

## EAST LEE COUNTY NEWS | DANIELS CORRIDOR

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### Why HJR 207 Is the Smartest Step Toward Property Tax Relief

Matt Caldwell | Lee County Property Appraiser



This week (November 17th, 2025) the House considered eight bills (seven constitutional amendments and a general bill) for property tax reform. While there are pros and cons to each of the proposals, HJR 207 stands out as

the best proposal to increase the savings to homestead property owners. This proposes to create a third homestead exemption of 25%, above the two existing \$25,000 exemptions. When the original homestead was adopted in 1934, every homeowner received a \$5,000 exemption on the value of their property for ad valorem taxation; at a time where the average home value was around \$4,000. The purpose was clear: to make homeownership tax free for nearly every Florida resident! However, in 1934, we were barely dreaming of a public highway system; today, just our cities and counties maintain roughly 110,000 lane miles. Public works such as water, sewers, libraries, parks, mosquito control(!); the list goes on and on. These were either mostly private functions or completely non-existent. Suffice it to say that it was far easier to balance a budget without taxes when there were no public services.

So where does that leave us? Just on inflation, that would mean a base exemption of \$125,000. But frankly, this just won't work, as inflation will continue to rob us of value moving forward and for our rural counties, they will immediately become dependent on state budget transfers to operate their core functions. Therefore, the simplest solution is to convert the homestead benefit to a percentage basis. In so

doing, we eliminate the inflation tax and bring equity between our rural and urban counties. The House proposal is for 25% as a third "layer of cake", but it still excludes the school taxes from being affected, as well as creates a new constitutional mandate for law enforcement. In tax policy, the simpler is always better. To that end, a major improvement would be to drop the new mandates, make the homestead apply to every property tax line, including schools, and to simplify the percentage homestead in a way that also doesn't retrograde the benefit on homes with less than \$200,000 in value.

There are still more innovative ideas to explore, such as Milton Friedman's "least bad tax", being the land value tax wherein improvements (houses, barns, docks, etc.) are not taxed at all, only the land underneath. Or for example, Speaker Perez recently raised the issue of structural government reform. When one considers that Florida has five water management districts, seven FDOT districts, 20 judicial circuits, 67 counties, over 400 cities, and thousands of special districts, no one can seriously contest that the potential to reduce duplication of services and distinguish between general revenue taxes and tax for service must exist. Comprehensive restructuring of this magnitude will have to wait for another article. In the meantime, HJR 207 provides an incredibly powerful starting point for homestead property tax reform, and I am hopeful that this concept will gain greater traction in the coming months.

#### ABOUT MATT CALDWELL

Matt Caldwell currently serves as the elected Lee County Property Appraiser

and served in the Florida House of Representatives from 2010-2018.

*The following section was prepared by Editor Katrina Salokar to expand on how this proposal affects Lee County homeowners. Matt Caldwell's original article concludes above.*

#### WHAT THIS MEANS TO YOU

For Lee County homeowners, the takeaway is straightforward: real, measurable property tax relief is within reach. HJR 207 would provide a third homestead exemption based on a percentage of value instead of a fixed amount. This matters because fixed-dollar exemptions lose ground to inflation every year. A percentage exemption grows as values rise, protecting homeowners in a way the original 1934 homestead never anticipated.

For families on fixed incomes, for working homeowners trying to keep up with rising costs, and for residents in both rural and urban areas, this approach creates a fairer and more predictable system. It restores the original purpose of the homestead exemption, keeping homeownership stable, affordable, and secure, while recognizing the demands of a modern Florida with far more public infrastructure than existed in the 1930s.

If the Legislature adopts a percentage-based exemption that applies across all property tax lines, including schools, homeowners would see a system that is simpler, more transparent, and more equitable from one county to the next. In practical terms, it means keeping more of your income, maintaining your home with less strain, and benefiting from a policy

designed to meet today's realities rather than those of ninety years ago.

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

If you believe Florida's homestead exemption should reflect the world we live in today, not the world of 1934, this is the moment to engage. HJR 207 is still moving through the legislative process, and lawmakers pay close attention when residents speak clearly and respectfully about policies that affect their families and their community.

Here are meaningful actions you can take:

- Contact your state representatives to express support for a percentage-based homestead exemption that keeps pace with inflation.
- Encourage them to strengthen the proposal by applying the exemption to every property tax line, including school taxes, and by removing mandates that add unnecessary complexity or shift burdens between jurisdictions.
- Share this information with neighbors, civic groups, and community organizations so more homeowners understand how significant this reform could be.

Reform of this scale does not happen automatically. It requires informed Floridians making their voices heard. If adopted, this proposal could deliver long-term relief for Lee County homeowners and help modernize the state's property tax system for decades to come.

To stay updated as HJR 207 progresses, visit [www.swflba.com](http://www.swflba.com) and sign up for alerts. 🐾

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# Amanda Cochran Officially Files for Lee County Commission District 5

East Lee County News Staff



Amanda Cochran has officially filed for the Lee County Commission District 5 seat, building on months of community encouragement and a renewed commitment to public service. Her filing follows the submission of her application to Governor Ron DeSantis for appointment to the same seat, a decision she respectfully awaits. Yet, as Cochran emphasized, her dedication to the people of Lee County “has not wavered for a moment.”

Her renewed campaign formally began that very morning, on Thursday, November 20th, 2025, when she filed for the Lee County Commission District 5 seat. That evening, she shared the news publicly at the SWFL Business Alliance, Community-Wide Thanksgiving hosted jointly by the

Building Industry Alliance and the Custom Home Builders Association. An overflowing amount of business owners, professionals, community leaders, tradesmen, and residents gathered on the idyllic back porch of the Buckingham Blues Bar, where string lights hung above a long community table and Bones Southern Pride Barbecue helped set a warm, welcoming tone. It was in this setting, among the people who help drive East Lee County’s civic and economic life, that Cochran announced the start of her campaign, a moment met with genuine enthusiasm and applause.

