Kids waiting for school buses in unsafe spots, drivers ignoring stop signs, and families losing loved ones were all part of the conversation. Community members asked for better lighting, more crosswalks, and safer school zones.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR LEE COUNTY’S SAFE STREETS PLAN?

1. Public Input Opportunities: An in-person public workshop took place on Tuesday, May 13, 2025, from 5:00 to 7:00 PM at Lakes Regional Library – Meeting Room A, 15290 Bass Road, Fort Myers, FL 33919. If you were not there, you can still share your thoughts through

an online survey at leempo.com. The virtual room and survey will stay open through the end of 2025.

2. Finalizing the Safety Action Plan: Lee County’s Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is working to finish the plan using crash data, public feedback, and expert advice. Draft versions of the plan will be reviewed in MPO meetings in May 2025.
3. Applying for Federal Implementation Grants: Once the plan is finished, Lee County can apply for federal Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Implementation Grants. These grants help fund actual construction, education programs, and safety changes.
4. Monitoring Progress: The MPO has created a crash data dashboard to track progress and evaluate if the changes are making roads safer.

Lee County’s future doesn’t have to be shaped by traffic tragedies. With strong community support, smart planning, and bold action, we can create a county where safety is the rule, not the exception. Every safer road we build is a promise kept to the people who live, work, and travel here every day. 🐾

Freedom Fest 2025 – Sponsor The Spirit Of Lehigh

Special to the East Lee County News

Freedom Doesn’t Come From Washington—it Starts in Your Backyard.

Freedom starts in your home, your neighborhood, and your town. It begins when families make their own choices, when small businesses serve their neighbors and create jobs in Southwest Florida, and when local communities stand together to protect what’s theirs. That’s real freedom.

That’s the spirit of Lehigh Acres—a vibrant, hardworking, multi-ethnic, multi-generational community that powers Lee County. From nurses and tradesmen to entrepreneurs and educators, Lehigh is where liberty lives in action.

This Independence Day, we’re inviting you to be part of something bigger than a celebration. Be part of Freedom Fest 2025—an unforgettable, family-friendly event that brings over 2,000 locals together for live music, community fun, local businesses, food vendors, and a spectacular fireworks finale at Victory Town Center.

This is more than an event. It’s a statement: We believe in freedom—and we’re willing to invest in it.

A CELEBRATION OF LEHIGH’S HEARTBEAT

Freedom Fest isn’t just another festival. It’s a free event powered by local sponsors and grassroots support, co-hosted by Victory Church and the Southwest Florida Business Alliance. It reflects everything that makes Lehigh special—patriotism, family, community, and a connection to our local businesses. Families gather, kids laugh, music plays, and fireworks light up the sky.

But with our community growing year after year, we need new partners to keep the momentum going and ensure this celebration stays free and accessible to everyone.

WHY SPONSOR FREEDOM FEST 2025?

- Be seen by thousands of Southwest Florida families

- Align your brand with values that matter: freedom, family, and faith
- Support local vendors and artists who make our community vibrant
- Gain recognition on stage, online, in print, and in our press coverage

Make a real impact that your customers and neighbors will remember

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Lee County Leaders Champion Government Reform with HB 4001

Push for Single-Member Districts Heads to Governor’s Desk

Special to the East Lee County News

A significant reform effort to reshape how Lee County voters choose their local leaders is now one step away from becoming law. House Bill 4001 (HB 4001), a measure designed to bring single-member district elections to the Lee County Commission, has successfully passed both chambers of the Florida Legislature. It now awaits the signature of Governor Ron DeSantis.

Spearheading the effort are State Representative Mike Giallombardo, Lee County Property Appraiser Matt Caldwell as a private citizen, and lending support are the non partisan Southwest Florida Business Alliance (SWFLBA.com)—a coalition of civic-minded business leaders advocating for fairer representation in local government and the non partisan League of Women Voters - Lee County Chapter.

What Are Single-Member Districts?

