

**INTERIM REPORT - HIGHLANDS COUNTY RIDGE TO RIVER**

**CONSERVATION PLANNING STUDY**

**RFP RFP No: 24-016-SDQ**



North Florida Land Trust

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**Introduction**

The North Florida Land Trust (NFLT) was engaged by the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) to assist the County with determining the feasibility and nature of a locally funded land conservation program. NFLT was selected based on its response (Exhibit A – Schedule/Service Overview) to Highlands County RFP NO: 24-016-SDQ RIDGE TO RIVER CONSERVATION PLANNING STUDY.

The County Commission sought this assistance in response to citizen concerns that the County was facing unprecedented development pressure. That pressure resulted in the conversion and loss of agricultural and natural lands. A tipping point may have been after the recent freezes, citrus canker, and citrus greening episodes that have significantly impacted traditional citrus production lands. This has forced producers to consider alternative ways to forestall continued economic losses and make a living, including letting the land go out of production or convert it into non-agricultural use. This has devastating effects on the local economy and on the many natural resource benefits such lands provide the community.

Highlands County lags other Florida Counties in percentage of lands in conservation use. While the Florida Natural Areas Inventory lists 33% of the County in “conservation use”, this figure is misleading. It includes Avon Park Air Force Range in its data for Federally managed lands. While much of AVAFR is managed as conservation lands, it is not permanently protected; its primary purpose is national security. Removing the acreage of the Range in Highlands County from the data results in Highlands County having 25% of its area in conservation, lower than the average of 33% for other Florida counties (Table 1, below).

Table 1.

	CONSERVATION ACREAGE					TOTAL CONSERVATION	HIGHLANDS COUNTY AREA	PERCENT OF COUNTY IN CONSERVATION
	LOCAL	STATE	FEDERAL	PRIVATE				
Highlands County	1,450	80,220	115,770	21,000	218,440	657,920	33%	
Avon Park Air Force Range			53,436		53,436			
Net APAFR:	1,450	80,220	62,334	21,000	165,004	657,920	25%	

([https://www.fnai.org/PDFs/MAxCounty\\_202501.pdf](https://www.fnai.org/PDFs/MAxCounty_202501.pdf))

**Goal of the Ridge to River Conservation Planning Study.**

In recognition of the losses in agricultural and natural lands, the County issued the RFP to determine ways to protect its open space. The goal of this Planning Study was “...to establish a conservation program that will guide the protection of our natural resources, reflect the environmental conservation values of the community, and lay out a financial path for achieving conservation goals and objectives.” A commonly asked question is, “How much land?” or “When will we know we have enough?” There are several metrics that can be used to determine success: increase the total to the State average or increase just the amount of locally owned conservation lands to the state average of 1.5% of County area. Table 2 shows how much additional conservation acreage would be needed, if this was the metric the community wanted to use.

However, NFLT recognizes that communities are not homogenous and necessarily adjust their conservation goals according to the resources present, their economic conditions, and their socio-political values. This is why the NFLT uses a collaborative approach, with a heavy emphasis on community input and transparency. How much is enough ultimately depends on each community’s tolerance.

Table 2.

	LOCAL	STATE	FEDERAL	PRIVATE	TOTAL	COUNTY AREA
Highlands	1,450	80,220	62,334	21,000	165,004	657,920
Percent of County	0.22%	12.19%	9.47%	3.19%	25.08%	
Average of All Counties	1.58%	17.68%	12.22%	1.02%	32.50%	
Acreage Needed	8,976	36,118	18,043	(14,319)	48,818	7%

To address this question of community values and tolerances, NFLT is facilitating community discussions about the need, values, structure and operation of a potential land conservation program. Protecting the appropriate lands in the desired quantity to achieve the conservation objectives can be achieved by creating sound strategies for the identification and preservation of appropriate lands across the County.

Two important notes before we proceed.

1. Any proposed Highlands County program, like all State, federal, and other County programs in Florida are “Willing Seller” only. This means the County may not use its power of condemnation nor eminent domain to acquire property for conservation. Each acquisition is voluntarily negotiated, in good faith by the parties, in an arm’s length real estate transaction, using market values for property value.

- The term “county-owned” when used in this context, applies to both County ownership of lands in fee simple title and the County holding conservation easements on private property. It should be a goal to acquire the minimum interest in title of a property that protects its identified conservation value.