Both the Building Industry Alliance and the Southwest Florida Business Alliance have voiced strong support for her candidacy, underscoring the community networks that have stood beside her through previous campaigns. In the most recent District 5 primary, Cochran earned 65

percent of the local vote, carrying 15 of 17 precincts, including 87 percent in her home precinct, a reflection of the broad trust she continues to build across East Lee County.

A lifelong Lee County resident, Cochran has centered her public service around transparency, accountability, and practical, common-sense leadership. She describes her mission simply: to give a voice to residents who often feel overlooked and to protect the quality of life in communities stretching from Bonita Springs to Boca Grande and from Cape Coral to Lehigh Acres.

“I love Lee County, all of it,” she said. “And I remain determined to fight for what is right and to stand up for the people who call this place home.”

Cochran credits her grassroots team for their dedication and be-



for Lee County Commissioner  
— A LEADER WHO LISTENS —  
Paid by Amanda Cochran, Republican,  
for Lee County Commissioner District 5

lieves deeply in the power of community when united in purpose. As she steps forward into this new phase of her campaign, she does so with gratitude, confidence, and the support of residents eager for steady, accountable leadership.

**Editor’s Note:** At this time, the District 5 seat remains a countywide race. The Republican Primary is scheduled for August 18, 2026, and will determine the party’s nominee for the General Election. 🐾



# Florida’s Cracker Cowboy Culture Through the Eyes of Its Artists

James Kennedy | Alva Library Association Trustee



Several months ago, I began writing about how rural communities like Alva, Buckingham, and the eastern edge of Lee County might preserve the identity that makes them different from everywhere else. Those articles, as well as trips to the Arts of the Inland Gallery and the Okeechobee Main Street Gallery, ultimately led to something deeper and more lasting: my introduction to the artists quietly preserving Florida’s Cracker Cowboy culture through their work. Understanding our cowboy and cattle history can help ensure we carry on the traditions that have made Florida strong, fearless, and successful.

Florida has one of the longest continuous cattle traditions in North America, stretching back more than five centuries. Long before theme parks and subdivisions, this land was shaped by saddle leather, seasonal cattle drives, and the quiet, disciplined routines of

ranch life. That world now survives most visibly through the hands of its artists.

Across Florida, a gifted group of painters, photographers, poets, sculptors, and storytellers has taken on an unexpected role: cultural historians of the Cracker Cowboy.

They are not inventing scenes. They are documenting real working landscapes and honest working people: horses moving through morning fog, hands repairing tack, cattle drifting through palmetto and wiregrass, weathered fence lines, quiet moments of prayer, and silhouettes of riders heading home at dusk.

Some of these artists were born directly into Florida ranch culture. Others found their way to it later in life. What unites them is not origin, but respect.

Photographers Adam Rountree and John Brady, and impressionist paint-

er Brendan Fisk, did not grow up as Florida cattlemen. However, their work reflects a deep humility toward the Florida landscape and the people who carry on our cattlemen’s traditions. They approach the Cracker Cowboy world with care, earning trust through time rather than intrusion. Their images and paintings do not exploit this culture. Instead, they listen closely and observe carefully. They capture silence, dignity, and the pride of work done well, along with the quiet beauty of Old Florida. As trusted guests, they work to preserve the land and the stories of those who work and care for it.

Alongside them are deeply Florida-rooted voices. Hobby Campbell’s work carries the weight of lived ranch experience. Joe Johnson’s pencil sketches carry the stories of his life in every line — raw, powerful memories of the cattle and their keepers. Sean Sexton’s paintings and words rise from within the culture. Eldon Lux, Nebraska-born but Florida-rooted, has immersed himself

so entirely in this world that his scenes feel less observed than remembered.

What these artists are creating is more than art. It is visual history.

A photograph can preserve the way morning light touches a bridle. A single brushstroke can hold tension, movement, and stillness all at once. A poem can carry the dust, sweat, leather, and prayer that defined a long, grueling Florida day.

Over the coming months, this series will introduce these artists and others whose work now stands as one of the most honest archives of Florida’s Cracker Cowboy culture — not frozen in time, but alive in every image, line, and frame.

The art and poetry of the Cracker Cowboy artists are not nostalgia or fantasy; they are documentation. In many ways, they stand among the most truthful records we may leave behind. 🐾

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# The Sneaky Flood Risks Hiding In Southwest Florida

Tyler Smith | Brightway Insurance

Here in Lee County, we get more than our share of sunshine, golf, pickleball, fresh seafood, and stunning sunsets. But there's one "local" that doesn't get invited to many backyard parties: **floodwater**.

A recent Realtor.com **Housing & Climate Risk Report** shows that many Floridians underestimate how easily water can move in — even if your home isn't near a canal or marked on FEMA's flood maps. Across the U.S., about **2 million homes face serious flood risk but aren't in a FEMA high-risk zone**. That means a lot of people are caught off guard when a summer downpour or storm surge leaves a soggy mess behind.

Here's what every homeowner in SW Florida should know:

1. **Your standard homeowners**

**policy doesn't cover flooding:** An HO-3 policy — the most common type — will help if wind rips off shingles or lightning zaps your AC, but it won't pay a dime if water rises from the ground up. Flood insurance is always a separate policy, either through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) or a private carrier.

2. **Flood maps don't tell the whole story:** FEMA's Special Flood Hazard Areas focus on historic flooding patterns and big storm surge. They don't always factor in heavy rain or shifting drainage after new construction. Even "low-risk" zones can experience damaging floods, especially with today's intense rainfall events and ongoing construction.

3. **Flood coverage can be surprisingly affordable:** If your home isn't in a mandatory flood zone, you may qualify for a Preferred Risk Policy — often costing far less than people expect. One claim-free year can make that premium look like a bargain compared to replacing drywall, flooring, and furniture out of pocket.

4. **Prevention is worth a lot of paper towels:**

Simple steps can reduce your exposure:

- Keep gutters and downspouts clear.
- Make sure soil slopes away from your foundation.
- Elevate valuable items or

HVAC equipment if possible.