Currently, Lee County voters elect all five county commissioners in countywide races. That means voters in Cape Coral help decide who represents Lehigh Acres—and vice versa. HB 4001 seeks to change that by switching to a single-member district system, where each voter would only cast a ballot for the commissioner representing

their own district.

“This is about accountability and local control,” said Matt Caldwell. “Under the current system, communities can be overruled by voters who don’t live there. Single-member districts ensure residents are heard and represented fairly.”

This is not a new or radical idea. In fact, single-member districts are already the standard for electing our representatives in both the Florida Legislature and the U.S. Congress. Every Floridian votes only for the House and Senate members representing their local district, ensuring local control and geographic accountability. HB 4001 simply applies that same principle to the Lee County Commission.

If the Governor signs, HB 4001 will place the question of adopting single-member districts on the 2026 general election ballot. Voters will then decide whether to modernize the way Lee County elects its commissioners, bringing it in line with most large counties across Florida.

Representative Mike Giallombardo has said that his motivation for advancing single-member districts stems from a desire

to ensure all residents, especially those in unincorporated parts of Lee County, have a more decisive say in who represents them. He noted that many constituents have expressed feeling overlooked or voiceless under the current countywide voting system. “This is your government, your vote, your voice,” Giallombardo said. “Together, we’re making Lee County more accountable—one district at a time.”

A GRASSROOTS COALITION

The Southwest Florida Business Alliance played an aggressive role in rallying public support behind the bill. “This was a community-led movement,” said SWFLBA founder Katrina Salokar. “Business leaders, local officials, and everyday residents all stood up for better government. It’s been a powerful thing to witness.” On March 26, Katrina Salokar and Alva Inc. member, James Whitney Jr. of Alva, FL, traveled to Tallahassee to deliver testimony before the House Intergovernmental Affairs Subcommittee, where HB 4001 passed unanimously. The bill then advanced through the full House with a vote of 94 YEAS to 11 NAYS on April 24, and passed the Senate with a unanimous 36-0 vote on April 30.

A BROAD COALITION OF SUPPORT

In addition to local officials and business leaders, the movement has drawn support from nonpartisan civic organizations such as the League of Women Voters. Marsha Ellis, a representative of the League’s Lee County chapter, praised the legislation as a vital step toward fair representation. “*This is about giving people a true voice in who represents them,*” said Ellis. “*The League of Women Voters has long advocated for single-member districts because they empower communities and improve transparency.*”

As the bill heads to the Governor’s desk, organizers are urging residents to stay involved.

HOW TO TAKE ACTION

The Southwest Florida Business Alliance is building a contact list of supporters to be notified of the next steps and future calls to action.

Visit www.swflba.com to sign up and stay informed. Then, click on the Single Member Districts Link to proceed. 🐾

Celebrate Responsible Pet Guardian Month This May!

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

Check out these 6 simple ways to be the best guardian your pet could ask for.

1. FEED A HEALTHY DIET

Feeding a healthy diet is an important part of being a responsible pet guardian. The diet should be nutritionally balanced and complete and contain the right mix of essential vitamins and minerals your pet needs to stay healthy.

2. PROTECT YOUR PETS FROM PARASITES

Routine deworming, heartworm prevention and prevention of flea and tick infestations are an important part of maintaining your pets overall general health. These parasites can cause significant decrease in the health of your pet.

3. TEND TO YOUR PETS’ EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Understanding your pet’s individual needs and creating a supportive and stimulating environment is crucial for their emotional well-being. Focus on providing a secure and predictable environment, engaging in quality time and activities, and fostering a strong bond through positive interactions. Include establishing routines, ensuring they are physically healthy, and addressing any signs of stress or anxiety.

Dedicate specific times each day to playtime activities or just be present with your pet and provide petting or cuddling to promote relaxation and decrease stress and anxiety.

