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Protect Captiva from increased density disguised as resiliency

Lee County plans to host a hearing on this issue Dec. 6

Lisa Riordan Fort Myers News-Press

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Just over a year ago, Hurricane Ian slammed into Southwest Florida as a Category 4 monster, causing unprecedented damage and leaving its tragic mark on our community. Ian was the largest storm ever to make landfall here and the third costliest storm in U.S. history, causing more than \$1.2 billion in damage.

In a period of just 15 days, Governor Ron DeSantis and his administration pulled off the seemingly impossible by reopening the Sanibel Causeway – reconnecting our battered, fragile barrier islands to the mainland and enabling us to begin the long journey of rebuilding our communities and livelihoods.

Now we are calling on the state again to help protect Captiva and save our island.

This summer, Lee County commissioners proposed amending the Lee County Comprehensive Plan and Land Development Code to increase building heights and to remove density restrictions on Captiva, while granting special development benefits to Timbers Resorts on Captiva Island under the guise of “resiliency.” These proposals are not only unnecessary and potentially harmful, but benefit just one single property owner: Timbers Resorts, which operates the resort on South Seas.

Existing ordinances allow property owners to restore structures to the same size as before Hurricane Ian in compliance with updated federal flood elevation standards. The amendments, quietly crafted without public input, would increase the density

and intensity of use on Captiva and allow for hundreds of new hotel rooms at South Seas with increased building heights – up to 75 feet above base flood elevation.

Dramatically increasing density in our island community, where evacuation routes were already stretched to the limit last year, is shortsighted at best and potentially life-threatening. Despite this, the proposed amendments are being pushed to a vote without any analysis of how they would impact infrastructure, evacuation routes, and the environment – seemingly in violation of Florida’s Community Planning Act.

So why are these amendments being touted as a beneficial resiliency tool? Lee County residents have been asking this very question. The state conducted a required review of the amendments, and it appears the governor’s administration is also scratching its head.

The Florida Department of Commerce issued a firm rebuttal to the county’s proposed amendments, confirming our fears that the county, in the words of the department, is “flying a ‘false flag’ of ‘resilience’” in the name of increasing hotel rooms on the island. We applaud the state for recognizing the amendments for what they are – a backdoor maneuver to sanction increased development. The state also urged the county to have a transparent discussion with the community about the actual purpose of the amendments.

We hope our county commissioners will join the state in standing with Captiva and Sanibel residents. The county plans to host a hearing on this issue on Dec. 6, if the proposed amendments are adopted in the face of near-unanimous opposition, the fight to protect Captiva is not over.

We will continue to fight for the health and safety of Captiva and Sanibel residents first and foremost. We urge you to join us in voicing your opposition to these amendments. We must protect Captiva.

Lisa Riordan is chair of the Captiva Civic Association, a resident of Captiva and part of the Protect Captiva Coalition.