**Strategic Conservation Planning.**

Open space provides a myriad of benefits that flow to a community including cleaning air and water, attenuating and storing storm floodwaters, preserving agricultural productivity and rural lifestyles, recharging drinking water supplies, providing recreational opportunities, and economically enhancing community aesthetics. None of these benefits are guaranteed unless that property is protected. A strategic conservation plan will help Highlands County identify, prioritize, acquire, and protect land that effectively achieves their conservation objectives. Strategic Conservation Planning helps visualize a future for the community and charts a course to realize that vision. A well-executed strategic conservation planning process will include community input obtained using a defensible scientific process so that decision makers know that their decisions are sound and reflect community values. In addition, by having clearly identifiable goals, potential funding partners can easily identify joint priorities to bring outside funding to the table. The strategic conservation plan identifies known conservation resources. Using the plan, County staff and elected officials can understand what open space benefits its community values and where those resources are located.

**Conservation Land Acquisition Program.**

The Conservation Land Acquisition Program implements the vision of the strategic conservation plan in Highlands County. It sets out a sensible, efficient, and transparent public and real estate process for the acquisition of interests in lands, covering the nomination, public decision making, and real estate process for acquisition. The process in Figure 1 below represents a linear path from public concern about the loss of their open spaces, to final acquisition and management of County-owned conservation lands. Each step in the figure below represents a milestone, which will be presented to County staff for approval before taking any further steps.

Figure 1.



## Status.

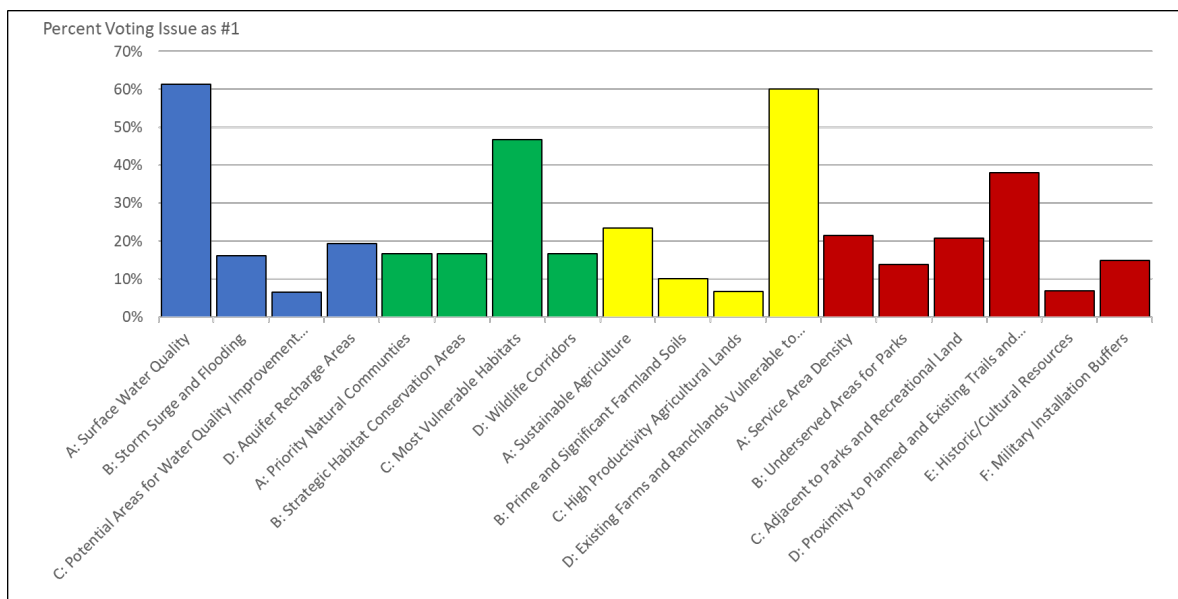
NFLT completed Phase 1 of the Scope with this Interim Report following the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) workshop on March 4, 2025. NFLT will initiate Phase 2 and will present its findings and recommendations to the BoCC at a subsequent meeting later around the end of the year.

