

The Votes Are In: Pine Islanders Want to Continue Path Toward Incorporation

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In July, the Greater Pine Island Civic Association (GPICA) sent postcard ballots to registered voters asking Pine Islanders whether they wanted us to continue our investigation into the pros and cons of incorporating.

The votes are in and 80 percent of the residents who returned ballots said they want to continue to move forward toward incorporation.

“We knew that people were upset with the changes made to the planning rules that kept Pine Island a coastal-rural paradise and with Cape Coral’s annexation moves,” said Roger Wood, Chairman of the GPICA board. “And Pine Islanders in general are an independent group, so we’re not really surprised that an overwhelming majority of residents who voted want to regain control of their community. Now, the Civic Association has a clear mandate to continue our incorporation studies and to move forward with our next steps.”

GPICA began its initial incorporation study after Lee County Commissioners revised the Pine Island Plan to allow greater building densities, and the City of Cape Coral annexed six parcels covering 5.47 acres in Matlacha in 2016. Members of the Pine Island Community had no say in the annexation vote and, under Cape zoning rules, the city could add additional boat ramps, a marina and buildings up to eight stories tall.

In response, GPICA hired BJM Consulting, Inc., to conduct an initial feasibility study to explore whether incorporation would be financially possible. The study, using boundaries contiguous with those of the Matlacha Pine Island Fire Control District, included an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) related to incorporation.

The results showed that we are a donor community to Lee County — meaning that we pay more in taxes than we receive in services and the county keeps our excess tax dollars. As an incorporated town, all the taxes would come directly to us. We would then contract with the county to provide services (sheriff, streets, waste disposal, permitting, parks, library, etc.) at the current levels. The surplus would pay the cost of our local government and provide a rainy day fund under our local control. (Note: water and fire are already provided by our own special districts and schools are provided by the Lee County School District — this would not change.)

The initial results showed that under a “government light” concept with minimal town staff and by contracting with the county to continue services as they are currently provided, our millage rate could remain the same at 0.8398 mils and our projected revenues would be \$3.24 million in three years and \$3.44 million in five years; expenses of \$2.45 million and \$2.7 million in three and five years and \$2.49 million and \$4.05 million in reserves under the “best-case scenario” projected by BJM. As a town, we would also be eligible for state revenue sharing funds, franchise fees from utilities and able to negotiate with the County for a share of the communication services tax.

GPICA sent postcard ballots to registered voters on Pine Island and in Matlacha and Cape Royal, (7,148 voters). 158 letters were returned as undeliverable.

Here are the results:

- Total postcards returned: 2,505
- 80 percent, or 1,997, voted yes to continued exploration of incorporation
- Only 20 percent, or 508, voted no

A breakdown by Pine Island community showed that only Cape Royal voters want to opt-out of incorporation:

- Bokeelia: Yes, 755; No, 143
- St. James City: Yes, 992; No, 199
- Matlacha: Yes, 217; No, 43
- Cape Royal: Yes, 33; No, 123

GPICA’s next step will be to have BJM take another look at the numbers and see if incorporation is still fiscally feasible without inclusion of the Cape Royal community. We will also create a charter document that broadly defines the purpose and goals of the town, including our purpose to be a small government that represents Matlacha, Matlacha Isles, Pine Island Center, Pineland, Bokeelia and St. James City.

In September, we will present the charter, financial feasibility study and results from this poll of voters to members of the Southwest Florida legislative delegation (state Representatives and Senators). Once they approve our move to incorporate, it will be sent to the full Legislature for its approval and then go on to the Governor for his signature.

After that, the question of incorporation will come back to our community for a full and formal referendum conducted by the Lee County Board of Elections on Nov. 6, 2018, and incorporation will be decided at that time.

- For more information and to review the results of the initial BJM incorporation study, visit GPICA.org. To receive notice of future meetings, join our newsletter list at www.pineislandplan.com/#JOIN.