



**PHOTO BY MIKE JOHNSON**

# **ESTERO'S SENSE OF PLACE**

**GREATER ESTERO COMMUNITY REPORT  
QUARTER 2 - 2024**



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# THE GREATER ESTERO COMMUNITY REPORT

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*Prepared by Allan Bowditch, Engage Estero's Chief Communications Officer*

## Introduction

Engage Estero is delighted to present the second of our special reports for 2024. This report focuses on the views of greater Estero citizens who responded to our recent March survey.

At an Engage Estero Community and Member Meeting held in January, our Chief Research Officer, Tony Carangelo, explained, "While many towns and cities promote a 'Sense of Place,' Estero does not attempt to convey its character or overall image to visitors and citizens" which was supported by those in attendance.



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As such, Estero may not be well positioned in the minds of its citizens or visitors. It needs distinction! Estero's "Sense of Place," or brand, should convey a favorable character, culture, and attractive image to visitors and its citizens.

The Village's Comprehensive Plan from 2015 emphasizes the concept of a "Sense of Place." This is particularly evident in the section on "Future Land Use," where the language used is:

"Promote the development of Estero as a community with a unique quality of life, distinct character, and diverse housing, economic, recreational, and social opportunities by protecting the natural resources, environment, and lifestyle: establishing aesthetic and design requirements, managing the type, location, quality, design, density, and intensity of future land uses: providing opportunities for public participation in the land development approval process and promoting a true sense of place."

The plan's wording encourages citizen engagement to impact the quality of life in greater Estero favorably and aims to inspire action and involvement in shaping the community's future.

It also begs the question of whether this is being addressed. If so, what is it, and what does the Village Council Management aim to promote as Estero's "Brand Image?" How do they want Estero positioned in the minds of its citizens and visitors? What do they want people to think about when they think of Estero?

Engage Estero believed it was fundamental to seek citizen opinions!

## **THE GREATER ESTERO COMMUNITY REPORT (GECR)**

Engage Estero surveyed citizens to determine their perceptions. In Part 1 of our second GECR, we share the responses of Estero citizens on what they thought Estero's "Sense of Place" should be. What are citizens' emotional bonds and attachments to our Village, and what is believed to be its distinctiveness or unique character? What is appealing about Estero, and what makes it different from other locations in Southwest Florida? Our citizens have answers in this part of the report.

In Part 2, citizens responded to what and where the Village's priorities should be focused. Check out our citizens' thoughts on:

- The most important of Village actions crucial to Estero's future.
- The issues the Village needs to address urgently.
- Their concerns.
- The level of satisfaction with projects the Village is responsible for implementing
- An increase in support staff to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and action.

Engage Estero appreciates all those who provided their input and insights, which will be shared with the Village of Estero Officials.

# Estero's "Sense of Place": How Should It Be Described? Residents Have Their Say!

## Part 1.

In early March, Engage Estero asked residents to share what they believed should be the image and character of Estero that they would like to see conveyed. This can be summarized as a "Sense of Place." Many municipalities in Florida and elsewhere promote their "Sense of Place" to attract visitors and investment into the community. It also provides a sense of pride for those living in the community. In brief, a municipality's "Sense of Place" describes a location's distinctiveness, culture, and unique character.

Estero is expected to undergo significant development over the next five years. New features are likely to include a Pickleball complex, a Bowling Alley, improved sports fields and facilities, development of Estero on the River, coordinated bike, walking, and rollerblading paths, local access to Larry Kiker Preserve, a Performing Arts Complex, and more.

While these added features will attract more visitors and improve the options offered to residents, it is important to promote Estero's attractiveness now. Establishing a community vision takes considerable time and effort. Waiting until some of these features are available will not benefit Estero.

In a recent competition to explore what residents believe Estero's "Sense of Place" should be, residents responded to Engage Estero's request to share their opinions. More than 150 people responded, providing a cross-section of excellent suggestions. Some outstanding words and phrases submitted included: "A boutique town;" "Estero - the Hidden Gem!" "A piece of paradise;" "Paradise doesn't get any better than Estero;" "Small village friendliness;" "Florida's natural splendor meets timeless Gulf Coast charm;" "The heart of Southwest Florida;" "Estero checks all the boxes;" "Florida's best kept secret." And many more!