## Key Findings – Subject Matter Expert Panels

Prior to making any recommendations or meeting with elected officials, NFLT met with community members with critical roles, or a vested interest, in open space in Highlands County. Exhibit A has a list of the members and which panels they were assigned to based on their connection to the land. The Panels were Agriculture, Cultural, Historic, & Recreational, Non-governmental entities, and Resource Agencies. Not everyone invited was able to attend and NFLT grouped the Cultural & Historic and Recreation & Economic representatives together in a single meeting. Each panel was asked to respond to the same polling questions. These questions were grouped to elicit information about the Expert’s opinions on Water Issues, Habitat and Species Protection, Working Lands & Rural Lifestyles, and Outdoor Recreation & Quality of Life. Exhibit B has copies of the presentation and the results of the polling questions. The members’ responses are summarized in Exhibit C. Exhibit D lists the additional comments that were submitted by the members.

Three questions generated the highest level of response (as indicated by them being voted as the #1 concern for Highland County). These were Surface Water Quality, Most Vulnerable Habitats and Existing Farms and Ranchlands Vulnerable to Conversion. See Figure 2. Concern for the most vulnerable lands did not appear to diminish when it was pointed out that the most vulnerable lands were typically those closest to developed areas and therefore would command the highest prices per acre. Ranking fourth was Proximity to Planned and Existing Trails and Blueways.

**Figure 2.**



### **Key Findings – March 4, BoCC Meeting.**

In the first part of the workshop, NFLT presented the County Commissioners with an outline of a local program and how one is set up and implemented, and several organizing principles. NFLT then asked for consensus on Question #1: “Is there sufficient interest on part of Highlands County BoCC to work towards a November 2026 Referendum?” After some discussion, the County Commissioners agreed that there was unanimous agreement for NFLT and County staff to proceed with Phase 2. The BoCC Presentation is included as Exhibit E.

The idea of a referendum was raised during this portion of the workshop in the interest of disclosing the full cost of a land conservation program. Any land conservation program needs to be funded not only in terms of purchasing property interests and land stewardship, but also the operating costs. Land conservation is not considered a core service of local government like policing, emergency services, water & wastewater, etc. As such, it is appropriate to ask residents to tax themselves to fund such a program, so that it does not impact core service funding. Typically, these questions are settled at the ballot box. NFLT recommends holding these referenda during a Presidential or Mid-term election year when most residents are likely to come out to vote. NFLT was asked if there was any information of referendum passage rates for Presidential year, versus Mid-term year, versus off-year elections. That information is below in Table 3 and indicates better success when it is held on Presidential election year cycles.

**Table 3.**

Row Labels	# Approved	# Total Referenda	% Approved	Conservation Funds Approved	% Yes
Mid-Term	21	26	81%	\$ 1,253,380,529	60%
Off Year	21	25	84%	\$ 768,463,610	61%
Presidential	45	52	87%	\$ 2,778,845,041	63%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>\$ 4,800,689,180</b>	<b>62%</b>

Source: The Trust for Public Land, LandVote Database. <https://tpl.quickbase.com/db/bbqna2qct?a=dbpage&pageID=8>

With consensus that the Highlands BoCC was interested in hearing from the community on whether a program should be developed, NFLT started the second part of the Workshop explaining to the BoCC generally the seven main conservation value themes that are typically put before voters in local referenda. These are: Threatened & Endangered Species and Habitats, Surface Water Features, Drinking Water, Wildlife & Conservation Corridors, Agriculture, Access to Recreation, and Historic and Cultural Resources (see Exhibit E for slides and explanations of each).

After discussion, NFLT asked Consensus Question #2: “What are the conservation values of the Highlands County BoCC?” NFLT asked the individual Commissioners to vote for their priorities by placing up to five dots on any of the conservation theme maps provided in the slides. Commissioners were free to place as many of their dots on any map as they wished. The results of that dot-matrix voting are summarized in Table 4 below.

**Table 4. March 4, 2025, BoCC Workshop Conservation Theme Consensus Question #2**

Conservation Theme	BoCC #Votes	BoCC Rank	SME Rank
Access to Recreation	7	Tied #1	#4
Drinking Water	7	Tied #1	
Agriculture	4	3	#2
Surface Water Features	3	4	#1
Wildlife & Conservation Corridors	2	5	
Historic and Cultural Resources	1	Tied #6	
Threatened & Endangered Species and Habitats	1	Tied #6	#3

We have also presented an interpretation of the SME responses as they relate to the seven conservation themes. There is some correlation between the two sets of responses. After NFLT gets responses from the Community Workshops, all of the ranks will be weighted, and a final set of recommendations will be provided.

