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Guest opinion: Funding arrangement is legal – and actually quite common

Liesa Priddy Special to the Naples Daily News

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“No good deed goes unpunished” could just as easily have been the headline for recent articles in The News-Press and Naples Daily News that twice allowed sources to accuse Eastern Collier Property Owners (ECPO) of “bribery.”

These defamatory accusations were included in the articles despite a factual demonstration that ECPO’s actions were consistent with all existing rules and had been publicly documented on forms provided by a federal agency. There has been no effort to keep the referenced payments secret.

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Agreeing to pay funds to offset costs for staff at the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) working on projects unrelated to the proposed Habitat Conservation Plan — funds requested by that federal agency — helps to provide additional bandwidth to review an extensive application. Such arrangements are not new, and they are not unique; they legally occur at local, state and federal agencies on a regular basis, including the FWS – and even Collier County.

In fact, Commissioner Taylor, who was directly quoted in the article, has participated in the very same arrangement that she claims is inappropriate with FWS. The Collier County Development Services department, which oversees all applications from developers, homebuilders and property owners, requires fees with every application to directly cover the costs of reviewing those very applications.

Those fees are made payable to the Board of Collier County Commissioners.

Development Services prides itself on collecting enough fees annually to cover its expenses. In 2021, those fees are projected to total some \$21 million.

Are these fees also “bribes”?

Under the reasoning used in the recent article, the answer would be yes.

And if those fees went away, who would foot the bill for Collier County’s Development Services staff?

Taxpayers.

ECPO members also provided complete funding — in excess of \$1 million — and hired the consultants that helped develop the Rural Lands Stewardship Area study on behalf of Collier County. Again, nobody had a concern when ECPO members wrote those checks.

It is hypocritical and nonsensical to claim that the same payment arrangement with the FWS that helps offset the agency’s staffing costs equates to “bribery” when, at the local level, it is applauded as “making developers pay their fair share.”

ECPO’s 11 landowners are voluntarily subjecting their landholdings to a program that could preserve 106,000 acres of private land — 156 square miles of high-quality habitat worth more than \$1 billion — to forever be available to the Florida panther and a vast number of other protected and native species as growth inevitably extends into eastern Collier County.

If approved, this Habitat Conservation Plan would become one of the largest land preservation and conservation efforts east of the Mississippi River. It will connect huge swaths of existing preserves and regional wildlife corridors that environmental organizations have long sought as part of wildlife protection programs.

The Habitat Conservation Plan effort has been underway for a decade; it is neither easy nor inexpensive, given that the \$287,872 paid to FWS is only one expense. Each landowner has devoted countless staff hours to the effort, hired numerous consultants to conduct extensive studies, and paid for a bookcase worth of detailed expert reports required by regulatory agencies.

There is no acknowledgment given to ECPO members for their own expenses and costs — nor any recognition for the value of their land that is being preserved and maintained at no cost to taxpayers.

But, we’re not looking for credit or accolades.

ECPO members are participating in the Habitat Conservation Plan because it’s the right thing to do. Without high-level planning for development as the HCP provides, Collier County is

looking at more urban sprawl over thousands of acres. Growth is coming, and we are doing our best to responsibly prepare for it.

Words matter. In this case, instead of casting aspersions and accusations at landowners trying to do the right thing, it shouldn't be too much to expect our elected officials and media outlets to avoid the cheap shots and misdirection and provide the public with the bare facts.

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