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The System Behind The Seat

How Appointments, Primary Elections, And A 2026 Ballot Question Could Shape The Future Of Lee County Government

Katrina Salokar | EastLeeNews.com

The appointment of Trish Petrosky to the Lee County Commission's District 5 seat has renewed discussion about how local offices are filled and how election rules shape representation in Lee County.

Under Florida law, the Governor appoints a replacement when a county commission seat becomes vacant before the end of a term. That process was used following the death of Commissioner Mike Greenwell in October 2025.

While the appointment followed state law, the circumstances surrounding the vacancy and Lee County's election structure have prompted broader public conversation about appointments, election rules, and how candidates ultimately reach office.

Those questions extend beyond a single seat. They also touch on how commissioners are elected, how primary elections determine candidates, and a ballot measure that could change the county's election system.

Two elections in 2026 will play a central role in those decisions.

The first occurs during the primary election on August 18, 2026. Florida operates under a closed primary system, meaning voters must be registered with the same political party as the candidates in order to participate in that party's primary election.

If only Republican candidates qualify for the District 5 race, the Republican primary could determine the outcome of the seat before the general election. Voters who wish to participate in that primary must be registered as Republicans by the voter registration or party-change deadline of July 20, 2026.

The second decision will come during the November 3, 2026 General Election, when Lee County voters will consider a ballot measure asking whether the county should transition from at-large commission elections to single-member districts beginning in 2028.

Lee County is one of only two Florida counties with populations above 500,000 that still elect commissioners at large.

Supporters of single-member districts argue that the change would allow each district to elect its own representative and strengthen local accountability. Opponents say countywide elections encourage commissioners to consider the needs of the entire county.

The decision will ultimately be made by voters.

DISTRICT VOTES AND COUNTYWIDE OUTCOMES

Recent election results have highlighted how Lee County's at-large system works in practice.

In the most recent District 5 race, Amanda Cochran received roughly 65 percent of the vote within District 5 itself and led countywide totals on Election Day.

However, because commissioners are elected at large, voters from across the entire county participate in each district race. After absentee and vote-by-mail ballots were counted, the final outcome reflected the countywide totals rather than the vote within the district alone.

For some residents, the result illustrates how district-level preferences can differ from countywide outcomes under the current election system.

WHEN APPOINTMENTS BECOME INCUMBENCY

Appointments are not uncommon in Lee County government.

Commissioner Mike Greenwell himself first entered the commission through a 2022 appointment following the death of Commissioner Frank Mann and later won election to the seat in 2024.

Similarly, Lee County Sheriff Carmine Marceno was appointed in 2018 by then-Governor Rick Scott after Sheriff Mike Scott stepped down. Marceno later ran for election and won the position in 2020.

Supporters of the appointment process say it ensures continuity in government operations. Critics note that appointed officials may later run for office as incumbents, benefiting from the visibility and experience

that come with holding the position.

Both perspectives recognize that the appointment process itself is authorized under Florida law.

CAMPAIGN INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLITICAL CONSULTING

Campaign finance and lobbying records show that several individuals involved in Lee County political campaigns and development issues have worked with the same consulting firm.

TM Strategic Consulting, led by political consultant Terry Miller, has represented Neal Communities on lobbying matters related to utilities and development policy in Lee County.

Public records also show that State Representative Tiffany Esposito has retained the firm for political consulting services, and campaign finance filings indicate that several county commission campaigns have used the firm during recent election cycles.

Miller also authored the biography used to introduce Commissioner Petrosky following her appointment and has spoken publicly about her priorities.

Observers note that shared political consultants and campaign infrastructure are common in Florida politics. Others say overlapping relationships between development interests, campaigns, and consultants can influence how local policy discussions unfold.

BUDGET DECISIONS AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Another key responsibility of the county commission is approving the annual county budget.

Public records show that the Lee County Sheriff's Office receives one of the largest allocations in the county budget each year. Commissioners review and approve those budgets annually.

Support for law enforcement remains a widely shared position among local officials.

At the same time, traffic safety advocates have pointed to ongoing

concerns about roadway fatalities and serious crashes across Southwest Florida. Population growth, tourism, road design, and enforcement strategies are frequently cited as factors influencing those trends.

These discussions illustrate how budget decisions, public safety priorities, and policy debates intersect at the county commission level.

THE DECISION FACING VOTERS

The broader structural question will appear directly on the ballot during the November 3, 2026 General Election.

A measure authorized by House Bill 4001 (HB 4001) will ask voters whether Lee County should change from at-large commission elections to single-member districts beginning in 2028.

Supporters say the change would give each district greater control over its representation and improve accountability at the local level.

Opponents say countywide elections help ensure commissioners consider the interests of the entire county.

Ultimately, the decision will be made by Lee County voters.

KEY ELECTION DATES FOR LEE COUNTY

Voter Registration / Party Change Deadline: July 20, 2026
Primary Election: August 18, 2026
General Election: November 3, 2026

Because Florida uses closed party primaries, voters must be registered with the same political party as the candidates to participate in that party's primary election.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article reviews publicly documented appointments, election rules, and campaign relationships in Lee County. It does not allege wrongdoing by any individual. East Lee News welcomes factual corrections, documentation, or responses from readers and public officials. 🐾

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Lee County District 5 At A Crossroads

Butch Swank | Goodlad & Swank



You organize, you show up, you support someone who reflects your community, and when the votes are counted, the outcome is decided somewhere else.

That is not a one time occurrence. That is how the system is built.