4. PROVIDE YOUR PETS WITH REGULAR, BREED APPROPRIATE EXERCISE

Routine exercise provides several mental and physical benefits that lead to a longer, happier and healthier life for your pet. Benefits

of exercise include healthy weight control, improved digestion, decreased behavioral problems and aids in removal of toxins from the body which may cause premature aging. Exercise also releases those “feel good” hormones, just like us, which help to produce a sense of calmness in our pets.

5. FIND A GREAT VETERINARIAN

Look for a qualified veterinarian who will provide your pet with a high standard of care. It’s important to find someone whose approach and beliefs align with your own. When meeting with potential vets, ask about their vaccination protocols, perspectives on alternative medicine, and any specific health concerns you have about your pet.

You’ll be building a long-term relationship with your veterinarian, so it’s essential to choose someone you trust—someone who will advocate for your pet’s health throughout their life.

6. INCLUDE YOUR PET IN YOUR WILL

Most of us expect to outlive our pets, but it’s important to plan for the unexpected. If something were to happen to you, would your furry companions be protected?

Our final tip for being a responsible pet guardian is to include your pets in your will. We recommend choosing at least two trusted friends or family members who are willing to care for your pets if you’re no longer able to. It’s also wise to set aside an emergency fund to help ease the financial responsibility of their care.

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.

CORRECTION NOTICE

In past issues, we mistakenly listed Dr. Veja Tillman’s credentials as “DMV” instead of “DVM.” Our sincerest apologies go to Dr. Tillman for this error and any unintended disrespect to the veterinary profession. We truly appreciate the dedicated care veterinarians provide for our beloved furry friends, and we care very much about the integrity of our work. 🐾



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Victory for Buckingham: Orange River Road Property Preserved Through Conservation 20/20

Katrina Salokar | East Lee County News

In a landmark victory for conservation and community advocacy, Lee County Commissioners voted unanimously on April 1, 2025, to purchase 129.56 acres of ecologically significant land in Buckingham for \$10.5 million. This acquisition, part of the county's Conservation 20/20 program, marks the culmination of a 30-year grassroots effort led by the Buckingham Community Association to preserve the area's rural character and natural habitats.

A LONGSTANDING FIGHT FOR PRESERVATION

The land, situated southeast of Orange River Boulevard and Staley Road, had been under threat from development proposals aiming to construct over 250 homes. Residents expressed concerns about potential impacts on wildlife, increased flooding, and the loss of the community's rural essence. Notably, the area is home to diverse ecosystems, including mesic hammock, pine flatwoods, and basin swamps, which serve as habitats for species like bears, panthers, and eagles.

Don Blackburn, who initiated the Buckingham Community Rural Preserve in 1990, emphasized the community's dedication: "We want to keep

the integrity intact, and that's why we fight so hard to keep that."

CONSERVATION 20/20: PROTECTING LEE COUNTY'S NATURAL HERITAGE

Established in 1996 and reaffirmed by 84% of voters in 2016, the Conservation 20/20 program is Lee County's initiative to acquire and manage environmentally sensitive lands. To date, the program has conserved over 30,000 acres, ensuring the protection of water resources, wildlife habitats, and recreational spaces for future generations.

The recent Buckingham acquisition underwent rigorous evaluation by the Conservation Land Acquisition and Stewardship Advisory Committee (CLASAC), which recommended the purchase despite the price exceeding the highest appraisal by \$390,000. County Land Director Robert Clemens justified the investment, citing the property's high ecological value and the urgency to secure it for conservation.

COMMUNITY VOICES: REFLECTIONS ON A HARD-WON VICTORY

Don Blackburn: *"I still can't believe it happened because it's been something in the works for 35 years, and I'm just very pleased about it, so happy."*

Nancy Hutto: *"There's not many rural areas around Fort Myers anymore. East Lee County and Alva are pretty much it."*

Terri Lodge: *"There are bear tracks here, panthers, and eagles. It is a big important piece of property to Buckingham."*

LOOKING AHEAD: STEWARDSHIP AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

With the land now under county ownership, plans are underway to integrate it into the broader network of preserves managed by the Conservation 20/20 program. This will involve developing stewardship strategies to maintain the area's ecological integrity, potentially including habitat restoration and the creation of passive recreational opportunities like hiking and birdwatching.