**Next Steps – Phase 2; Community Workshops.**

A well-executed strategic conservation planning process should include broad and deep input to reflect the community’s values. NFLT will help County staff develop and present public workshops to allow the community to speak to their “conservation values” and quantify them in measurable terms for staff and elected officials. As with the BoCC, the participants will be asked to rank and prioritize what they think are the important conservation values to be protected by a program. NFLT will compile the results into a draft Highlands County Land Conservation Program Greenprint. NFLT will develop a GIS model that incorporates those priorities and produce a heat-map that visually displays the results in the Greenprint. This is not intended to identify individual properties, but to demonstrate visually that the values that folks want protected do exist here.

The draft report will include model Program Ordinances that can be used to establish the Program, and outline of an operating manual which. It will include a land nomination form and evaluation tool with which County staff can evaluate how well property nominations meet the Program goals as they were expressed in the Referendum.

NFLT will work with County staff to present the draft report to the BoCC for consideration and comment. NFLT will incorporate members’ recommendations as to the land acquisition and management process, such as approving institutions or boards, acquisition processes, criteria, etc. into the draft Report. The revised Report will be brought back to the BoCC for consideration and adoption as a roadmap to move forward.

Finally, NFLT will recommend the BoCC hear from our partner, the Trust For Public Land (TPL). They will conduct a Feasibility Study in Spring 2026. Using detailed polling information from a cross-section of likely voters, TPL will provide a winning formula for a Referendum, or a sense that the timing is not conducive, and the project be shelved until it is likely to pass.


It is our pleasure to assist Highlands County in this Study and we are pleased to be moving forward with bringing this out into the community for their input.

**Exhibit A. Subject Matter Panel members:**

Panel	Organization	Name
Agricultural	Total: 14	
Agricultural	Farm Bureau	Trevor Murphy
Agricultural	Citrus Growers Association	Ray Royce (Heartland Ag Coalition)
Agricultural	Highlands Chapter of FL Cattlemens' Association	Sarah Childs
Agricultural	Highlands County Soil & Water Conservation District	Susie Bishop
Agricultural	UF/IFAS Extension	Kati Lawson
Agricultural	UF/IFAS Extension	Alissa Hevesh
Agricultural	UF/IFAS Extension	Alexandra Bennett
Agricultural	Citrus League	Bert Harris, President, Heartland Law
Agricultural	Rafter T Ranch, Cattle	Jimmy Wohl
Agricultural	Butler Dairy, Cattle	Ben Butler
Agricultural	President of the Cattlemen's Association	Sarah Childs
Agricultural	Lykes Bros engineer and land manager	Noah Handley
Agricultural	Swaine, Harris & Wohl, P.A.	Bert J. Harris, III
Agricultural	Citrus and on IFAS Citrus Board	Emma Ezell
Quality of Life	Total: 7	
Recreational, economic	<a href="#">Mason G. Smoak Foundation</a> –	Deena Wright
Recreational, economic	All Florida	Travis Thompson
Recreational, economic	Highlands County Economic Development	Sarah Beth Murphy
Recreational, economic	Heartland Association of Realtors	Robert Hinerman, incoming President
Cultural, historic	Highlands Historic Commission	Joe Gentili
Cultural, historic	Avon Park Air Force Range	Buck MacLaughlin
Cultural, historic	Seminole Tribe of Florida Tribal Historic Preservation Office	Tina Osceola
Natural Resource Agencies	Total: 17	
Natural Resource Agencies	FWC	Alex Seasholt
Natural Resource Agencies	FWC	Cory Snyder
Natural Resource Agencies	FWC	Allie McCue
Natural Resource Agencies	FWC	Noel Ethan
Natural Resource Agencies	FWC	Elysia Dytrych
Natural Resource Agencies	FDEP	Heidi Hoffman
Natural Resource Agencies	FDEP	Tory Gray
Natural Resource Agencies	FDEP	Victor Morgan Tyrone
Natural Resource Agencies	NRCS	Carlos Torres
Natural Resource Agencies	FDACS	Bret Hader
Natural Resource Agencies	FDACS	Amy Philips
Natural Resource Agencies	FDACS	Sue Mullins
Natural Resource Agencies	SWFWMD	Cindy Rodriguez
Natural Resource Agencies	SWFWMD	Mike Singer