I have seen this firsthand. Through my work as President of the Southwest Florida Business Alliance, my time serving on the executive committee of the Lee County Economic Development Horizon Council, and my continued involvement representing economic development concerns that directly impact District 5, along with my role on the County School Board Audit Committee, I have had a front row seat to how decisions are made and who they ultimately serve.

Too often, District 5 is not at the center of those decisions.

WHY CHOOSE AMANDA COCHRAN FOR LEE COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DISTRICT 5

I want to be clear about this upfront. I am asking you to vote for Amanda Cochran in the Lee County Republican Primary, which is open only to registered Republicans.

I know Amanda Cochran personally. What you see in public is who she is in private. She listens, she shows up, she does the work, and she understands this county in a way that cannot be manufactured.

Her roots here run deep. Generations of her family have lived, worked, and built in Lee County. Long before most of us were here, her family was helping shape East County and the surrounding communities. That matters, because understanding this place is not something you pick up overnight.

In my conversations with her and in watching her campaign, one thing has always stood out. She is not chasing a position. She is running because she understands what is at stake.

She has been consistent about the need for balance. Growth that is planned, infrastructure that keeps up, water that is protected, and schools and healthcare that are not constantly playing catch up.

She is focused on real issues that affect real people, not political talking points. And she has already proven she can earn the support of District 5.

In the last primary, Amanda received roughly 65 percent of the District 5 vote. In her own precinct, that number was even higher. On Election Day, among those who showed up in person, she won decisively.

District 5 chose Amanda Cochran. But District 5 did not get Amanda Cochran.

The final outcome was driven by mail in ballots and votes from outside the district, largely from Cape Coral and Fort Myers precincts. People who were not here during the campaign and who do not live with the consequences of these decisions.

Many of those votes were influenced by years of noise and mischaracterization surrounding Mike Greenwell, not based on the realities of this district but on narratives that had little to do with the day to day life of the people who live here.

That is how District 5 lost its voice.

THE REALITY OF THE OPPOSITION

The current occupant of the District 5 seat was not elected by the people of District 5. She was appointed following the passing of Mike Greenwell.

She does not have deep roots here. She was brought into this district and does not carry the lived understanding of the people she is supposed to represent.

What she does have is support from a political structure that depends on maintaining control through the current system.

That system works very well for those interests. It does not work for District 5.

THE VOTE THAT ACTUALLY DECIDES THIS RACE

Here is the part that continues to surprise people.

This race will be decided in the Republican primary.

If you are not registered as a Republican, you will not be able to vote for Amanda Cochran in the election that determines who wins this seat. By the time the general election arrives, the decision has already been made.

That means many people who care about this race lose their voice simply because they are not registered with a party. Not because they are Democrats, but because they are unaffiliated.

That is a problem in itself. But it is the system we are operating in today.

Key dates for Lee County:
Deadline to register as a Republican to vote in this race: July 22

Republican Primary Election Day: August 20

If you want to vote for Amanda Cochran, you must be registered as a Republican by July 22. If you miss

that deadline, you will not have a say in who represents District 5.

THE BIGGER FIX: SINGLE MEMBER DISTRICTS

Even if we get this election right, the larger issue remains.

Lee County is approaching one million residents. It cannot be governed as if every district is interchangeable.

We should have moved to single member districts years ago, when the county passed 500,000 people.

Single member districts mean one simple thing. The people of District 5 choose the commissioner for District 5.

No override. No dilution. No outside votes determining local representation.

It is the only way to guarantee that what happened in the last election does not continue to happen.

THE BOTTOM LINE

This election cycle comes down to two votes that actually matter.

First, the Republican primary on August 20, with a registration deadline of July 22, where District 5 has the opportunity to elect Amanda Cochran, a candidate who has earned the trust of this community and understands it at its core.

Second, the vote for single member districts in the General Election on November 5, which ensures that going forward, District 5 will always have a voice that cannot be overridden.

One corrects what happened. The other prevents it from happening again.

If you live in District 5, this is your moment to be heard. 🐾

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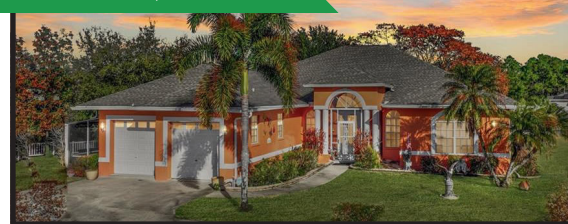


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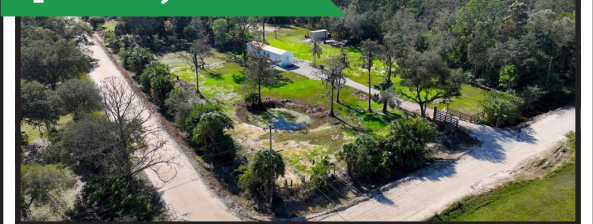


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Why Year-Round Volunteer Support Matters For Southwest Florida's Nonprofits

Charlotte Miller | Manager of External Affairs for Fort Myers and Naples, Florida Power & Light Company



Every day across southwest Florida, volunteers are powering strong communities. Consistent, hands-on service helps ensure families are supported, essential programs remain strong and local nonprofit organizations can continue serving those who depend on them.

With extra support, food banks like Community Cooperative can distribute more meals, youth organizations such as YMCA of Collier County can mentor more students, and community groups like Keep Lee County Beautiful can keep our neighborhoods and shorelines clean. But many still lack the regular volunteers they depend on to operate at full strength.

month, they become trusted partners who make it possible to plan ahead and meet growing community needs — whether during hurricane season, the holidays or throughout the year.

annually working alongside hundreds of nonprofit partners, from preparing meal kits for seniors ahead of hurricane season alongside Community Cooperative and Collier Senior Center - Golden Gate to supporting programs that help families meet basic needs.