- Consider installing smart water sensors in key areas.

5. **When in doubt, talk it out:** Flood risk isn't one-size-fits-all. Your property's elevation, drainage, and distance from waterways all matter. A quick conversation with your local insurance agent can help you weigh your true risk and explore options that fit your budget.

Floods may be part of life in Southwest Florida, but they don't have to be a financial disaster. A little preparation — and the right coverage — can keep the water where it belongs: outside your living room. 🐾

# Lighthouse Pet Clinic Celebrates 10 Years of Compassionate Care in Lehigh Acres

Dr. Laura Woodward, DVM | Lighthouse Pet Clinic

Lighthouse Pet Clinic proudly announces its 10th anniversary of exceptional veterinary service to the Lehigh Acres community. Since taking ownership in 2015, Dr. Laura Woodward, the sole veterinarian and owner of Lighthouse Pet Clinic, has dedicated herself to providing compassionate care and medical expertise to thousands of pets throughout the area.

"It's been a true honor to care for the animals in our community over these past ten years," said Dr. Woodward. "I am grateful for the trust our clients have placed in us and look forward to expanding our services to help even more pets."

Dr. Woodward is particularly proud of the fact that Lighthouse Pet Clinic was recently voted "The Best Veterinary Clinic" in Lehigh Acres by a community vote. "Our talented and hardworking staff are absolutely committed to providing the very best care to the pets of Lee County."

In celebration of the clinic's 10-year milestone, Dr. Woodward invites current clients to a special anniversary celebration on Sunday, December 14, 2025, from 12 P.M. to 3 P.M. at the Veterans Park Lodge at Veterans Park in Lehigh Acres. The event will feature catered food, games, prizes, and the

opportunity to connect with the dedicated staff at Lighthouse Pet Clinic, as well as fellow pet lovers.

While the event is family-friendly, clients are respectfully asked to leave their pets at home due to the size and nature of the celebration.

As part of her vision for the clinic's future, Dr. Woodward plans to enhance her services by expanding the clinic to accommodate a growing clientele. In the next six months, Lighthouse Pet Clinic will welcome a new veterinary doctor to its team, and plans are already underway to build a new standalone clinic within the vicinity of their current

location within the next 18 months.

For clients wishing to attend the anniversary celebration, please RSVP to [mwoodward@lighthousepet.com](mailto:mwoodward@lighthousepet.com). Prospective clients interested in consultations can reach Lighthouse Pet Clinic at (239) 674-9060.

Join us in celebrating a decade of love and care for our beloved pets at Lighthouse Pet Clinic!

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# Highlighted Events in Alva and LaBelle

## SHOP DOWNTOWN SATURDAY MORNING MARKET



Presented by the LaBelle Downtown Revitalization Corporation  
Shop Downtown is a monthly outdoor market held the first Saturday of each month, October through March, in Barron Park on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River in historic downtown LaBelle.

From 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM, visitors can enjoy a relaxed Saturday browsing local vendors, hand-

crafted goods, and specialty foods. The market provides a family-friendly way to support small businesses and experience the heart of LaBelle downtown district.

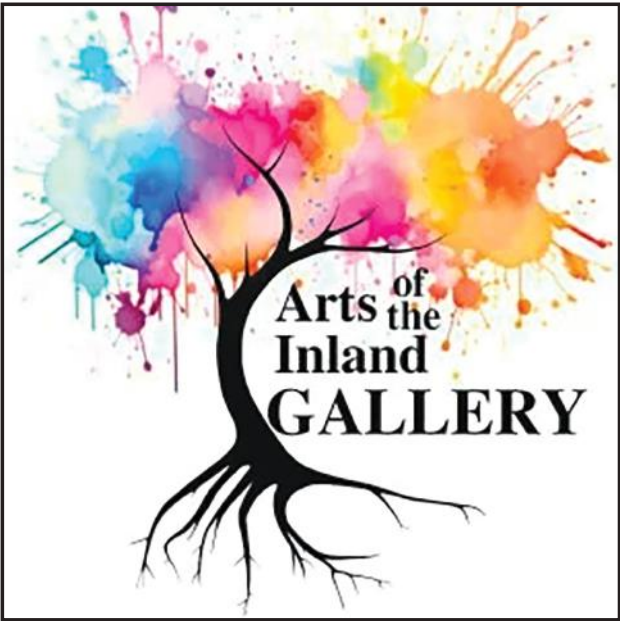
10x10 vendor spaces are available all season long. For more information or to apply, please visit [www.DowntownLaBelle.com](http://www.DowntownLaBelle.com). 🐾

## PICTURES WITH SANTA AT THE ALVA MUSEUM



The historic Alva Museum is welcoming Santa to town on Saturday, December 13, from 2-5 p.m., with a family-friendly afternoon hosted by community volunteer Susan Allen. Families are invited to stop by 21420 Pearl Street in Alva for pictures with Santa, a Wishes and Prayer Tree, a hot chocolate bar, and kids’ crafts, all in support of the museum and its work preserving local history. 🐾

## DECEMBER AT ARTS OF THE INLAND GALLERY, LABELLE



Arts of the Inland Gallery in downtown LaBelle kicks off its December show with a Receiving Day on Tuesday, December 2, from 3-6 p.m., when local artists bring in new work for the month’s exhibit at 471 N. Lee Street. The gallery is open Thursday through Sunday from 1-5 p.m. for visitors to browse and purchase local art, and later in the month it will host the “Next Phase of LaBelle Educational Garden” work day on Saturday, December 27, at 9 a.m., inviting volunteers to help shape the educational garden behind the gallery by Barron Park. 🐾

More stories, events, and photos online at: [EastLeeNews.com](http://EastLeeNews.com).

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# Mon Paris Bakery Returns To Fort Myers Offering A Slice Of Paris For The Holidays

Katrina Salokar | EastLeeNews.com



Walk through the doors of Mon Paris Coffee Shop & Bakery, and you could almost believe you've stepped off a cobblestone street in Paris. The air is warm with the scent of butter and espresso. The pastry case gleams with golden croissants, elegant quiche, and desserts that could have come straight from a European café window. Every detail, from the delicate cappuccino foam to the polished pastry presentation, feels five-star, yet comforting and familiar.