Natural Resource Agencies	SFWMD	Jenna Bobsein
Natural Resource Agencies	SFWMD	Libby Pigman
Natural Resource Agencies	SFWMD	Stephen Collins
<b>Ecological/NGO</b>	<b>Total: 18</b>	
Ecological/NGO	Florida Native Plant Society – Heartland Chapter	Ed Murawski
Ecological/NGO	The Nature Conservancy	Cheryl Millet
Ecological/NGO	The Nature Conservancy	Chris Bergh
Ecological/NGO	Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation	Jason Lauritsen
Ecological/NGO	Archbold	Josh Daskin
Ecological/NGO	Archbold	Zach Franco
Ecological/NGO	Archbold	Vivienne Sclater
Ecological/NGO	Highlands Audubon	Ken Keck
Ecological/NGO	Highlands Audubon	Paul Gray
Ecological/NGO	Highlands Audubon	Steve Blair
Ecological/NGO	Conservation Florida	Chelsea Wisner
Ecological/NGO	Ducks Unlimited	Elizabeth Guthrie
Ecological/NGO	Green Horizons Land Trust	Rachelle Selser
Ecological/NGO	Green Horizons Land Trust	Suzanne Lindsey
Ecological/NGO	Green Horizons Land Trust	Tom Palmer
Ecological/NGO	Florida Conservation Group	Julie Morris
Ecological/NGO	Wildlands Conservation	Dave Sumter
Ecological/NGO	Wildlands Conservation	Eric Sievers
<b>Highlands County (Non-voting)</b>	<b>Total: 2</b>	
Highlands County	Highlands County	Sam Ericksen
Highlands County	Highlands County	Dawn Ritter
<b>Total (not incl. County)</b>	<b>56</b>	


## Exhibit B. SME Presentation:



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NORTH FLORIDA  
LAND TRUST  
FOUNDED SEPTEMBER 19, 1999

### HIGHLANDS COUNTY RIDGE-TO-RIVER CONSERVATION PLAN


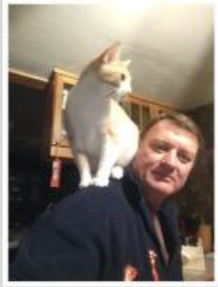




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NORTH FLORIDA  
LAND TRUST  
FOUNDED SEPTEMBER 19, 1999

### SUCCESSFUL WEBINAR

- We're made better by your questions... so please ask.
- Feel free to raise your 🖐️ when you have a question at any time.
- We've also put in breaks for questions in the presentation.
- You can also write your questions in the chat.
- We will be monitoring the chat box if you're having IT issues.
- To avoid any general laughter at your expense, you might want to mute your microphone.
- Zoom pets are always welcome.





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NORTH FLORIDA  
LAND TRUST  
FOUNDED SEPTEMBER 19, 1999

### NORTH FLORIDA LAND TRUST

Founded in 1999



#### Our Mission

To preserve and enhance our quality of life by protecting North Florida's irreplaceable natural environment.

#### Our Vision

We Envision:  
North Floridians feel more connected to and have a stronger appreciation for our unique native environment.  
The North Florida Land Trust implements collaborative approaches for long-term solutions commensurate with rapid growth. By protecting more of North Florida's farms, forests, and natural areas, we maintain traditions, enhance lives, and sustain our expanding communities.