Yet many organizations are being asked to do more with fewer hands. According to the Florida Nonprofit Alliance, about 40% of nonprofit organizations say they need more volunteers to meet current demand. Here in southwest Florida, that need is clear.

That's why corporate volunteerism matters. After decades of working alongside nonprofit partners, Florida Power & Light Company (FPL) has seen firsthand how reliable volunteer engagement helps stretch limited resources and reduce operating costs. When volunteers return month after

In February, hundreds of FPL employees participated in our 18th annual Power to Care Week, an initiative rooted in the belief that lasting impact comes from showing up consistently. In LaBelle, FPL volunteers rolled up their sleeves to help complete the new LaBelle Educational Garden to create a welcoming outdoor learning space for students and the community. That commitment continues throughout the year, as FPL volunteers contribute more than 55,000 volunteer hours

Strong communities aren't built overnight. They're built through steady, hands-on service — one hour, one skill and one project at a time — that lays a foundation of volunteerism that lasts for generations. As southwest Florida grows and faces new challenges, dependable volunteer support will be more important than ever to make our communities thrive.



On Feb. 18, 2026, Florida Power & Light Company (FPL) volunteers, along with LaBelle Middle FFA Chapter, help complete the new LaBelle Educational Garden. Volunteers installed educational signage for foliage, hammock posts and a fountain and also landscaped the area and planted a new pollinator garden area — creating a welcoming outdoor learning space for students and the community. This project is in partnership with the City of LaBelle, Arts of the Inland Gallery, LaBelle Garden Club, National FFA Organization, LaBelle Middle School and Hendry County School District. Now in its 18th year, FPL's Power to Care program reinforces the company's long-standing commitment to powering strong communities making Florida an even better place to live, work and raise a family. This year, FPL's Power to Care week consists of more than 30 projects led by hundreds of employees in over 10 counties across Florida.

Local Brightway Insurance Team Members Earn National Top 2% Recognition

Tyler Smith | Brightway Insurance, the Smith & Mitchell Agency

Brightway Insurance is proud to announce that three members of Brightway Insurance, the Smith & Mitchell Agency—Michael Beeson, Kain Groves, and April Luettich have been recognized nationally as Top Client Advisors, an honor awarded to the top 2% of advisors across the country.

Smith, owner of Brightway Insurance, the Smith & Mitchell Agency. "This achievement reflects their dedication to our clients and to our community. Their focus is always on providing trusted guidance and exceptional service, and this recognition is truly well deserved."

and a wide range of coverage options. Brightway Insurance, the Smith & Mitchell Agency proudly serves clients

across Fort Myers, Naples, and the surrounding Southwest Florida communities.

The recognition was presented at Brightway's annual national conference, which brings together leading insurance professionals from across the United States. This prestigious award highlights advisors who consistently demonstrate outstanding client service, professionalism, and a strong commitment to helping individuals and families protect what matters most.

Beeson, Groves, and Luettich have built strong reputations throughout Southwest Florida for their personalized approach to insurance and their ability to help clients navigate the often-complex decisions surrounding home, auto, flood, and business insurance.



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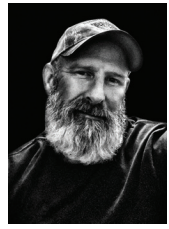
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A Florida Gubernatorial Candidate Running on Slower Growth, Accountability, and Agriculture

James Kennedy



Before the recorder was turned on, Bobby Williams was already working the crowd, shaking hands, answering questions, and moving from one conversation to the next.

The setting was informal, but the message was consistent.

"Its accountability. Its credibility. It's what are they producing?" Williams said during the meet-and-greet. "The fruit tells you everything."

That idea judging leadership by outcomes rather than promises, carried into a more structured interview that followed.

A CAMPAIGN ROOTED IN FRUSTRATION

Williams describes Florida as a state where dissatisfaction has become widespread and consistent.

"It doesn't matter the race, the income, the background—everybody's saying the same thing," he said. "They're frustrated, and nothing's changing."

He pointed to conversations across the state with teachers, health care workers, small business owners, and families trying to keep up with rising costs. In his view, the complaints are not isolated.

"Every county thinks they're the only one," he said. "But it's the same everywhere I go."

Rather than frame that frustration in partisan terms, Williams presents it as a broader loss of confidence in how Florida is being governed.

DEVELOPMENT AS THE DEFINING ISSUE

At the center of his campaign is development.

Williams argues that Florida is no longer simply growing, but expanding beyond its ability to support that growth. Roads, water systems, and infrastructure, he says, have not kept pace with the pace of residential construction.

"We can't handle more," he said. "We can't handle the traffic, the water, the infrastructure. People have had enough."

He draws a distinction between development that fills a genuine need—such as services in underserved areas—and

large-scale housing expansion in already strained regions.

When asked directly, he does not avoid the label often applied to his campaign.

"They call me anti-growth, and I am—because we can't handle it."

RESPONSIBILITY ACROSS THE SYSTEM

Williams does not isolate responsibility to one group.

"All of the above," he said when asked who is responsible—citing local governments, state leadership, and developers.

His criticism is particularly directed at large development firms, which he argues are not paying the full cost of the infrastructure required to support their projects.

"These national developers are what's really destroying Florida," he said. "They should be paying for all of it."

INFRASTRUCTURE BEFORE EXPANSION

A key part of his platform is restoring the link between development and infrastructure.

