Lost Grove mine opponents voice concerns to advisory board

By ERIC STAATS

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They had to wait two weeks, but foes of a proposed mine west of Immokalee had their say Thursday at a hearing of a Collier County advisory board.

The so-called Lost Grove mine has been a time eater for the Planning Commission, which had a daylong hearing earlier this month on the plans but ran out of time before taking public comments.

"Once this is mined, it can never be fixed again," said Neal Ott, who has lived for 12 years across the street from the proposed mine in a neighborhood that was the site of a pioneer settlement a century ago.

The board adjourned again Thursday without reaching a decision on a recommendation to Collier County commissioners. The board set a third hearing day for Jan. 5.

Alico Land Development Corp. wants to convert a 1,380-acre citrus grove along the Lee-Collier county line between Corkscrew Road and State Road 82.

Rural neighbors say the mine, with an expected life of at least 20 years, will ruin their tranquil homesteads with vibrations from underground blasting, noise, lighting and an estimated 1,400 truck trips to and from the site each day.

The proposed mine would abut protected wetlands in the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed and would sit across the county line from an area where Lee prohibits mining to protect the environment.

"This (Alico) is a Lee County refugee, for mining purposes, seeking asylum in Collier County," said Lee Senior Circuit Judge Hugh Starnes, a lifelong Southwest Florida resident who runs cattle on land he owns near the mine.

Lee and Collier counties also are at odds over the mine.

Lee County commissioners worry about the mine's impact on Lee's roads and underground drinking water supply. Collier County planners have recommended the
mine's approval.

Starnes urged a more cooperative approach on mining issues between the neighboring counties.

"We've got to make sense of all this," he said. "We can't just have mines strewn all through this environmentally significant area."

More mines are proposed in the area where Lee has banned mining. Landowners have filed a legal challenge to the ban, and an order is pending in the case.

Alico contends that replacing the orange grove with the mine's lakes will reduce the use of irrigation water at the site and increase groundwater levels, protecting water supply and wetlands.

Crews would dig up to 145 feet deep but would stop one foot above a layer of clay that confines underground drinking water supplies and is between 40 and 70 feet thick, Alico's studies show.