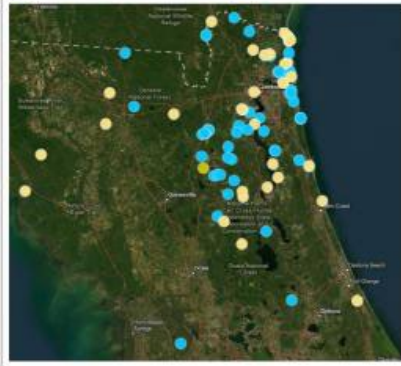
17 Staff



## PROTECTED LANDS

Core Focus Area includes:

Nassau, Duval, St Johns, Clay, Flagler, Putnam, Baker, Columbia, Marion, Bradford, Union, Lake, Volusia, Hamilton



46,105 Acres \$97.4 MM



39 properties owned by NFLT  
15 conservation easements  
40 facilitated transactions

2021 – 2024: 126,974 acres of Active Projects  
13,666 acres Closed  
\$36,713,145 in property value

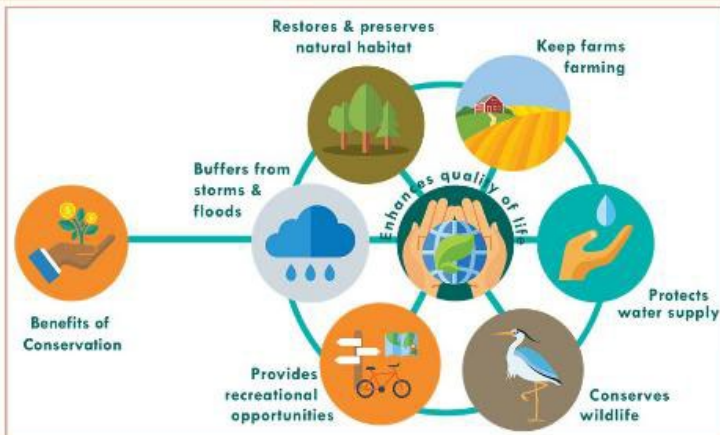


## TODAY'S GOALS

1. Help the County in development of a "Greenprint".



## CONSERVATION VALUES

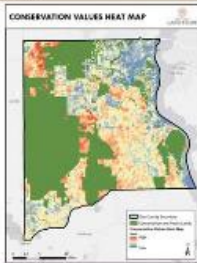


## COMMUNITY CONSERVATION - "GREENPRINTING"

1. Uses COMMUNITY INPUT to identify what benefits should be protected
2. Translate those benefits into CONSERVATION VALUES
3. Prioritizes those values based on SCIENCE
4. Provides RECOMMENDATIONS to achieve the protection – "Line of Sight"



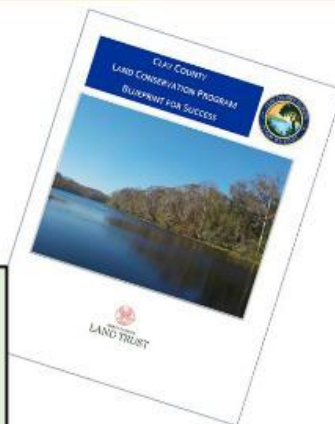
## COMMUNITY CONSERVATION - "GREENPRINTING"



Since 1999 in Florida:

- 107/126 Referenda passed (85%)
- 73/84 County Referenda (87%)
- \$5.11B conservation funds (total: \$16.3B)
- Average margin 2:1 pass (64% in favor)

[www.floridalandtrust.org](http://www.floridalandtrust.org)



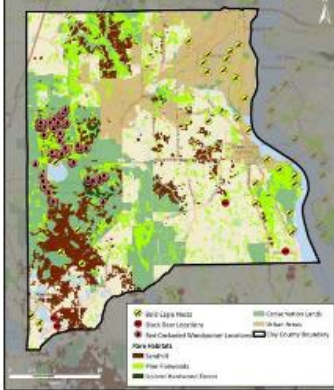
## TODAY'S GOALS

1. Help the County in development of a "Greenprint".
2. Your role today: Inform.
  - What are the most important conservation issues?
  - What kind of resources and tools are needed?
3. Subject Matter Expert Panels:
  - Agriculture
  - Recreation and Economic
  - Cultural and Historic
  - Natural Resource Agencies
  - Non-profits