Four residents reduced the original comments to 25 to arrive at the winner. Then, a team of nine reduced those 25 final statements to the top 10. All statements were judged "blind." No one knew who had written them until the statement with the highest score (10 points for 1st place to 1 point for 10th) was found.



The winners were as follows:



(Photo: Left to Right, Allan Bowditch, CCO, Julie Yellig (1st place), Karen Katz, (2nd Place), Jim Gilmartin, President. (Jaqueline Clifford (3rd Place) was unavailable).

- **1<sup>st</sup> Place (Mean Score 6.0) Julie Jellig**

*Estero is an engaged community that supports an active lifestyle. It offers access to the Gulf Coast through the Estero River and its Bay, historical state parks and natural preserves, top-quality food, shopping, and cultural venues. The Village is near Florida Gulf Coast University and Hertz Arena, offering diverse exploration opportunities, discovery, and entertainment.*

- **2<sup>nd</sup> Place (Mean Score 5.3) Karen Katz**

*Upscale but not pretentious - casual convenience with everything you need close at hand. Arts, sports, education, retail, healthcare and more. All you want, all you need - in the middle of everything. Make your life easier in Estero*

- **3<sup>rd</sup> Place (Mean Score 4.22) Jacqueline Clifford**

*Florida's best-kept secret - multigenerational healthy living at its very best, where everyone is valued!*

Considering the essence of the many suggestions, the Engage Estero team felt a need to produce an even more emotional and compelling means of conveying Estero's "Sense of Place." After extensive discussions with the team members, the following key phrase was chosen as the most effective way to draw people's attention and interest: *Estero: "Southwest Florida's Best Kept Secret!"*

The team also felt conveying Estero's uniqueness and emotionally appealing qualities was essential. The statement reflecting a "Sense of Place" for Estero that was developed with the help of all those who took part in the survey is as follows:

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## ESTERO: SOUTHWEST FLORIDA'S BEST KEPT SECRET!

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Nestled alongside the beautiful Estero Bay is the Village of Estero—a vibrant, thriving, and growing community that welcomes residents and visitors of all ages. Estero is an environmentally and health-conscious location, and its unique blend of history, nature, and vibrant living offers much. It provides a safe, relaxing, friendly, and inviting setting with casual and upscale dining, diverse entertainment, and

recreational activities. You are sure to have many enjoyable and unforgettable experiences. It's the place you want to be!

### **Estero checks all the boxes!**

The text is persuasive, effectively conveying Estero's unique and appealing qualities, emphasizing its vibrant community, natural beauty, and diverse recreational and entertainment opportunities. The chosen key phrase, "*Estero: Southwest Florida's Best Kept Secret,*" and the accompanying description create a compelling picture of Estero as an attractive and welcoming destination for residents and visitors of all ages.

(Roseate Spoonbill near Estero: photo by Mike Johnson: The photo is subject to copywrite and cannot be copied or used without permission)

# What Should Estero Priorities Be?

## Residents Are Engaged!

### Part 2.

#### **Summary.**

Residents' input is vital in determining the most important initiatives for the Village. The Engage Estero's March 2024 survey focused on what residents considered the most important of Village initiatives. It's crucial to consider Estero's future.

In the survey findings, over two-thirds of the responding public identified four significant "***Potential Initiatives***," which were of the utmost importance: (See Table 1). In addition, over 50% considered another four initiatives as "highly important."

Additionally, implementing the Utilities Expansion Program (septic to sewer) and its impact on water quality remains a concern for many. The village must urgently address this issue in collaboration with leading environmental organizations.

Moreover, residents have expressed concerns about traffic congestion and safety, which should be a top consideration for the village management in order to enhance the day-to-day living experience for both residents and visitors.

Engage Estero examined the public's satisfaction with various Village tasks, their view of adequate staffing, and what, if any, other issues the Village should address. It's clear that the public is generally satisfied with the Village's current projects, but there is a need for better communication as some residents are unaware of many ongoing developments.