### A NEW OWNER, A RENEWED EXPERIENCE

Now under the ownership of Jan and Veronika Maivaldova, Mon Paris has reopened with a new energy, refined, elegant, and refreshingly professional. Originally from the Czech Republic, Veronika brings years of experience from bakeries, cafés, and bistros across Europe. She's created something rare in Southwest Florida: a spot that's equal parts world-class and welcoming.

"I wanted Mon Paris to be a place where people can take a deep breath and truly enjoy something beautiful," she says. "Everything we make is fresh, flavorful, and crafted with care. You don't have to travel to Paris to feel that spirit; you can find it right here."

Fresh, Flavorful, and Perfectly Parisian  
The case at Mon Paris is a show of craftsmanship, trays of almond and chocolate croissants, tender muffins, quiche, cinnamon rolls, cupcakes, and cookies, all made fresh daily. Specialty breads and cakes are baked in-house, with local ingredients used whenever possible for the best flavor and texture.

Breakfast and brunch run all day, featuring avocado toast, fruit and yogurt bowls, crepes, and handcrafted sandwiches. Signature items include the Croque Monsieur our Aritsan Sandwich Bread, beschamel sauce, Dijon mustard, ham, and Gruyère cheese and the Gravlax & Egg Ciabatta, featuring Veronika's own house-cured salmon. Each dish is plated with the finesse you'd expect in a European bistro, simple, stunning, and satisfying.

### THE PERFECT STOP FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

As the holidays approach, Mon Paris is the kind of place locals are turning to for

a little help, and a lot of flavor. Whether you're hosting family for Thanksgiving, preparing breakfast for houseguests, or planning an office or company party, Mon Paris can take your spread from ordinary to unforgettable.

From fresh-baked breakfast trays and artisan breads to beautiful cakes, tarts, and desserts, everything can be ordered ahead for easy pickup. The bakery also offers elegant pastry assortments and savory quiche platters that make entertaining effortless.

Veronika encourages guests to call in special orders at least 48 hours in advance to ensure every detail is perfect. "We make everything fresh," she explains. "If you have something in mind, a special dessert, gluten-free bread, or a custom pastry, call us and we'll prepare it for you."

And for those last-minute needs, there's always something delightful waiting in the case. "We bake throughout the day," she adds, "so even if you stop by on your way to a gathering, you'll find something beautiful to bring."

### FIVE-STAR FEEL, LOCAL HEART

Inside, the café is clean, calm, and welcoming. Parisian décor, soft music, and polished service make every visit feel like a small escape. The outdoor patio is

equally serene, a perfect spot to enjoy a cappuccino while the world slows down for a moment.

"What we do comes from the heart," Veronika says. "Good food brings people together, especially this time of year."

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Whether you're looking for a cozy brunch, a box of pastries for the office, or a show-stopping dessert for your holiday table, Mon Paris Bakery is ready to make the season delicious. Step inside, slow down, and savor. This is what the holidays taste like when made from scratch, with love, right here in Fort Myers.

Dive into the full story at EastLeeNews.com, explore the expanded menu, meet new owners Jan and Veronika Maivaldova, and discover the incredible journey that brought them from Europe to Fort Myers! 🍷



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# Thankful for Our Pets: Celebrating Gratitude with Your Furry Friends

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

As the season of gratitude unfolds, November offers a beautiful opportunity to reflect on the many ways our pets enrich our lives. From their unwavering loyalty to the joy they bring with every tail wag or gentle purr, our furry companions deserve a special place in our Thanksgiving celebrations.

## THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF PET COMPANIONSHIP

Pets are more than just adorable companions—they're vital to our emotional and physical well-being.

- Numerous studies have shown that pet ownership can:
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Lower blood pressure and improve heart health
- Combat loneliness and depression
- Encourage physical activity and routine

For children, pets teach empathy, responsibility, and compassion. For seniors, they offer companionship and a renewed sense of purpose. In every stage of life, pets provide comfort, joy, and unconditional love.

## INCLUDING PETS IN THANKSGIVING TRADITIONS

Thanksgiving is a time for family, and that includes our four-legged

members. Here are some thoughtful ways to include pets in your holiday traditions:

- 1. Create a Pet-Friendly Feast:** While you enjoy your Thanksgiving meal, treat your pet to a special plate of vet-approved goodies. Safe options include:
  - Plain cooked turkey (no skin, bones, or seasoning)
  - Steamed sweet potatoes
  - Pumpkin puree (unsweetened)
- 2. Family Photos with Pets:** Capture the season with festive family portraits that include your pets. Dress them in a cute bandana or bowtie and let their personality shine.
- 3. Gratitude Walks:** Take a peaceful walk with your dog or leash-trained cat. Use the time to reflect on what you're thankful for and enjoy the crisp autumn air together.
- 4. Thankful Paw Print Craft:** Create a keepsake by dipping your pet's paw in non-toxic paint and pressing it onto paper. Surround it with notes of gratitude from each family member.
- 5. Give Back in Their Honor:** Consider donating pet supplies or volunteering at a local shelter. If your pet is certified for therapy visits,

bring joy to others by visiting senior centers or hospitals.

## SAYING "THANK YOU" TO YOUR PET

Gratitude can be expressed in many ways—extra belly rubs, longer playtime, or simply sitting together in quiet companionship. Your pet will feel the love in every moment you share.

At Just 4 Pets Wellness Center, we're thankful for the trust you place in us to care for your beloved companions. This season, let's celebrate the bond we share with our pets and the joy they bring into our lives.

For more pet gratitude ideas and to read the full article, visit our website at: <http://www.just4petsfl.vet>.

Wishing you and your furry family a warm, safe, and joyful Thanksgiving!