"We're 15 to 25 years behind on infrastructure," he said. "How do you ever catch up if you keep building?"

He supports stronger requirements that infrastructure be in place before major development is approved and suggests giving residents more direct input on large projects.

"If a development's going in, the people should vote on it," he said. "What we've been doing hasn't worked."

AGRICULTURE AS POLICY

Agriculture is central to Williams's campaign, not secondary.

"It's all the same—rural land, woods, agriculture—it's all the most important thing," he said.

He frames farmland preservation as both an economic issue and a matter of food security.

"We can't depend on foreign entities for our food," he said. "We've got to be able to feed ourselves."

His position is direct: "If it's ag, it

needs to stay ag. No more rezoning."

A State Meat Processing Proposal

Williams also proposes creating a state-supported or cooperative meat processing system to support ranchers.

"We've only got four major packers left, and most are foreign-owned," he said. "That creates a monopoly."

The goal, he said, would be to give producers more options and keep more of the agricultural economy within Florida.

"It's about food security, lowering costs for ranchers, and helping Florida feed itself."

HOUSING AND INCENTIVES

During the earlier meet-and-greet, Williams addressed housing and public assistance programs, focusing on how they are structured.

"The way it's set up, why would you want to make more money if your rent just keeps going up?" he said.

He argued for systems that allow people to stabilize financially while working toward independence.

"It shouldn't be a lifetime system, it should be a way out," he said.

He also said that if public housing is viewed as unsafe or undesirable, the solution should be to improve conditions.

"If people say it's dangerous, then fix it, don't just accept it."

EDUCATION AND WORK-FORCE READINESS

Education is another area he identifies as needing change.

"K-12 is broken," he said. "We've got to get trades back, life skills, budgeting, things people actually need."

He emphasized preparing students for multiple pathways, not just college.

"Right now, they're not equipped for anything when they leave," he said.

WATER, UTILITIES, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Environmental concerns, particularly water quality, are tied closely to his views on development.

"We're polluting our waterways, we're stressing our systems," he said.

He also raised concerns about state boards and regulatory bodies, arguing they often operate without enough accountability to the public.

"Every time they come for an increase, they get it," he said, referring to utilities. "Who's fighting for the people?"

GOVERNING APPROACH

When asked how he would address the influence of development interests, Williams pointed to executive authority.

"As governor, you've got veto power," he said. "If it doesn't help Floridians, it's not getting signed."

CAMPAIGN STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY

Williams describes his campaign as operating outside traditional funding models.

"I self-fund most of it," he said. "The rest comes in \$50, \$100 at a time."

He also emphasized the role of social media.

"Social media is free, and everybody's on it," he said.

At the same time, the pace and interruptions of both the meet-and-greet and interview reflected another part of his approach: direct engagement.

"When people hear you in person, it's different," he said. "They're looking for truth."

A CAMPAIGN FRAMED AROUND OUTCOMES

Williams's campaign is built around a consistent premise: Florida's challenges; growth, infrastructure, affordability, and environmental strain are connected and visible in daily life.

"You know them by their fruit," he said. "And the fruit of what we've got right now, it's not working."

Whether that message resonates statewide remains to be seen. But the campaign is structured around a single question that runs through each issue he raises: What has leadership produced, and is it enough? 🐾



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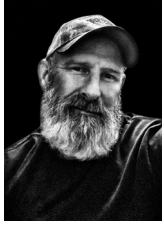
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The Artists of Florida's Cowboy Tradition, Hobby Campbell, Art With Roots

James Kennedy



Lifelong cowboy and native Floridian Hobby Campbell is known for imagery so detailed it borders on photographic. But that description alone would miss the mark. A few months ago,

he was kind enough to spend an afternoon with me. We talked not just about his work, but about Florida—its wild spaces, its cattle culture, and a way of life that is steadily slipping out of reach.

The interview, however, didn't start when I hit record. It started over lunch at the Gator Shack in Lorida. If you pass through town, stop in and have a bite. The food is excellent. The walls of this local restaurant are lined with several exceptional paintings by Mr. Campbell, creating an unexpected fine art exhibit along a Florida back road.

Before we ever got into art or technique, before we walked among the remnants of an old cow pen talking about history and life, I watched Hobby interact with people who had known him for decades. A friend stopped by. Then another. Stories began before introductions were finished. What stood out wasn't just familiarity, but respect—the kind built not on reputation alone, but on years of shared ground, shared work, and a shared understanding of what this part of Florida still is.

That mattered. By the time we got in the truck and headed out across ranch country, I wasn't just interviewing an artist. I was riding with someone who has lived the very life he paints. That experience shows up in every piece of his work.

Hobby doesn't paint from photographs unless he has to. He paints from memory, built over a lifetime of rodeos, ranch work, and long days in places most people will never see. As he put it, there "wasn't nothing around but horses and cows... that's all I knew." That foundation is what separates his work from imitation. You can't fake what you haven't lived, and according to Hobby, you can't fool an old cowboy either.

That standard—being believable to the people who know—shows in everything he creates. It's why the details matter: the way a saddle sits, the way a cow turns its head, even the smallest, almost invisible elements like a scrap of nylon string tied to a saddle horn. They're there for a reason, not for the casual viewer, but for the ones who know what they're looking at.

And make no mistake, they do notice.

Hobby told me he's watched old cowboys stand in front of his work for half

an hour at a time, just studying it. Not saying much. Just looking. That, more than anything, is how he knew he had gotten it right.

One piece in particular, Cracker Necktie, changed everything.

