



WHAT WILL ESTERO'S FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

**GREATER ESTERO COMMUNITY REPORT
QUARTER 2 - 2025**

Engage Estero's 2nd Greater Estero Community Report 2025

Adapt or Perish

(Written by Allan Bowditch, President, Engage Estero)

Introduction

During a recent trip to many European countries, several in the former "Eastern Bloc," as it was once called, it was interesting to see how Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania were adapting to change.



It was evident that the countryside of many of these counties was littered with abandoned companies and broken-down buildings, with villages and towns nearby as a shadow of their former selves! The landscape represented a clear example of what happens when companies fail to adapt to the changing demands of society and/or their customers' purchasing habits.

However, Hungary, Romania, and Croatia have become more focused on change and have significantly improved their Gross Domestic Products (GDP); others are less so. The same can be said of companies in the USA and elsewhere, where those in charge of businesses fail to anticipate changing trends with dire consequences.

Municipalities must adapt what they offer to the public, much like companies do, because they operate in a competitive environment, even if their primary goal isn't profit. Here's why:

Attracting and Retaining Residents and Businesses

- Just like companies need customers, municipalities need residents and businesses to thrive.
- If a city doesn't evolve offering good services, infrastructure, and quality of life, people and companies may leave or choose not to settle there.

Economic Vitality

- Visitors (tourists, investors, shoppers) bring revenue to local businesses, which fuels job creation and boosts municipal tax income.
- Municipalities that fail to adapt risk economic stagnation.

Changing Expectations

- Citizens increasingly expect the same level of service, convenience, and innovation from public services as private companies (e.g., digital services, responsive communication).
- Failing to meet these expectations can lead to dissatisfaction and reduced civic engagement.

Competing for Talent and Investment

- Cities and towns compete to attract talent and investment.
- A forward-thinking, adaptive municipality is more appealing to professionals, entrepreneurs, and companies looking for vibrant, well-managed locations.

Tourism and Cultural Appeal

- Cities that evolve by enhancing their attractions, public spaces, events, and cultural offerings are more likely to attract tourists.
- Like a company updating its brand or products, a city must stay relevant and appealing.

Environmental and Social Challenges

- Societal needs are constantly shifting (e.g., aging populations, climate change, migration), and municipalities must adapt to remain livable and functional.
- Being proactive signals competence and care, building public trust.



In short, just as companies must adapt to meet market demand and stay competitive, municipalities must evolve to meet residents' needs, attract visitors, and maintain a vibrant, sustainable community.

Most people tend to become worried and uncomfortable when faced with change. Most prefer the status quo. However, like companies, municipalities will face severe financial difficulties if they do not adapt. Property values fall, and revenue will be reduced as potential purchasers become attracted to towns and cities offering more relevant attractions.



What will Estero's Future Look Like?

Introduction

Engage Estero is planning a Public Forum in March 2026 at FGCU's Cohen Ballroom to address this critical question. Details of the date and panel members will be provided together once the date is finalized.

While the interests of those living in Estero and the surrounding area need to be considered, so do the needs of future potential buyers and visitors.



The Needs of the Younger Generation

Municipalities must respond to younger generations' unique values, habits, and expectations to attract and engage Gen Z and younger adults. The following are some suggestions from detailed marketing research investigations examining their interests and needs.

Embrace Digital-First Services

- **Why:** Gen Z grew up with smartphones, the internet, and instant service access.
- **How:**
 - Offer mobile-friendly platforms for paying bills, reporting issues, accessing public services, and participating in local decision-making.
 - Use social media effectively for real-time updates, transparency, and engagement.



Prioritize Sustainability and Green Living

- **Why:** Environmental sustainability is a core value for Gen Z. However, given the impact of climate change, regardless of what people think is causing it, this issue impacts many people's views, regardless of age.

With the increase in storms and their severity, the increased danger of seawater surges, the rise in insurance costs, and the threat of reduced home values to those homes in vulnerable areas, this issue has a wide level of concern and support.

- **How:**

- Invest in renewable energy, green public transport, bike infrastructure, and walkable neighborhoods. Support urban farming, zero-waste programs, and visible climate action plans. The Village of Estero Council and Management are fully committed to these aspects, which is reassuring.

Foster Affordable, Flexible Housing

- **Why:** Younger adults face housing affordability challenges and value flexible, urban lifestyles.
- **How:**
 - Promote mixed-use developments, co-living spaces, and affordable rental units.
 - Simplify zoning and building codes to allow for diverse housing options.



Engage Estero's management team has produced several articles on this topic and has spoken to the Lee County Commissioners and the Estero Village management about the need to increase affordable homes for young professionals, such as teachers, healthcare workers, first responders, and other essential workers who support our community. While Lee County has taken several initiatives to enhance affordable homes, and the Estero Village Management has agreed with the

suggestion, we have yet to see the results of any local action. There is a need to address this issue sooner rather than later!