## The Survey Findings.

The public believes the initiatives of utmost importance which the Village should prioritize are listed below in Table 1 **Potential Initiatives**. Those items which achieved the scores of 7+ on a 1 to 10 scale of importance (10 being extremely important) were as follows:

**Table 1**

<b>Potential Initiatives</b>	<b>Top scores 7+ Very Important</b>	<b>Mean based on 10 max</b>
Development of the 62 acres along the Estero River (Northeast US 41 and Corkscrew Road) with areas to walk and relax in the natural area south of the river and activities for children, plus coffee and restaurants on the north side of the river.	<b>86%</b>	<b>8.6</b>
Support BERT with initial funding and ongoing maintenance (e.g., increase the safe areas to walk, bike, and rollerblade).	<b>76%</b>	<b>7.9</b>
Support converting the Florida Power & Light (FP&L) right of way in West Estero as an area to walk, bike, and rollerblade.	<b>71%</b>	<b>6.8</b>
Provide local Estero access to the Larry Kiker Preserve. (This preserve totals 428 acres and consists of several natural plant communities, including wet flatwoods, live oak hammocks, freshwater marshes, and cypress. This diversity of plant communities makes it very beneficial to wildlife. Currently, access is in Bonita Springs).	<b>68%</b>	<b>7.6</b>
Performing Arts Hall is a multi-use performance space that is intended for use by various types of performing arts, including dance, music, and theatre.	<b>65%</b>	<b>7.1</b>
Provide local subsidized housing for teachers, health workers, police, and firefighters to reduce resignations and traffic density.	<b>60%</b>	<b>6.7</b>
A theater complex and community center with restaurants.	<b>58%</b>	<b>6.6</b>
Expand the number of Estero's sports fields available to enable soccer, lacrosse, football, baseball, softball, and other sports to be played across various age groups.	<b>50%</b>	<b>6.2</b>
Veterans Recognition area/park	<b>48%</b>	<b>6.1</b>
Provide an Olympic sized 50 meter and 25meter pools with slides	<b>36%</b>	<b>5.1</b>
Provide spa facilities, including mineral pools and plunge pools for rehab. purposes, as well as relaxation lounges, steam rooms, and saunas.	<b>36%</b>	<b>4.7</b>



It is clear from the above results that the public is extremely interested in seeing many of the issues itemized above developed. The clear priorities for the Village are:

- Development of the 62 acres along the Estero River
- Support BERT with initial funding and ongoing maintenance
- Support converting the Florida Power & Light (FP&L) right of way in West Estero as an area to walk, bike, and rollerblade.
- Provide local Estero access to the Larry Kiker Preserve.
- Performing Arts Hall

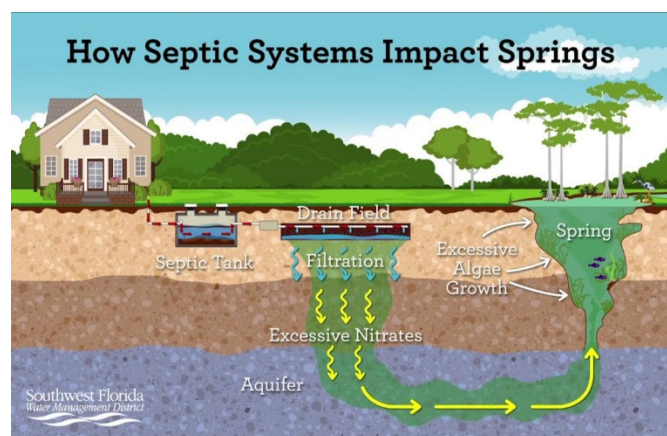
All these issues had at least 2/3rds of the public attributing a very high level of importance to these issues. Over 50% of the public gave several other initiatives a high importance score.

Overall, the public seems satisfied with the various projects itemized in the survey for which the Village is responsible. However, around 1 in 5 indicated they were unaware of many of these items, indicating that more communication was needed.