## 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. 🐾



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# A Life Built by Hand and Carried by the Wind

## An Interview With 98-Year-Old World Sailor, Draftsman, and Model Maker Robert “Bob” Kipp

Katrina Salokar | EastLeeNews.com



The porch of the old Sears Roebuck house at Belle Hatchee Marina breathes in its own rhythm. Its wavy glass windows catch the afternoon light in a softened glow as the Caloosahatchee River drifts steadily behind it. That is where I found Robert “Bob” Kipp, almost ninety-nine years old, sitting in a wooden chair like a man who has finally earned a gentle place to land. Boats nudged quietly in their slips, cats wound calmly around our feet, and the whole place felt as if time had paused just long enough to let a century of memories come forward.

Bob smiled when I sat down across from him, the kind of smile that carries humor, patience, and long stories. His hands rested on the chair arms, hands that had built airplanes, boats, wartime cargo boxes, jewelry stores, six-foot architectural models, and a trimaran that would carry him around the world. When he began to speak, it was with the straightforward clarity of a man who has spent his life building instead of boasting. “I was born on December 5, 1926,” he said. “Almost ninety-nine now. Doesn’t seem possible.” He laughed the way old sailors do, treating age like an old companion rather than a burden.

His childhood was simple, and he never pretends otherwise. “I flunked first grade twice,” he said, shaking his head. “Country school. One teacher for eight grades. They sent me back.” His mother, a fiery Frenchwoman, pulled him out of the country school and put him in town school instead. He spent four summers in a row attending summer school, working to catch up. “I wasn’t supposed to be anything special,” he told me. “But I liked drawing. I liked

building things. That got me started.” By the age of twelve, he was a draftsman in a sheet-metal shop. At fourteen, he was designing military cargo boxes that supported the country’s wartime supply chain. While other boys were driving tractors, Bob was sketching the designs that shipped America’s equipment overseas.

When World War II arrived, Bob enlisted hoping to become a fighter pilot. He passed every test, but the war ended before he could be placed in a training class. His unit was mistakenly shipped overseas anyway, their paperwork lost twice. “We lived on K-rations in France and Belgium,” he said. “Stayed in an orphanage for a while. Six months before the Army figured out where we were supposed to be.” He later served during the Korean War as well, again nearly landing in combat before being sent to England for drafting work. “I went where they needed me,” he said simply.

Bob’s life before sailing was defined by building. He drafted for construction companies, designed kitchens in Australia, built jewelry stores in Lahaina, created collapsible architectural models that could travel as airplane cargo, and even designed a collapsible airplane he flew over Central America. His hands, even at ninety-eight, still moved with the precise confidence of a draftsman as he sorted through photographs on the porch table. “You don’t just decide to sail around the world,” he told me. “You build your way there.”

It took him four years to build the first trimaran, one small section at a time as he earned money to buy materials. In 1972, he set off from Long Beach for Hawaii. But he didn’t stay alone long. Her name was Trudy, a recently divorced woman looking to escape, to reinvent, to step into a different kind of life. They met in Long Beach,

and she told him she wanted to sail. She needed to sell her house first, so he left for Hawaii without her. A year later, she flew over and stepped aboard. “No fights,” he said, his voice warm with memory. “She was good. We worked together.” Trudy was an artist, bright and gifted; one of her paintings now hangs in the Brisbane Museum in Australia. For twenty-five years they lived, worked, traveled, and built side by side before she passed away about a decade ago. “We were good together,” he said softly.

From 1972 to 1978, Bob and Trudy sailed around the world, earning their way through ports by crafting architectural models from colored mat board and Elmer’s waterproof glue. He showed me photos of the tiny buildings, churches, boats, kitchens, and storefronts he built in port towns all over the world. “Sometimes we made good money,” he said. “Sometimes nothing. Sometimes the pay was a meal. But the models kept us going.” In Australia he designed kitchens; in South Africa he built round houses for families preparing for political upheaval; in Lahaina he helped build jewelry stores; in countless ports he created small models for captains and business owners. “Some of the ones we gave away for free,” he said with a grin, “we enjoyed the most.”

I asked him which places stayed with him the most. South Africa came first. “People loved each other more than the politics let on,” he said. Somalia was the most rural, “the toilet was a hole in the ground,” and Australia had the best food. “They’re meat eaters. Big steaks, thin but as wide as the whole plate.” But his best single meal came on Bonnaby Island, where the locals cooked shark for the two travelers. “Best shark I ever tasted,” he said. His scariest moment was Hurricane Bebe. “We got caught in the outer bands,” he said. “We were

becalmed, and then the winds hit. If that hurricane hadn’t shifted, that would’ve been it.” He stopped, letting the memory settle. Some moments, even after half a century, return with sharp edges.

Bob and Trudy arrived in LaBelle in the early 1990s. “We stopped here, and then we stayed.” He lived on his trimaran at the Belle Hatchee Marina, cleaning leaves for exercise, talking with neighbors, and finding a peaceful rhythm along the water. When I asked him the secret to living so long, he answered without hesitation: “Nitrogen. Opens the blood vessels. More oxygen.” He eats beets, celery, carrots, and drinks beet juice regularly, though he insists anyone trying it should talk to a doctor first. “But the work saved me,” he added. “Building the boat. Sailing the boat. Those were the prime years.”

After all he has lived, built, and survived, I asked him what he considers his greatest achievement. His answer was immediate. “Sailing my own boat around the world. Building it with my own hands. Sailing it with one crew, one good woman. That was the prime time of my life.”

As the sun dropped behind the trees, Bob spread photographs across the old porch table, boats, parades, ports, planes, models, beach parties, shark feasts, friends, and moments from a life made of movement and curiosity. “We got enough to write a whole bible,” he said, smiling. Maybe he’s right. Or maybe what he has given us is something even better: a reminder that a life well lived isn’t shaped by one big moment, but by thousands of small ones, built by hand, guided by courage, and carried forward by the wind. 🐾

More stories and photos online at [EastLeeNews.com](http://EastLeeNews.com).