Painted in the mid-1990s, it was the first work that truly broke through—not just as art, but as something recognized within the cattle community itself. It circulated through the Florida cattle world, drew attention from people who lived the life it depicted, and established Hobby as more than just another painter trying to capture cowboy life from a distance.

A large print of Cracker Necktie hangs in the living room of cowboy, artist, and storyteller Joe Johnson. The two haven't met, but they might as well have.

When Johnson talked about the piece, he didn't describe it like a viewer. He described it like someone recognizing something familiar. The realism, the detail, the feel of it—it wasn't just a painting to him. It was his life, his work, looking back at him.

That's about as high a compliment as you can get, especially from someone who can spot the difference between something that's painted well and something that's lived. That's the line Hobby walks in every piece he creates. What he's painting isn't just a scene; it's a record. A record of a Florida that is still here, but not in the way it used to be.

Ranches that once ran thousands of head have been cut down, sold off piece by piece. Land that held cattle, wildlife, and open ground is being reshaped, repurposed, or lost entirely. As Hobby put it plainly, once it's gone, "it ain't coming back." That reality sits just beneath the surface of the work.

It came into sharper focus as we drove. Hobby talked about a man he knew—someone he had worked for—whose family once ran a large operation. What had supported thousands of cattle was broken apart over time, sold parcel by parcel until only a fraction remained. The money might be there for a while, but eventually it runs out. The land, meanwhile, is already gone.

And once it's gone, it doesn't come back as pasture or open range. It comes back as something else entirely—houses, roads, commercial development. The land changes function, and with it, everything tied to it changes too.

It's not just a cultural loss. There's an environmental one as well.

For years, some of the land around the Kissimmee River was purchased with the idea that removing cattle would allow it to return to a more natural state. But the reality is more complicated than that.

We don't allow the natural fire cycle to occur the way it once did. Controlled burns help, but they don't fully replace that process. And with invasive species now established across much of Florida, something still has to manage the land, keep growth in check, maintain balance, and prevent those systems from being overrun. For generations, well-managed cattle grazing has filled that role.

When handled properly, cattle control vegetation, limit woody overgrowth, and help maintain open grasslands. Those grasslands, in turn, play a critical role in how water moves across the landscape, slowing it down, allowing it to soak in, and filtering it along the way.

Remove that system, or replace it with development, and those benefits disappear. Water moves faster. Filtration drops. Flooding becomes more likely, and groundwater no longer replenishes the aquifers.

At the same time, many species have adapted to these working landscapes. They've found habitat within ranchlands that are still active, still managed, but still open. Replace that with concrete and density, and that balance collapses. What's lost isn't just open space. It's a system that was working.

As our conversation moved through land loss, fragmentation, and the steady disappearance of rural Florida under a spread of concrete, we eventually circled back to what brought me there in the first place: the art.

It all ties together, but at the center of it is an artist whose work made me want to make the drive, sit down, and understand where it comes from.

Hobby's work is often described as almost photographic in its realism, layered with detail that feels deliberate rather than incidental. But Hobby sees it differently. He believes he can paint a scene better than a photograph, and after talking with him, it's not hard to understand why.

A photograph captures a moment, but it doesn't always capture what you actually see. Your eye and your understanding pick up on depth, texture, and subtle details that a camera flattens or loses. What Hobby does is rebuild that scene in a way that makes those elements visible again.



Cow Hunter

These landscapes, ranches, hammocks, and open grasslands aren't always obvious to someone passing through. It takes a trained eye—or more accurately, a lived connection—to see them fully. Hobby's work gives you that perspective. It lets you see Florida through the eyes of someone who has spent a lifetime in it.

And that level of understanding shows up in the way he works.

At one point, looking at a piece in progress, he mentioned repainting the head of a turkey more than twenty times. Not because he couldn't paint it, but because it didn't meet his standard. He kept working it until it was right.

That kind of discipline carries through everything he does.

It's also why he rejects shortcuts. Everything is built by hand, layered through time and effort. That commitment is part of what sets his work apart. It's not just the result; it's the process behind it.

When I asked him how he got started, his answer was simple: he's been drawing for as long as he can remember.

Horses, cows, and rodeo—that was his world. His father was a cowboy, a ranch hand. He grew up in it, lived in it, and started by drawing what he knew: bucking horses, cattle, the movement of animals that were part of his everyday life.

He spent some time at art school in Palatka, but by his own admission, it didn't last long. Rodeo took precedence. Life took precedence. In the end, that may have mattered more than anything formal training could have offered.

Because what defines his work isn't just technique. It's experience. A lifetime spent working cattle, riding, hunting, guiding, and living in the landscape he now paints. That depth is what gives his work its weight. It's not observation from the outside. It's knowledge from within. 🐾

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Lee County Housing Market Shifts Toward Buyers

Melissa Flexsenhar | CornerStone Coastal Properties



Lee County's real estate market is entering a new phase, and it is one that increasingly favors buyers.

After several years of a strong seller's market that peaked in 2022, conditions are beginning to shift. Year-over-year sales have actually increased from 2024 to 2025 by roughly 450 transactions, which suggests buyers are returning to the market. At the same time, prices are facing downward pressure as inventory rises and homes spend more time on the market.

For much of the past several years, affordability had nearly disappeared for buyers who live and work full time in Lee County. This recent change reflects a broader rebalancing across Southwest Florida. Rising costs, higher interest rates, and a wider selection of homes are giving buyers more negotiating power and pushing sellers to adjust expectations in a more competitive environment.

