Rebuilding bigger on Captiva is controversial issue for Lee commissioners to consider



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Timbers Resorts, the Winter Park-based resort owner and investor, has claimed its South Seas resorts on Captiva cannot rebuild from damage sustained by Ian unless the company has the right to increase the elevation of the buildings.

Timbers Resorts wants higher buildings and greater density in the number of units that can be built on Captiva, potentially allowing a new hotel at South Seas resort to replace a hotel gutted by Hurricane Ian and for it to rise to three-story height, which its owners claim will help make the island more resilient to rising tides during severe storm.

South Seas leaders have said they would like to erect a three-story hotel with a height of up to 63 feet which would be accomplished by relying on changes in federal regulations that determine just how the height of a building is calculated.

Representatives of Timbers Resorts did not immediately respond to a request for comment.



How tall is too tall for Captiva resort?

The issue before commissioners will be whether to allow structures to be built higher and with more resilience rather than follow old rules with lower standards.

The county's interpretation is based on the Federal Emergency Management Agency decision last November to redefine the base elevation for construction. The county staff considers that elevation as defining the height above the ground that a new building could be allowed while strengthening its resilience from being severely damaged.

County commissioners had been scheduled to conduct a public workshop session on Captiva building heights and other issues last Tuesday, but the meeting was canceled due to the emergence of Hurricane Idalia bearing down on the gulf coast.

Failure to reschedule an anticipated workshop could lead to confusion of complicated issues during a busy county commission meeting on Tuesday.

"This whole process has been fraught with issues, from start to finish, and we are concerned that without a public workshop, the public is not going to be aware of the position of the BOCC until they vote on it Tuesday," said James Evans, CEO of the Sanibel-

Captiva Conservation Foundation. "We feel strongly it should be delayed until they have a workshop to discuss it publicly."

At public meetings and hearings, Sanibel and Captiva residents have been concerned about the impact on their community if a taller hotel is allowed. Some base their stand on the existing Captiva Community Plan, which sets a goal of enforcing "development standards that maintain one and two story building heights, and historic low-density residential patterns"

Hurricane Idalia got in way of open session on Captiva plan

In a report filed with commissioners, county development staff refer to existing goals for land use on Captiva as "ambiguous," because they do not define a starting point for measuring "one and two story building heights."

It also suggests that without making use of FEMA's new base elevation calculation for flood zones as a guideline for construction, landowners who have lost buildings to a hurricane would have "limited ability to rebuild their properties" without losing historically usable living space.

Evans said a better look should be taken at the environmental risk of putting more people, homes and vehicles on an island that will not grow larger as more intensive use of the land increases.

"More density is more people, more units in building. You can have more people at any time, any given day. More people using the facilities means more waste," Evans said. "We are fully supportive of South Seas being able to build back what they had prior to the storm – we want South Seas to be successful as we have every other business on Captiva."

In addition to its meeting Tuesday at which commissioners could vote on adopting the proposed land development rule changes to limit restrictions on rebuilding properties damaged by Hurricane Ian, commissioners have a zoning meeting scheduled for 9 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 6 at which the Captiva issues, and a half dozen other land use issues, would be considered.

Taking up the matters on the agendas for the Tuesday and Wednesday sessions would require commissioners to ignore their promise of a workshop session on the controversial issues.