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# Paradise Podiatry: Expert Care for Feet That Keep Southwest Florida Moving

Imagine walking barefoot on a Fort Myers beach, only to be sidelined by nagging heel pain or a stubborn wound that won't heal in our humid climate. For nearly 20 years, Dr. Duane F. Cumberbatch has seen how undiagnosed nerve problems and preventable complications can rob people of their mobility and joy, especially in our active, sun-soaked community.

That experience led him to found Paradise Podiatry: a practice devoted to bringing specialized foot and ankle care closer to home for Southwest Florida.

In addition to providing comprehensive podiatric care, Dr. Cumberbatch is fellowship-trained in diabetic limb preservation and further refined his expertise at the renowned Ilizarov Institute in

Kurgan, Russia, training typically found in major academic medical centers. He focuses on peripheral nerve surgery and advanced wound care, using tools such as high-resolution imaging and AI-assisted diagnostics to detect problems early and guide precise treatment.

"I've watched nerve pain and chronic wounds strip away independence," Dr. Cumberbatch says. "But with timely, expert care, patients reclaim their lives, whether it's walking the boardwalk, golfing, or chasing grandkids."

What sets Paradise Podiatry apart is the combination of advanced techniques with a whole-person approach. Alongside surgical options and regenerative medicine, treatments that help the body re-

Dr. Duane Cumberbatch | Paradise Podiatry

pair itself, patients receive guidance on footwear, activity modification, nutrition, and preventive care. From diabetic foot care and bunion relief to sprains and everyday ankle injuries, each treatment plan is individualized, with unhurried visits and clear education so patients understand every step.

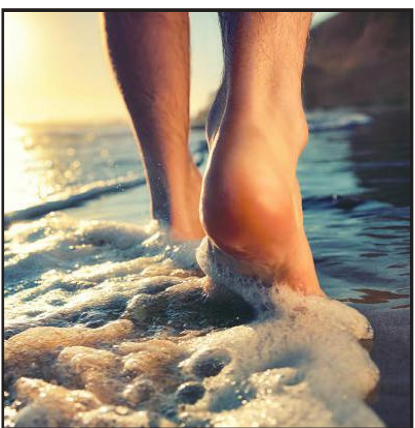
If foot or ankle issues are slowing you down, don't wait for them to worsen. Early treatment can prevent complications and get you back to the activities you love with less downtime and far better outcomes.

Paradise Podiatry serves patients throughout Southwest Florida, providing advanced, personalized care close to home Monday through Friday. From chronic foot pain and diabetic care to complex

nerve problems and hard-to-heal wounds, Dr. Cumberbatch and his team specialize in foot, ankle, nerve, and wound care so you can keep moving with confidence.

Paradise Podiatry Nerve and Wound Care Center is convenient to everyone at 14391 Metropolis Avenue, Suite 103, Fort Myers, Florida 22912. To book an appointment, call 239-931-3668 or online at [www.paradisepodiatryfl.com](http://www.paradisepodiatryfl.com) for hours, services, and patient resources.

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# Buckingham Youth Baseball Association Announces Partnership to Bring Recreational Baseball Back to Alva Fields

Dan Brophy | President, Buckingham Youth Baseball Association

Recreational youth baseball is officially returning to Alva. The Buckingham Youth Baseball League (BYBL), in partnership with Lee County Parks & Recreation and Alva, Inc., has announced the launch of a new youth baseball program at the Alva Fields on N. River Rd. Registration is now open for the Spring 2026 inaugural Alva season, marking the first organized league play at the fields in several years.

BYBL, a longtime provider of recreational baseball in the Fort Myers area, is expanding its reach to better serve families in Alva and Northeast Lee County. “After many years serving the youth of Fort Myers, we are thrilled to bring baseball back to the Alva area,” said Dan Brophy, President of BYBL. “This partnership reflects our shared commitment to community, health, and fun through the sport of baseball.”

Alva Inc. President Grant Fichter praised the effort, noting that “Alva Inc. and the community are excited about this program and honored to welcome the league’s expansion to the Alva Park and ball fields. We couldn’t ask for a better group to help our community in this important endeavor.”

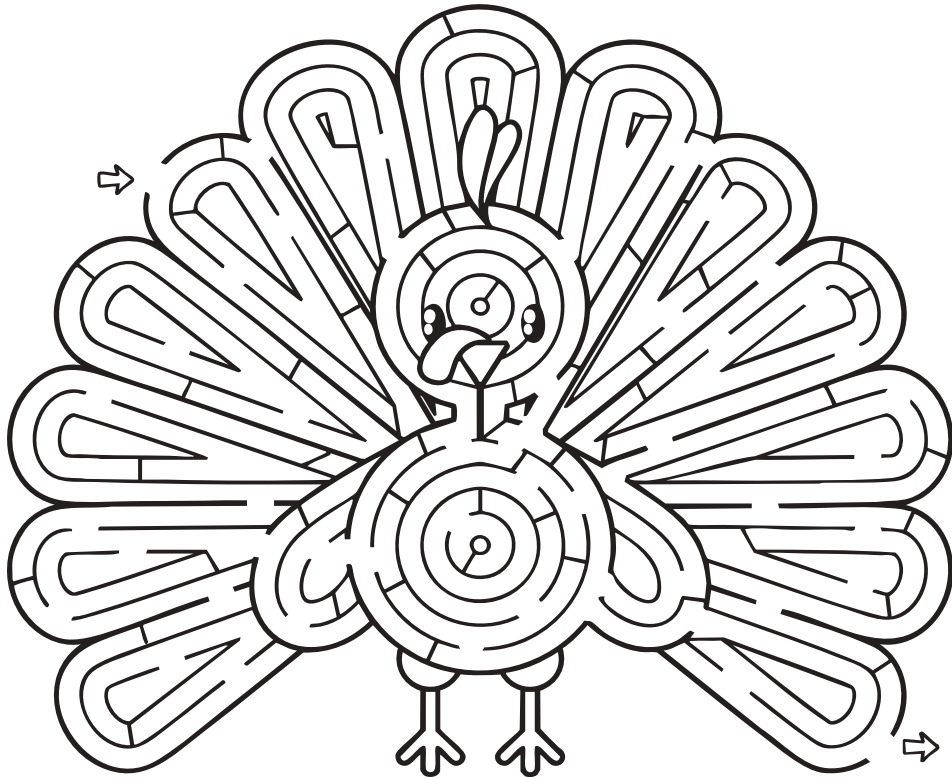
The new Alva division will provide a welcoming environment for both first-time players and returning athletes, offering season-long in-

struction, teamwork, and community engagement. Families are encouraged to register early.

