

COMMENTARY

Future past tense: the 2025 20/20

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Lee County Commissioner Brian Bigelow announced a new plan Wednesday “to create a truly public place of Lee County’s now too-private public places,” saying the Conservation 20/20 Land Stewardship program needed to be changed to benefit more people.

“That was a wonderful program in conception, and it remains a success in theory, one that I support completely,” Bigelow said. “But theory is one thing, and reality is another. Practically speaking, the 20/20 program is a complete failure. Its managers and the controlling board have been 100-percent blind to the real needs of our 620,000 residents and taxpayers, so far.”

Standing on the steps of the old county Courthouse downtown, along with his recent appointments to the Conservation 20/20 board, Julio Chico Rivera, and William “Big Willy” Keyes, Bigelow outlined a “conversion schedule” that he predicted would bring significantly larger numbers of people to the public land.

“It’s very simple: Julio and Big Willy represent the first real diversity we’ve ever had on this board. They are working together to put the ‘public’ back in public land, because the public is diverse. It’s not just a bunch of good ol’ boys like it was in my great-grandfather’s day, or even in my father’s day. (Bigelow’s great grandfather, William H. Towles, burned down the original Lee County Courthouse by night, so the county would build the new one, in 1915. His father, Charlie Bigelow, helped create the first land-use plan as a commissioner more than two decades ago.)

“Big Willy’s going to use the expertise he’s gained in his many land acquisition cases against Lee County to force these government stick-in-the-muds to do what’s right,” Bigelow said. “Although my colleagues are mostly stick-in-the-muds and insufferable little go-alongs who keep getting in my way, I’m not making any of this personal. It’s not personal at all, it’s progress. Someone has to stand up for the public.”

To that end, Bigelow said, Keyes, a real estate and eminent domain attorney who has long championed the rights of developers and land investors, will take legal steps to open all 20/20 lands to commercial development.

Rivera, meanwhile, will bring to bear his own diverse experience as director of Hispanic sales at Sam Galloway Ford, Bigelow said. Rivera will outline plans to open both new and used car dealerships on at least 17 of the 33 parcels that are part of Conservation 20/20 holdings, which now include almost 17,600 acres in Lee County. The \$46 million now held in the Conservation 20/20 reserve fund will be used to build roads that reach the dealerships.

“At least 9 of those new- and used-car dealerships are going to target Hispanic markets, because after all, the population in Lee alone will be at least 50-percent Hispanic by 2025, which is why we’re calling this new program the 2025 20/20,” Rivera said.

Reaching behind Bigelow on the courthouse steps, Keyes grasped Rivera’s shoulder and said, “Vaya con Dios, Juli baby, Vaya con Dios!”

The increasingly muscular Hispanic market produces thousands of workers newly benefiting from American salary and labor standards, along with heavily financed credit opportunities. Predominantly, they tend to seek trucks, vans and SUVs carrying the names of American auto manufacturers as symbols of success and assimilation, according to business analysts.

Several other commissioners either refused to comment on the 2025 20/20 plan, or were unable to comment, on Wednesday.

Commissioner Ray Judah fainted on the courthouse steps, and emergency medical technicians had to move him to Lee Memorial Hospital. Administrators there refused to accept him in the emergency room until he was returned to the courthouse steps, where he had lost his billfold with health insurance cards, they said. He was then moved to the roof of the nearby federal building and airlifted back to the trauma center by helicopter.

“We do it right — we have the best care, and the best trauma center, in 100 miles,” said Jim Nathan, Lee Memorial president and CEO, who met Judah at the hospital entrance.

But when Judah was unable to produce enough cash to make the required co-payment for his insurance, he was handcuffed to the hospital bed until a family member arrived to bail him out.

Commissioner Frank Mann, from Alva, shook his head in mute response to a reporter’s request for a comment about the 2025 20/20 plan. Mann pulled a bag of chewing tobacco from his pocket, bit off a plug bigger than he could apparently chew, smiled grimly, and spit the entire thing at a WINK-TV news crew. Unfortunately for the commissioner, his wife, Mary Lee Ferguson, and his mother, the philanthropist Barbara B. Mann, were watching the live TV feed. Both of Mann’s cell phones rang immediately, and after he put one on each ear, his face began to turn the color of a good Burgundy wine, and he left the courthouse steps in haste.

Commissioner Bob Janes simply shook his head. Then he walked away while Bigelow was still talking, entering his office and locking the door. A Fort Myers police hostage negotiator and psychologist were unable to convince him to unlock the door and come out by early

Thursday morning.

But Commissioner Tammy Hall, who called herself “the last man standing,” told reporters that the plan was okay, but only as far as it went.

“Like everything else about Commissioner Bigelow, the plan falls short — far, far short,” she said, holding up her thumb and forefinger to suggest a length of about half-an-inch.

“There is no reason in the world to allow those wonderful 20/20 properties to be dominated by automobile dealerships. I think that for years, developers have been discriminated against in Lee County, and this is just another example of that discrimination. Some of this land should be opened to development — green development, which is so important to all of us, because it keeps the green in green places, but it also puts the public in developed places.

“And frankly, if Julio gets to sell trucks and cars off of these wonderful public lands, then I think he should agree that all of the vehicles sold through the 2025 20/20 program should be painted green. Because green is a very, very important color, it’s one of my very favorite colors, and we’ll be seeing a lot more of it in our future. And developers are very, very important to our future, because by 2025, we will be completely developed. So we better do it right, and do it very very green.”

Hall may have been the last man standing, but Bigelow had the last word, explaining.

“I have not been understood, especially by other commissioners, and especially by her,” he said. “I’m trying hard to make them understand me. I know my public already does.” ■

NOTE: Bigelow announced the 2025 20/20 plan on January 8, 2008. Florida Weekly will faithfully continue to report future past tense events and news whenever it breaks, in this space.

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