The Buckingham Community Association's success serves as a testament to the power of sustained civic engage-

ment in shaping local environmental policy. As the community celebrates this hard-won victory, it also sets a precedent for future conservation efforts in Lee County and beyond.

For more information on the Conservation 20/20 program and upcoming public meetings, visit the official Lee County website: www.leegov.com/parks/conservation2020 🐾



Buckingham Community Association Celebrated Its 75th Anniversary At The Buckingham Blues Bar



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Alva Equestrian 15 Acre River Ranch in Southern Olde Florida design. This is a custom-built two-story (Daniel Wayne home). The Main house features 4 elegantly designed bedrooms and 5 bathrooms. The home has over 5,000 square feet of living area in the main house and 9,000 square feet of total area.

The main residence includes a large open eat-in kitchen with butcher block island, double ovens, travertine tile backsplash, granite countertops, and large windows and French doors that deliver scenic River views from nearly every room. The family room, with wood burning fireplace, features expansive picture windows which maximize the panoramic river view from nearly every angle. The home is paired with beautiful hardwood floors and natural stone travertine throughout. The primary bedroom suite is drenched in sunlight coming in from wall-to-wall windows along the open-style solarium sitting room. More than a house ~ this is a home. Lounge on the Southern-style wrap around porch or relax by the pool and jacuzzi.

Stroll down the brick walkway to the boat dock situated along the Hickey's Creek natural inlet. Enjoy the boat & yachts cruising down the intracoastal while sitting by the custom built fire pit just feet from the water's edge. Visit the equestrian facility & have coffee in the barn house while feeding the horses. The 8 stalls & the AC tack room give you ample room to run the barn business. Trail ride under the shade of Spanish moss covered oaks and Florida palm trees on 15 Acres of equestrian trails. The barn, post and beam construction, is outfitted with air conditioned tack room, and one bedroom/one bath living quarters above.

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Still Rooted: The State of Caladium Farming in Lake Placid, Florida

Katrina Salokar | East Lee County News

Lake Placid, Florida—once the undisputed “Caladium Capital of the World”—still proudly honors its colorful legacy. Tucked in Highlands County, this small town once produced 95% of the world’s caladium bulbs. While the industry has shrunk, its roots run deep, sustained by resilience, family tradition, and cautious optimism.

From a peak of over 30 farms, only seven remain today. Loss of generational interest, rising land costs, and new agricultural pursuits, have reshaped the landscape. Yet, a handful of determined growers continue to cultivate caladiums in the region’s fertile muck soil, keeping the legacy alive.

Each summer, the town celebrates its heritage at the Caladium Festival, this year on July 25th through July 27th, showcasing blooming fields and honoring generations of growers. Among them is Lake Country Farms, Inc., led by siblings Stephanie Sapp and David Harrison, who are third generation farmers. Their grandparents and parents, Lamar and Joyce Harrison, began on two acres in the 1960’s. Today, the farm exports bulbs internationally. During our visit, Stephanie shared a little bit about Caladium farming and her insights on the evolving industry and the hope that still grows in Lake Placid’s fields.

Q&A: STEPHANIE SAPP OF LAKE COUNTRY FARMS ON TODAY’S CALADIUM INDUSTRY

Q: Are caladiums still in demand?

A: Absolutely. Garden clubs, landscapers, and plant lovers still love caladiums. It’s a hardy, beautiful plant that adds color to any space. But they don’t multiply like other bulbs—you have to replant them each year. Larger digging bulbs will come back for three to four years, where the ground does not freeze.

Q: What’s the best way to plant caladiums at home?

A: Store bulbs in a warm, dry place until the soil reaches about 70°F. Then just plant them a few inches deep. They’re low-maintenance and love Florida weather. In most parts of Florida they will not freeze so you can leave them in the ground.