The items listed included:

- The Estero Monument signs
- Keeping residents informed about the recreational facilities being planned
- Keeping residents updated on the progress of the “Estero on the River” project
- Progress of the Utilities Expansion Program
- Keeping residents updated on the road projects where the Village does not own the road
- Keeping residents updated on the road projects where the Village owns the road
- Updates on the Woodfield development
- Updates about the road modifications on West Coconut Road

The public was far less satisfied with the Village’s action on “The speed of implementing the Utilities Expansion Program (septic to sewer).” This issue is also a considerable concern among those involved with water quality. The Calusa Waterkeeper, Captain Codty Pierce, and others have expressed their frustration and concern that the contamination of the Estero River leading into the Estero Bay remains high. Although not the only cause of contamination, septic tanks that have been in place in older Estero homes in the vicinity of the river, if not in perfect order, can lead to seepage and runoff into the river.



The impact of the bacteria in the water is a blight on Estero’s environment. It does not follow the environmentally conscious approach the Village wishes to convey to visitors and residents. Engage Estero, along with other leading environmental organizations, believes that this must be given urgent attention.

When asked, “What other amenities or ideas should the Village Management consider to enhance what Estero offers residents and visitors?” The comments centered on:

- Traffic congestion and safety concerns.
- Estero needs a focal point/ centralized downtown area similar to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Naples.
- To be environmentally conscious, especially with the level of future development
- An emphasis on “green space”
- Estero needs more businesses: “Why not recruit other corporate headquarters? That brings young families and high-paying jobs.”

67% were satisfied with the opportunity to comment on the Village’s plans for recreation and developments, such as the *Estero on the River* initiative.

While the majority, almost 60%, were unsure about whether the Village has adequate staff to perform its functions, many did believe it would be important to appoint:

- A full-time employee for recreation and parks (61%)
- A full-time employee for environmental management (56%)
- A full-time employee for emergency management (39%)

As indicated in an earlier study in 2022, around 70% still believe Engage Estero should continue to exist. Only 5% said it should not, with the balance unsure.

The main reasons for feeling that way were itemized in verbatim comments below:

- Good oversight is important, without bias.
- Must ensure our officials do not bend to the pressure of developers.
- Engage Estero should continue monitoring projects, communicating to the community, and offering public forums on themed issues while encouraging public engagement. We are fortunate to have EE.
- Engage Estero informs me of what is happening much more than what I hear from village officials.
- I appreciate the Engage Estero emails. That is primarily how I am informed about projects in Estero. There were several issues in this questionnaire that I was unfamiliar with, and it may be beneficial for your group to have a greater role since you have done a great job keeping us informed.
- Engage Estero is providing a vital source of information as Estero grows and changes.
- These projects seem to be moving too slowly. We need more information on the status of what’s happening.

Almost 2/3rds also wanted Engage Estero to share other issues with the Village. These mainly focused on the following:

- This may not be the appropriate place to say this, but the Corkscrew Road Improvement project has taken WAY too long..
- Road improvements (i.e., the intersection of 41 and Williams Road
- Traffic is getting unbearable in high season and with all the new developments. We will become just like the East Coast of Florida and Naples, and it will drive people away.
- Have lived in Estero off of River Ranch Road for 29 years. I have complained numerous times to the Lee County Sheriff's office and many years ago to the mayor. The speeding and traffic violations in our area are "ridiculous." We need a lot more traffic enforcement.
- Increased safety on the Corkscrew Road during the construction.
- Just 3 things: TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT...TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT...TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT. I believe that the Village should have an active project, with community involvement, on whether to form our own Police Department.



The verbatim comments reviewed clearly showed that traffic congestion and safety were key issues the public felt the Village needed to address aggressively.

Engage Estero is grateful to the public for expressing their views, which are shared with the Village of Estero's management. We also appreciate your encouraging support for our purpose and vision.

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Engage Estero is an all-volunteer, nonpolitical, nonprofit Community Engagement Association.

Our purpose is to inform citizens of significant community issues and encourage citizen engagement to impact the quality of life in greater Estero favorably.

Our vision is to have an informed and engaged citizenry, resulting in a community that delivers the desired quality of life.

**"Be Informed, Get Engaged, and Make an Impact!"**



Inform > Engage > Impact

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