For more information or to sign up, visit:

- Website: Buckingham Youth Baseball  
<https://buckinghamyouthbaseball.net>
- Facebook: Buckingham Youth Baseball | Fort Myers FL  
<https://www.facebook.com/buckinghamyouthbaseball>

Contacts for the program include BYBL President Dan Brophy ([president@buckinghamyouthbaseball.net](mailto:president@buckinghamyouthbaseball.net)), Alva Program Director Dustin Tindall ([alva.league@buckinghamyouthbaseball.net](mailto:alva.league@buckinghamyouthbaseball.net)). 🐾



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### 4 BEDROOM 2 BATH IN TOWNLAKES COMMUNITY



Large 4 bedroom 2 bath home on a quiet cul-de-sac in popular Town Lakes community with gated entry, sidewalks, central water and sewer, low HOA fee of \$90 per month, NEW ROOF IN 2018, large lot overlooking the intersecting preserve canals in the backyard, tiled throughout, cathedral ceilings, breakfast bar in the kitchen, pantry, indoor laundry room with Samsung Washer and Dryer included, large master bedroom with wood laminate floors, walk in closet, dual sinks in master bathroom, shower tub combo, pull down stairs attic entry, Quiet neighborhood with sidewalks and gorgeous views of the intersecting canals, located just minutes to Lee Blvd, I-75 and Ft Myers and walking distance to the newly renovated Williams Ave Community Park. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$295,000**

Nick Bonacolta 239-887-0468 nbonacolta@gmail.com

### 3/2 IN TOWN LAKES COMMUNITY



Pristine move in ready 3 bedroom home with a large den in the popular Town Lakes gated community! NEW ROOF in 2023, tile throughout, kitchen was updated in 2024 with new stainless steel appliances, backsplash, and underneath lighting on the cabinets, exterior of the home was painted in 2024, property is one of the largest lots in Town Lakes with close to half an acre of land, central water and sewer, both a formal living room and a family room gives you plenty of space in this over 2,200 sq ft home! Large den that can be used as a home office, playroom, workout space, or even a 4th bedroom, huge backyard with beautiful views of the lake and nature, walk in closet in Master bedroom, master bathroom has been updated with a newly retiled shower and new vanities, dual sinks, indoor laundry room with washer and dryer included, located just minutes to Lee Blvd, I-75 and Ft Myers and walking distance to the newly renovated Williams Ave Community Park. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$311,900**

Nick Bonacolta 239-887-0468 nbonacolta@gmail.com

### POPULAR 2/2 + DEN VISTANNA VILLA



Popular Vistanna Villa 2 bedroom 2 bath with den that may be used as a THIRD BEDROOM, EXTENDED LANAI IN THE REAR 12 x 19 overlooking the golf course with plenty of privacy, common resort style pool plus a playground area, gated entry, excellent location just minutes to SR 82, I-75 and Ft Myers, newer luxury vinyl plank floors throughout, solid surface countertops in the kitchen with breakfast bar, pantry and stainless steel appliances including a French door refrigerator and brand new built in microwave, CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR NEW IN 2017 AND NEW WATER HEATER NEW IN 2017, primary bedroom in the rear with plenty of natural light, large walk in closet, ensuite primary bath with dual sinks with newer faucets, new commodes and tiled walk in shower, newer granite top in the guest bathroom with new commode as well, indoor laundry area with full size washer and dryer, plenty of room in the screened double garage with pull down stairs for storage and laundry tub, screened front entry door as well, screened from the front to the rear for excellent cross ventilation on those nice days. NO AGE RESTRICTIONS. Pets OK. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$239,900**

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

### AFFORDABLE 3/2 + DEN - NO AGE RESTRICTIONS



Affordable 3 bedroom 2 bath home with a large den that may be used as a 4TH BEDROOM, ALMOST 1800 SQUARE FEET OF LIVING AREA, NEW DIMENSIONAL SHINGLE ROOF IN 2023, NEW CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR IN 2019, NEW WATER HEATER IN 2022, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER, quiet low traffic community in neighborhood atmosphere, ceramic tile and newer luxury vinyl plank flooring in the bedrooms and den, cathedral ceilings and plant shelves, breakfast bar and pantry in kitchen with all appliances, LED lighting throughout, newer entry door with pocket screen, primary bedroom with private access to the lanai, walk in closet, private ensuite bathroom with shower and separate water closet, indoor laundry room with washer and dryer, 16 X 9 screened lanai overlooking the nicely landscaped yard with two oak trees for shade. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS LOCATED IN THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$259,000**

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### BRAND NEW HOME ON HALF ACRE IN NE LEHIGH



Brand New Home located in Northeast Lehigh on a HALF ACRE LOT at the end of a QUIET DEAD END STREET, MOVE IN READY 3 BEDROOM 2 BATH WITH A DEN with a closet that may be used as 4TH BEDROOM. C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, double door entry to the den for privacy, 32 X 32 POLISHED PORCELAIN TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5 inch 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, pantry, large dining area off of the kitchen, spacious master bedroom with walk in closet, private bath with dual sinks and tiled walk in shower, indoor laundry room, covered porch in rear overlooking the HALF ACRE backyard with plenty of privacy, double garage with auto opener, extra long driveway with plenty of parking, excellent location just minutes to SR 80, I-75 and Ft Myers.