During the work-from-home boom of the COVID era, Florida experienced a major wave of migration. Demand surged, and home prices climbed rapidly across Lee County. That sharp appreciation, driven largely by out-of-state buyers and limited inventory, pushed values beyond what local fun-

damentals could reasonably support.

As the market begins to normalize, those elevated price levels are being tested. This is not a collapse, but it does appear to be a measured correction that is bringing prices more in line with long-term market realities.

Several factors are likely to keep pressure on prices in the near term.

One is the growing presence of what is often called shadow inventory. This includes homes that did not sell at higher price points, properties likely to return to the market at adjusted prices, and potential distressed inventory such as short sales or foreclosures as pandemic-era mortgage relief programs continue to wind down.

New construction is also adding significant supply across Southwest Florida. Entire communities continue to expand in East Lee County and along the Corkscrew Corridor. One major example is Kingston, a large-scale development expected to introduce approximately 10,000 residential units along with hotels, retail, and dining. The project is also expected to connect Corkscrew Road to State Road 82, creating another route between Estero and Lehigh Acres.

Builders are attempting to maintain pricing by offering incentives and

mortgage rate buy-down programs, often using direct price reductions only as a last resort. These strategies may help support price points in the short term, but they also contribute to the larger inventory landscape buyers are navigating.

Even with these headwinds, there are still opportunities for sellers. Homes are continuing to sell, but they now require more strategic pricing and more realistic expectations than in recent years.

As Lee County's housing market continues to evolve, it remains to be seen exactly where prices will stabilize. What does seem clear is that widespread price appreciation is unlikely in the near term.

That is not necessarily bad news. A more balanced market creates new opportunities for buyers who have been waiting on the sidelines, while still allowing well-prepared sellers to succeed in this next chapter of Southwest Florida real estate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Flexsenhar is a Realtor with CornerStone Coastal Properties and has been advising buyers and sellers in Southwest Florida real estate since 2002. She works with residential, investment, and waterfront properties throughout Fort Myers, Cape Coral, Estero, Bonita Springs, Naples, and surrounding communities.

Flexsenhar has built her career helping both buyers and sellers navigate changing market conditions and is known for her work with investment properties, relocation clients, and complex transactions such as short sales.

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Florida Cracker Cowboy Heritage Festival To Launch Florida 250 Exhibit At Alva Museum

Katrina Salokar | EastLeeNews.com

Long before the cattle drives of Texas and the Hollywood image of the American West, Florida had its own cowboys.

This spring, the Alva Museum will celebrate that little-known heritage with the Florida Cracker Cowboy Heritage Festival and the opening of the Florida 250 Cracker Cowboy Exhibit, highlighting the ranching traditions that shaped Southwest Florida for more than 500 years.

The exhibit will open May 1 at the Alva Museum, 21440 Pearl Street in Alva, and will remain on display through the July 4 holiday weekend as part of the Florida 250 commemoration. Organizers are also planning a July 4 morning reception at the museum, with details to be announced.

Florida's early cow hunters worked cattle through palmetto prairie, dense brush and swamp country, relying on cow whips and hardy Florida Cracker horses adapted to the environment. Their traditions developed generations before the cattle culture most Americans associate with the western frontier.

James Kennedy, trustee at the Alva Library and Museum, said the goal is to reconnect the community with a piece of Florida history that is often overlooked.

"This story belongs to this place," Kennedy said. "Long before the cattle drives of Texas and the Hollywood image of the West, Florida cow hunters were moving cattle across palmetto flats and river country. We want people to understand that this heritage started right

here in Florida and shaped communities like Alva."

The heritage festival will unfold as a three-day weekend of demonstrations, storytelling and cultural programming centered around the museum exhibit.

Friday evening will feature an invitation-only opening reception bringing together artists, historians, ranching families and community supporters. Saturday will host the main public festival day with demonstrations and educational presentations. Sunday will conclude with a relaxed community gathering focused on storytelling, music and time to explore the exhibit.

Saturday's Living History Day will include demonstrations of traditional cowboy skills such as whip cracking, ranch techniques and heritage crafts. Organizers are also planning livestock displays, storytelling, cowboy music and traditional foods connected to Florida's ranch culture.

Grant Fichter, trustee at the Alva Museum, said the event is about preserving the traditions of families who helped shape rural Florida.

"The ranching families of Florida built communities, worked the land and developed a way of life that still exists today," Fichter said. "This exhibit and festival help document those traditions and make sure the stories are preserved for future generations."

The exhibit will feature historic photographs, artwork, ranch tools, saddles and

interpretive displays explaining Florida's cattle frontier and the lives of the cow hunters who worked it.

Organizers say the project could grow into a recurring heritage event celebrating Florida's Cracker cowboy traditions while introducing the history to new generations.

IF YOU GO

Florida Cracker Cowboy Heritage Festival
Florida 250 Cracker Cowboy Exhibit
Opening Weekend
Location: Alva Museum
21440 Pearl Street
Alva, Florida

Exhibit Dates
May 1 - July 4, 2026

Opening Weekend Events

Friday - Opening Reception (Invitation Only)

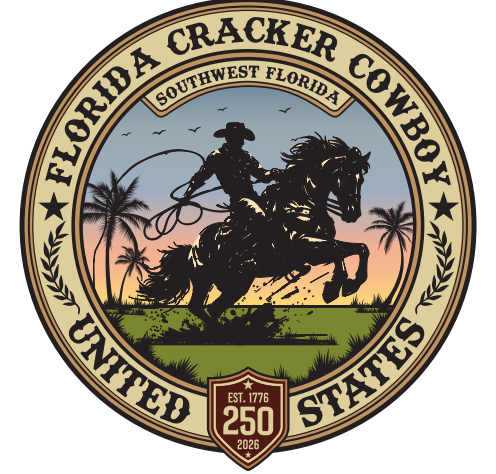
Saturday - Living History Festival (Public Event)
Cowboy skill demonstrations, whip cracking, ranch culture presentations, storytelling, music and family activities.