Q: Are jumbo bulbs worth the extra cost?

A: Definitely for landscapers. They have more eyes and produce more foliage. (“Eyes” are spots on a bulb where new leaves grow.) They’re robust and last longer—three to four years, while smaller ones may last just a season.

Q: What happens to smaller bulbs?



Vista Views Lake Country Caladium Farm



Caladiums of Lake Placid

A: They’re typically used for seed. These bulbs are reserved for planting next season and play a crucial role in sustaining production.

Q: What’s involved in drying bulbs after harvest?

A: After washing, bulbs drip-dry and are loaded into heat rooms where warm air is circulated to dry them thoroughly. It takes about 10–14 days depending on the time of year, temperature and humidity.

Q: What is de-eyeing and why is it done?

A: De-eyeing, is the removal of the main eye from a bulb to force smaller eyes to grow. This results in a fuller plant with more uniform foliage. Not every variety should be de-eyed.

Q: How do growers handle labeling and inventory tracking?

A: Each trailer is tagged and tracked through washing, drying, and packaging to maintain variety integrity and avoid mix-ups.

Q: What happens to extra bulbs?

A: We sell all that we can then at the end of the season, we donate them to FFA groups, donate to the local museums for fundraisers, and give them away to friend and family. The smallest bulbs are saved for next year’s seed. Not too much really goes to waste here.

Q: How does weather affect farming?

A: It’s everything. One year it’s too wet, another too dry. We’ve had storms flood fields and even fires in drought years. Every season, you adjust.

Q: Do weather conditions affect shipping schedules?

A: Absolutely. Bulbs can’t be shipped in temperatures below 50°F unless in heated trucks. Timing is crucial, especially for customers who require bulbs by February.

Q: How are bulbs shipped internationally?

A: Bulbs are shipped by air and sea freight to destinations like Holland and Puerto Rico. Shipments are routed through hubs like Miami and Tampa, depending on urgency and destination.

Q: Why is soil fumigation important to growing?

A: It helps eliminate nematodes and disease in the soil, creating a healthy environment for the next planting cycle.



Stephanie (Harrison) Sapp, Lamar Harrison, David Harrison



Bulbs for sale for a donation at Lake Placid Historic Society Depot and Museum

Q: How do farmers maintain fallow land to grow in?

A: They plant sorghum to prevent weed growth and replenish the soil’s nutrients. It’s an essential part of sustainable farming in the off-season.

Q: Why has Lake Placid seen a decline in caladium production?

A: A mix of things—land has become more expensive, and there’s a shortage of younger generations wanting to farm. Regulations have also gotten tougher, especially for international shipping. Some of our best land was bought out by people growing palms or other crops.

Q: Why did some farms close despite strong sales?

A: It’s mostly generational. Kids grow up and want different careers. Some farms pay themselves too much money and don’t leave enough in the bank for the next year when crops didn’t make. My grandfather always said, “You’ve got to save seed!” and that applies to many different things.

Q: What’s the biggest hurdle you face today?

A: Labor. We rely heavily on seasonal help. If immigration policies are not fixed and workers can’t return, we’re in trouble. It’s hard, dirty work—and not many locals want to do it.

Q: What challenges do growers face with big-box retailers?

A: Large retailers often control delivery schedules, pricing, and payment terms—sometimes only paying for what actually sells. This creates challenges for growers who must ship perishable goods without guaranteed returns. Additionally, retailer-imposed timelines, price points, and packaging requirements don’t always align with optimal bulb quality or seasonal timing. When customers have poor results due to early planting or subpar bulbs, it can damage both consumer trust and the industry’s reputation.

Q: What’s changed most in the industry?

A: Collaboration. Back in the day, it was competitive—growers didn’t share much. Now, with fewer of us, we work together more. We refer customers to each other, share bulk orders, and try to support one another however we can.