Enable Community and Social Spaces

- **Why:** Gen Z values community, inclusivity, and spaces that promote connection and well-being.
- **How:**
 - Create vibrant, inclusive public spaces with free Wi-Fi, like parks, open-air gathering spots, and community centers.
 - Host cultural events, night markets, music festivals, and pop-up activities that reflect diversity.

Estero's Village Management and Council have been very focused on this aspect. The Village has purchased several land parcels to ensure that commercial and residential buildings do not occur in those areas, enhancing green space and the local animal habitat and vegetation. Steps have also been taken to reduce the risk of flooding in these areas.

The Village has significantly invested in the new Sports and Recreation Complex located at the northeast corner of Williams Road and Via Coconut. The complex will be completed in the next few years. Building a Music & Arts Center in Estero is also being considered, but project plans

have not been finalized. This would fit with the current and future interests of residents, young and old.

Support Local Innovation and Entrepreneurship

- **Why:** Many young adults value independence and purpose-driven work.
- **How:**
 - Develop coworking spaces, startup hubs, and support programs for young entrepreneurs.
 - Partner with local schools and colleges to create pathways from education to local employment.



FGCU is a university at the forefront of entrepreneurial development. Indeed, many students have been very successful in creating small businesses. However, a municipality that can assist with these new small businesses is required. Municipalities are crucial in developing an ecosystem where small and entrepreneurial companies can start and thrive. There is a need to:

- ✓ Create a **"one-stop shop"** for business registration, permits, and licensing.
- ✓ Offer **fast-track programs** for small businesses and startups.
- ✓ Translate processes into plain language and provide multilingual support where needed.
- ✓ Encourage **shared commercial spaces** or maker hubs with shared tools and facilities.
- ✓ Provide **microgrants, low-interest loans, or tax relief** for startups and local businesses.
- ✓ Partner with banks or credit unions to create **municipal-backed loan guarantees**.
- ✓ Provide mentorship programs with local business leaders, accountants, and legal professionals.
- ✓ Offer free or low-cost marketing, bookkeeping, taxes, and digital tools workshops.
- ✓ Highlight success stories through local media, social media, and municipal newsletters.

What is required are clear policies, innovative partnerships, and a genuine commitment to reducing barriers for small new businesses to thrive.

Offer Convenient, Sustainable Transit

- **Why:** Car ownership is less of a priority; convenience and environmental impact matter more.
- **How:**
 - Improve public transportation systems—make them clean, affordable, and reliable.

- Invest in micromobility (bike/scooter sharing) and integrate payment across transport modes.

There are good examples in other municipalities where these decisions have already been taken with positive results.

Engage Youth in Governance

- **Why:** Gen Z wants to be heard and have a say in shaping their communities.
- **How:**
 - Create youth advisory councils and participatory budgeting platforms.
 - Use digital tools to gather input and host interactive town halls.

Organizations like Engage Estero need volunteers to help keep residents informed and to help develop committees to work on important issues that might adversely affect our community. These actions help to shape communities in a positive way, free from politics.

Build a Distinctive Identity and Brand

- **Why:** Younger generations are drawn to cities with character, culture, and a clear sense of identity.
- **How:**
 - Highlight local arts, heritage, food, and culture through storytelling and design.
 - Brand the city as innovative, inclusive, and future-ready.

Engage Estero, in conjunction with the Village Management, believes this aspect is an essential ingredient of how Estero is promoted and fits with residents' view of where they live and how to attract visitors.

Last year, Engage Estero encouraged residents to submit their ideas of what Estero's Sense of Place should be. Many excellent comments were combined into a final version by a team of advertising and marketing executives. The Sense of Place was updated recently, considering possible annexation plans to expand Estero's current boundary. The description below has been shared with the Village Management and Council, and it is hoped that this or a modification of it will be used for the future promotion of Estero.

With its Urban Village Vibe, Estero is Southwest Florida's Best Kept Secret.



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.

Discover the perfect family getaway, where endless adventures, fun-filled attractions, and unforgettable memories await at every turn! You are sure to have many enjoyable and unforgettable experiences. It's the place you want to be!

Estero checks all the boxes!

Conclusion

Municipalities that embrace Gen Z values, prioritize digital convenience, and emphasize sustainability, inclusivity, and authenticity will attract this generation and cultivate vibrant, resilient communities. It's not just about new technology or trendy programs—it's about demonstrating a genuine commitment to progressive, responsive urban living.

If you reside in greater Estero, you'll want to attend the Spring Public Forum at FGCU. We are hoping to finalize the panel shortly, but anticipate we will have representatives from Village Management, Developers, Lee Health, and FGCU. We will explore:

- ✓ Can Estero keep its image as a Village if it expands its boundary?
- ✓ What additional plans are in hand to enhance its appeal to current and future residents?

- ✓ Will Estero become a "go-to" location for the most advanced healthcare services in Southwest Florida?
- ✓ Can the link between FGCU and Estero be tightened to enable both to enhance their reputations in the USA and internationally?
- ✓ Will our infrastructure be capable of handling these developments?

Stay tuned for more details on this event!



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