Sunday - Community Gathering
Storytelling, music and time to explore the exhibit.

Special Event
A July 4 morning reception at the Alva Museum is planned to close the exhibit. Details will be announced.

Stay Updated
For additional exhibit programs and display dates, follow the Alva Museum Facebook page.

Call to Attend
The public is invited to experience Florida's ranching heritage firsthand. Bring family, bring friends, and step into the story of Florida's original cowboys at the Alva Museum this spring. 🐾



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Groovy 70'S Celebrity Waiter/Waitress Dinner Returns April 18 To Support Lehigh Community Services

Special to East Lee News

Community members are invited to step back into the "Groovy 70's" while supporting an important local cause at the 2nd Annual Celebrity Waiter/Waitress Dinner benefiting Lehigh Community Services. The event will take place Saturday, April 18, 2026, at The Club at Gateway, 12091 Gateway Greens Drive in Fort Myers.

Guests will enjoy an evening of food, fun, and philanthropy beginning with cocktails at 5:30 p.m., followed by dinner at 6:30 p.m. The themed evening encourages attendees to embrace the spirit of the 1970s while local "celebrity" servers help create a

lively and entertaining atmosphere. Dinner selections include Chicken Cordon Bleu, Salmon, or Prime Rib, and each meal includes salad, rolls, potatoes, vegetables, and dessert. The event will also feature a silent auction, wine pull, and cash bar, giving guests additional opportunities to support the organization's mission.

Individual tickets are \$70, and several sponsorship levels are available for businesses and community leaders wishing to support the event. Sponsorship packages range from \$75 "Far Out" sponsors to the \$1,500 "Peace and Love" level, which includes a table of eight, drink tickets,

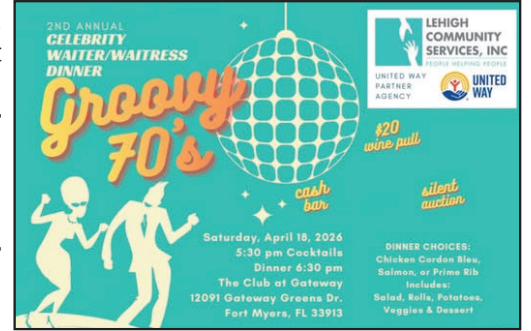
program recognition, and promotion on the organization's website.




Proceeds from the evening will benefit Lehigh Community Services, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization and United Way partner agency dedicated to helping families and individuals in need in the Lehigh Acres community. Through programs focused on emergency assistance, food distribution, and support services, the organization works to improve the quality of life for residents facing hardship.

Community members interested in attending, sponsoring, or donating auction items can con-

tact Lehigh Community Services at: 239-369-5818.

Checks may also be mailed to: Lehigh Community Services
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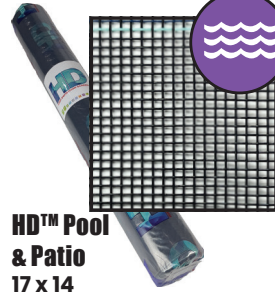



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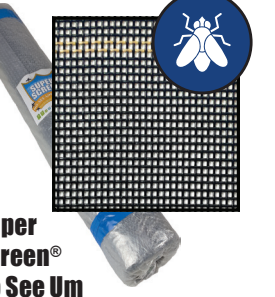
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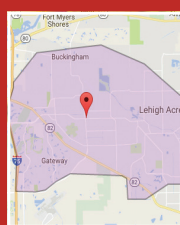


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NICK BONACOLTA

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2/2 GROUND FLOOR GOLFSIDE VILLAGE CONDO



Affordable 2 bedroom 2 bath GROUND FLOOR CORNER UNIT in Golfside Village, common POOL and tennis courts just steps away, COVERED CARPORT PARKING, NO AGE RESTRICTIONS HERE AND PETS ARE OK, NEWER LUXURY VINYL PLANK FLOORS THROUGHOUT, new cabinets and GRANITE COUNTERTOPS in the kitchen with breakfast bar, EXTRA LARGE SINK WITH NEWER FAUCET, open tray ceiling in the kitchen with newer LED lighting throughout the condo, newly remodeled bathrooms as well with all new tile in the tub and shower areas, NEW CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR IN 2021, primary bedroom with walk in closet and ensuite bathroom, access to the screened lanai with extra storage cabinet and laundry area, plenty of privacy overlooking the nicely landscaped yard and GOLF COURSE, easy maintenance living with the exterior all covered by the monthly condo fee, located within walking distance to stores etc., I-75, Ft Myers and SWFL International airport just a few minutes away. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$127,500

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

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.....\$180,000

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3/2 DOUBLE GARAGE- CENTRAL WATER & SEWER



Affordable 3 bedroom 2 bath DOUBLE GARAGE located just south of Lehigh off SR 82, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER, NEW DIMENSIONAL SHINGLE ROOF IN 2020, NEW WATER HEATER IN 2024, NEW CENTRAL HEAT AND AIR IN 2022, freshly painted interior, cathedral ceilings and plant shelves, NEW LUXURY VINYL PLANK floors in the eat in kitchen with breakfast bar and pantry, two sets of French doors lead out to the spacious backyard with Oak tree for shade and plenty of room to play and entertain, primary bedroom with walk in closet and ensuite bathroom, built in desk in the guest bedroom hallway, new light fixtures in the bathrooms, indoor laundry room, low traffic street in an excellent neighborhood atmosphere located just minutes to SR 82, I-75, Ft Myers and the SWFL International airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$255,000