Q: Are there efforts to form a growers’ association?

A: There have been past attempts, but growers were too competitive to cooperate. Today, fewer farms have fostered better relationships, making cooperation more feasible.

Q: Are there still opportunities in caladium farming?

A: Yes. People are buying plants again, especially post-COVID. We’re also experimenting with hybrids—new colors, better disease resistance. And exports are still strong. We ship to Holland, Puerto Rico, and Italy.

THE FUTURE: CAN LAKE PLACID REMAIN THE CALADIUM CAPITAL OF THE WORLD?

As land values rise and younger generations pursue new careers, the future of caladium farming faces uncertainty. Yet, there is still time—time to invest in soil health, preserve farmland, and foster cooperation among the remaining growers. Industry groups, marketing innovations, and perhaps a renewed growers’ cooperative could offer new momentum.

Looking ahead, opportunities extend beyond Florida’s borders. Southwest Florida’s infrastructure is undergoing significant enhancements that could benefit the caladium industry:

- **Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW):** A \$1.1 billion Terminal E expansion is underway, aiming to increase passenger capacity and modernize facilities. This expansion is expected to accommodate an additional 10,000 to 15,000 passengers daily, enhancing the airport’s capacity for both passenger and cargo traffic.
- **Airglades International Airport (AIA):** Located in Hendry County, AIA is being developed into a \$300 million cargo hub, designed to handle perishable goods imported primarily from Latin America. The facility will feature a new 10,000-foot runway and provide services for international floral importers and domestic growers under one roof.

These developments open doors to new international markets, particularly in South America, where interest in ornamental plants is growing. The Latin American floriculture market is projected to reach USD 6.93 billion by 2029, growing at a CAGR of 7.40% from 2024 to 2029.

Strategic research into consumer trends, climate compatibility, and retail partnerships in countries like Colombia, Brazil, and Chile could help Florida’s growers reclaim global dominance and extend the caladium’s legacy to new corners of the world.

Lake Placid’s story isn’t just about plants—it’s about people, perseverance, and pride. As long as there are hands willing to dig, bulbs willing to grow, and hearts willing to believe, caladiums will continue to color the world from one small town in Florida. The roots run deep, and the future—like the fields in bloom—remains full of promise. 🐾

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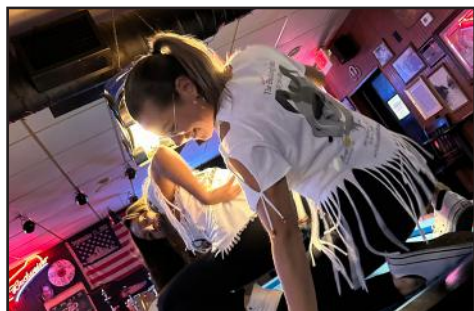
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Katrina, Paula and Heather



Michelle and Keith



Roger wishing Jamie Happy Birthday



Paddy and Tim

More Photos Online at EastLeeNews.com

Reel Paradise: Southwest Florida In The Movies

Arthur Ingram

Southwest Florida may not be Hollywood East, but it's carved out a quirky place in cinema history. From swamps to sandy shores, our landscapes have hosted everything from thrillers to cult comedies. Whether you're a native or still learning the local lingo, here's a peek at the region's reel legacy.

We start with *Adaptation* (2002), where Nicolas Cage and Meryl Streep venture into the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve—swampy, strange, and undeniably Floridian. Just as unorthodox, *Hoot* (2006) adapts Carl Hiaasen's kid-lit

with sun-drenched shots of Boca Grande and enough mischief to make environmentalism fun.

For slapstick lovers, *Gone Fishin'* (1997) lures Joe Pesci and Danny Glover into chaotic misadventures around Marco Island and Fort Myers. If noir's more your flavor, *Palmetto* (1998) turns Charlotte County into a sunlit stage for scams and suspense starring Woody Harrelson.