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### 4 BEDROOM 3 BATH IN NE LEHIGH



Brand New Home in NE Lehigh, Excellent location in area of larger estate sized homes, MOVE IN READY 4 BEDROOM 3 FULL BATHROOMS with TWO MASTER SUITES, EXCELLENT FOR IN LAW QUARTERS, C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, PORCELAIN TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5 inch baseboards, impact resistant windows and doors, decorative glass in front entry door, covered front porch leads to large great room, high entry foyer with decorative glass shelf & lighting, high ceilings throughout with tray ceilings in the living room and master bedroom, shaker cabinets with soft close doors and drawers and crown molding on top, pendant lighting over breakfast bar, pantry, under cabinet lighting, QUARTZ TOPS in kitchen and baths, stainless steel appliance package, large dining area off of the kitchen, spacious master bedroom with two walk in closets, private bath with dual sinks and tiled walk in shower with frameless glass door, all bathroom vanities have under cabinet night lighting, 4th bedroom guest quarters off of the kitchen area with it's own private bathroom, built in glass shelving in the linen closet as well as decorative glass shelving in the guest bathroom, indoor laundry room, screened lanai in the rear with tile floors overlooking the backyard, covered front porch with tile floors as well, auto irrigation on well, oversized double garage, pavers in the extra long driveway with plenty of parking, excellent location just minutes to schools, SR 80, I-75, Ft Myers and the International airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$389,900**

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

### 4 BEDROOM 3 BATH IN SW LEHIGH



Brand New Home located in Southwest Lehigh, MOVE IN READY 4 BEDROOM 3 FULL BATHROOMS with TWO MASTER SUITES, EXCELLENT FOR IN LAW QUARTERS, C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, 32 X 32 POLISHED PORCELAIN TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5 inch baseboards, impact resistant windows and doors, covered front porch leads to large great room, upgraded front door with side light that opens up to make moving in easy, high entry foyer with lighted decorative shelf, high volume 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, large dining area with upgraded light fixtures, spacious master bedroom with dual walk in closets, private bath with dual sinks with upgraded light fixtures and built in controls in the mirror, tiled walk in shower with frameless glass doors, 4th bedroom guest quarters off of the kitchen area with it's own private bathroom, indoor laundry room, covered porch in rear overlooking the backyard, covered front porch as well, double garage with grey seal coated floors, excellent location just minutes to SR 82, I-75, Ft Myers and the International airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$369,900**

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### AFFORDABLE 3 BEDROOM 2 BATH HOME



Affordable 3 bedroom 2 bath, NO AGE RESTRICTIONS HERE- PETS OK, NEW DIMENSIONAL ROOF IN 2018, NEW SQUARE D ELECTRICAL PANEL BOX IN 2025, NEW WATER HEATER IN 2017, freshly painted interior in 2025, large 3 BEDROOM addition in the rear of the unit with a walk in closet and separate entrance, screened front porch, LUXURY VINYL PLANK FLOORS WITH CERAMIC TILE FLOORS, vaulted ceilings in the living room, large formal dining room with built in cabinets, newer vanities in the bathrooms, covered carport parking with small storage room off of the carport, walking distance to stores and bus stop, low monthly maintenance fee of \$60 per month includes grass cutting, indoor laundry area with full size washer and dryer off of the kitchen, NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$200,000**

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### NEW 2018 ROOF - 2 BEDROOM + DEN HOME



NEW DIMENSIONAL SHINGLE ROOF IN 2018, NEW WATER HEATER 2025, NEW WATER TREATMENT EQUIPMENT IN 2025, newer interior doors, nicely landscaped corner lot, 20 X 9 enclosed family room/den under central heat and air, cathedral ceilings, plant shelves, ceramic tile floors throughout the entire home, QUARTZ tops in the kitchen with breakfast bar and nook area, cathedral ceilings and plant shelves, great room with living and dining area, decorative plantation shutters, primary bedroom with walk in closet and private ensuite bathroom with newly tiled walk in shower, new commodes in both bathrooms, LED lighting throughout, freshly painted interior, large indoor laundry room with laundry tub, quiet low traffic location, located just minutes to I-75, Ft Myers and the International airport, NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

**Offered At.....\$279,900**

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### BRAND NEW 4 BEDROOM HOME W/ 2 MASTER SUITES



BRAND NEW MOVE IN READY 4 BEDROOMS 3 FULL BATHROOMS with TWO MASTER SUITES, EXCELLENT FOR IN LAW QUARTERS, C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, Excellent location in area of larger estate sized homes by Mirror Lakes Elementary school, 48" X 24" POLISHED PORCELAIN TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5 inch baseboards, impact resistant windows and doors, covered front porch with tile floors lead to large great room, high entry foyer with UPGRADED LED LIGHTING THROUGHOUT, DECORATIVE ENTERTAINMENT WALL WITH MOUNTED TV, MARBLE AND DECORATIVE WOOD BACKGROUND, BUILT IN ELECTRIC FIREPLACE, high ceilings throughout with tray ceilings in the living room and master bedroom, shaker cabinets with soft close doors and drawers with crown molding on top, pendant lighting over breakfast bar, QUARTZ TOPS in kitchen and baths with QUARTZ WATERFALL TOPS ON EACH SIDE IN THE KITCHEN WITH OVERSIZED BREAKFAST BAR EXCELLENT FOR ENTERTAINING, stainless steel appliance package, QUARTZ backsplash, large dining area off of the kitchen, spacious master bedroom with two walk in closets, private bath with dual sinks and tiled walk in shower with frameless glass door, multiple shower heads including rainfall, LED MIRRORS WITH BUILT IN LIGHTING IN ALL BATHROOMS, 4th bedroom guest quarters off of the kitchen area with it's own private bathroom, indoor laundry room, screened lanai in the rear with tile flooring and BUILT IN SUMMER KITCHEN WITH BURNERS AND SINK WITH TILE ACCENTS, covered front porch with tile floors as well, auto irrigation on well, double garage with grey seal coated floors, excellent location just minutes to SR 82, I-75, Ft Myers and the International airport as well as walking distance to schools. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

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