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2 BEDROOM + 20 X 9 DEN / 2 BATH 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. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

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

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BRAND NEW 3 BEDROOM 2 BATH DOUBLE GARAGE



BRAND NEW- READY TO MOVE IN- C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED. Affordable 3 bedroom 2 bath with DOUBLE GARAGE, UPGRADES GALORE, 24 X 24 porcelain tile floors throughout, QUARTZ countertops in the kitchen with waterfall, soft close doors and drawers, pendant lighting over the breakfast bar, oversized pantry, stainless steel appliances, large fixed glass window in the dining room with plenty of extra natural light, impact resistant windows and doors, quartz tops in bathrooms with frameless glass shower doors, lighted mirrors, porcelain tile showers and soft close doors and drawers, primary bedroom with transom window for extra natural light, ensuite bath and walk in closet, LED lighting throughout, covered lanai with tile floors overlooking the oversized backyard with a canal in the rear for privacy, extra long driveway with plenty of parking for multiple cars, MOVE IN READY HOME. C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, quiet low traffic street located just minutes to SR 82, I-75, Ft Myers and SWFL International airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED- LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

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

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3 BEDROOM 2 BATH POOL HOME



Affordable 3 bedroom 2 bath POOL HOME in West Lehigh, NEW DIMENSIONAL SHINGLE ROOF IN 2024, NEW WATER HEATER IN 2023, covered front porch plus a screen enclosed IN GROUND POOL overlooking the backyard with a large covered patio area, CORNER LOT with a FENCED YARD and side double gate to the other street, cathedral ceilings, plant shelves, LUXURY VINYL PLANK FLOORS plus ceramic tile, breakfast bar and pantry in the kitchen with GRANITE COUNTERTOPS, STAINLESS STEEL APPLIANCES, newer cabinets with soft close doors and drawers, crown molding, indoor laundry room, primary bedroom with walk in closet and ensuite private bath with newly tiled walk in shower, excellent location just minutes to I-75, Ft Myers and the SWFL International Airport, NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$305,000

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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.....\$305,000

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3/2 POOL HOME IN MARBLE BROOK



THREE BEDROOM TWO BATH POOL HOME BUILT IN 2019, located in an excellent neighborhood atmosphere of Marble Brook, CENTRAL WATER AND SEWER, sidewalks, secure gated entry, walking distance to common clubhouse with resort style pool, fitness center and playground, Private Pool on the home was built in 2020 with spacious open deck with light grey pavers, electric heat pump for pool, salt water system and Baja deck in pool for sunning, BUILT IN FIREPIT overlooks the FENCED BACKYARD with excellent views of the lake in the backyard as well as plenty of privacy by not having another home in the yard, HEDGES ARE ALLOWED ALONG THE FENCE LINE FOR PRIVACY, pavers in double driveway and walkways, NEWLY REMODELED KITCHEN WITH GRANITE TOPS, breakfast bar, BARNYARD DOOR over pantry with custom built in shelving and drawers, SAMSUNG STAINLESS STEEL KITCHEN APPLIANCES, decorative stone tile wall accents on the kitchen wall, backsplash, under breakfast bar and around entry way, spacious living room with decorative wood accent wall overlooks the pool area, ceramic tile floors throughout with newer LUXURY VINYL FLOORS IN THE BEDROOMS with 5 inch baseboards, CROWN MOLDING, master bedroom located in the rear of the home with pool and lake views, private ensuite master bath with walk in closet, separate water closet, dual sinks and walk in shower, guest bedrooms located in the front of the home with upgraded vanity and fixtures in the guest bath, indoor laundry room with accent wall, built in cabinets and shelving with full size washer/dryer, double garage with auto opener, storm panels for openings, quiet low traffic street. The home is located near schools, Veteran's park and minutes to Downtown Lehigh for shopping etc. yet minutes to I-75, SR 82, Ft Myers and the airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED HERE. HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$345,000

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BRAND NEW 4/3 WITH 2 MASTER SUITES ON HALF ACRE



Brand New Home located on a quiet low traffic street on A HALF ACRE LOT, larger estate sized homes in the area, MOVE IN READY 4 BEDROOM 3 FULL BATHROOMS with TWO MASTER SUITES, EXCELLENT FOR IN LAW QUARTERS, C.O. HAS BEEN ISSUED, 24 X 48 POLISHED PORCELAIN TILE FLOORS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOME with 5 inch baseboards, impact resistant windows and doors, OUTDOOR KITCHEN ON LANAI OVERLOOKING THE BACKYARD, decorative wood color on garage door, extra concrete side drive off of the driveway for additional parking or turn around, covered front porch with seal coated floors leads to large great room with grand entry, coffered ceiling with decorative wood accent wall, 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, decorative lighting over breakfast bar, QUARTZ WATERFALL COUNTERTOPS WITH QUARTZ BACKSPLASH, stainless steel appliance package, large dining area with upgraded light fixture, spacious master bedroom with dual walk in closets, private bath with dual sinks with upgraded light fixtures including LED lighting built into 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 with built in cabinets, double garage with grey seal coated floors, excellent location just minutes to I-75, Ft Myers and SWFL International airport. NO FLOOD INSURANCE REQUIRED. LEHIGH IS THE HIGHEST ELEVATION IN LEE COUNTY.

Offered At.....\$395,000

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