Oscar-winning *Blue Sky* (1994) brings drama to North Captiva and Fort My-

ers, while *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) borrows Captiva's South Seas Resort as a stand-in for the Deep South. Even thrillers like *Just Cause* (1995) use our coastlines to add tension and beauty in equal measure.

Cape Coral's oddest moment might be *The Fat Spy* (1966), a surreal musical mess starring Jayne Mansfield—best enjoyed with a sense of humor (and perhaps a cocktail). For something grittier, look no further than *Day of the Dead* (1985), which transformed downtown Fort Myers into a zombie apocalypse.

In every case, Southwest Florida does more than serve as a backdrop—it becomes a character. Next time you're strolling Sanibel or cruising through Alva, remember: Hollywood's been here, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arthur Ingram is a pseudonym representing AI-human collaboration in Southwest Florida. Article prompted and fact-checked by Trey English. 🐾

The Rooster's Report: Fresh Finds & Tasty Times

Tyler and Trevor Bear | Roosters Produce

It's heating up, and so is the flavor at Rooster's Produce on Route 80! This month, we're rolling out new picks, farm-fresh favorites, and food truck delicacies that'll have your mouth watering.

What's Sprouting:

- U-Pick Black-Eyed Peas – Head out to the field and pick your own! Great for summer sides, soups, or freezing.
- Brandywine Tomatoes – Heirloom beauties from our garden. Big, bold, and perfect for slicing.
- Local Sweet Corn – Crisp, juicy, and grill-ready.
- Coconuts & Fresh Mint – For a refreshing drink on a hot day try a mint juleps and tropical refreshment.
- Watermelons from Hanshaw Farms – Ripe and ready to slice!
- Georgia Peaches – Sweet Southern charm in every bite.

- Local Blueberries – Bursting with flavor from Blueberry Bunch Farm.
- Foliage Combos & Bougainvilleas – Brighten up your porch or patio.
- Farm-Fresh Eggs – A colorful variety from local partners like Altamont Farms and Cypress Creek.
- Taco Truck (Check us on Facebook) – Fresh, bold flavors.
- Wood-Fired Pizza by Fired Up Pizza at Sweet Cypress Farm – Hot, smoky, and handmade.
- Fresh-Squeezed Lemonade – A cool sip while you shop.

Come out, bring the family, and make a day of it—local flavor, friendly faces, and all the summer goodness you can carry! Support Local, Eat Fresh, Feel Good!

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2 + DEN / 2+ BATH TOWNHOME IN GATEWAY



Popular Villages of Stoneybrook, NO AGE RESTRICTIONS HERE, PETS OK, 2+Den/2+ Bath 1400+sf Townhome in GATEWAY. Enjoy all that Gateway Living has to offer! Huge HEATED POOL w/ Wading Pool for Kids, Soccer, Playgrounds, Basketball, Walking/Biking/Running Trails, Shops, Dining, Sports. The association put NEW TILE ROOFS ON IN 2024. Impeccable Condition: HVAC new in 2015* New 1st Floor LUXURY VINYL PLANK FLOORS 2019* New Sparkling Stainless Steel Appliances 2019* New Washer/Dryer 2019* New Disposal 2020 - Thousands of \$ in Beautiful updates/upgrades The Village of Stoneybrook is a Gated Community with Pool/Play Area/Pet Friendly. This condo has in-home 2nd floor Washer/Dryer, private ensuite bath in primary bedroom with Great Flex Space: Den/Office/ Loft/ Extra Guest Area. Third half bath located on the first floor for guests, Enjoy Morning Coffee or Sunset Cocktails on the Western-Facing Screened Lanai with Private Landscaped Preserve View. Super low HOAs include water and sewer. Golf Memberships available @nearby "The Club at Gateway". LOCATION? Quick to I-75, SWF International Airport and FGCU. Speaking of SCHOOLS? Choose from Charter, Public & Private Schools nearby. HEY SPORTS FANS! JetBlue Park at FENWAY SOUTH is "just around the corner." NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED.

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