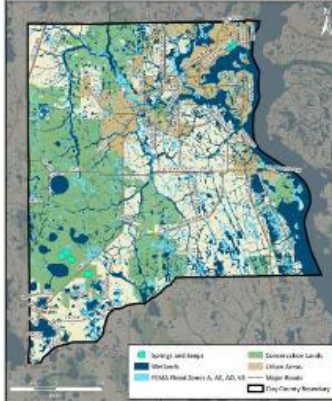


## CONSERVATION VALUES

### THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES AND HABITATS

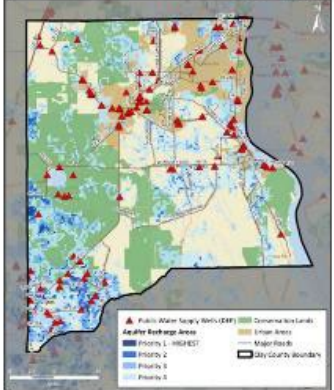


### SURFACE WATER FEATURES

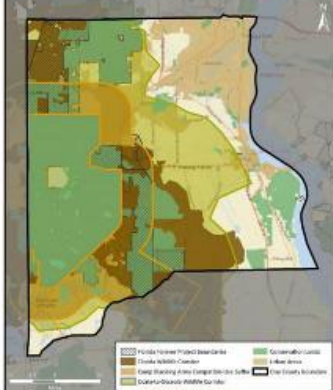


## CONSERVATION VALUES

### DRINKING WATER

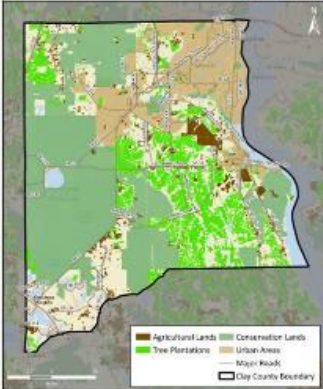


### CONNECTIVITY

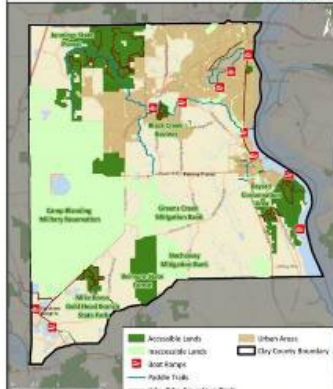


## CONSERVATION VALUES

### FARMS AND FORESTS

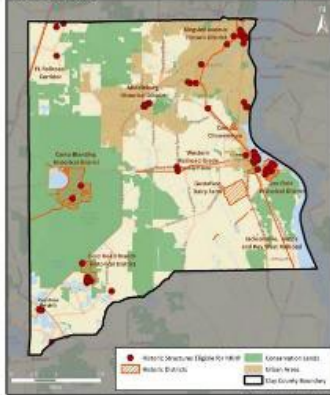


### ACCESS TO RECREATION

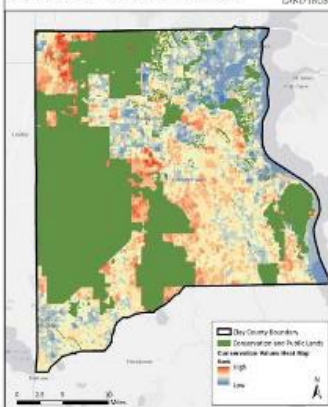


## CONSERVATION VALUES

### HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES



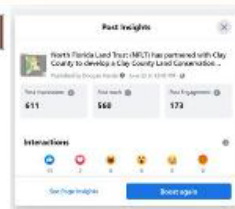
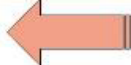
### CONSERVATION VALUES HEAT MAP



## COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS

Conservation Value	BOCC Workshop 1.24.2023	Public Workshop Koyabonc Hatchee 4.10.2023	Public Workshop Middleburg 4.13.2023	Public Workshop Green Cove Spgs 4.13.2023	Online Survey May - July 2023
<b>in all participants</b>	34	2	20	21	117
Access to Recreation	10	0	3	1	31
Connectivity	8	2	5	7	45
Drinking Water	11	1	5	2	25
Farms and Forests	5	2	55	42	62
Historic and Cultural Resources	6	0	3	6	23
Surface Water	8	0	5	0	21
Threatened and Endangered Species and Habitats	12	1	4	11	72
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>334</b>

Consensus: BOCC met 22 times each. Participant linked to 3 users each.



Conservation Value	BOCC Bank	Public Bank	Average
★ Access to Recreation	3	5	4.0
★ Connectivity	4.5	4	4.3
★ Drinking Water	2	3	2.5
★ Farms and Forests	7	5	4.0
Historic and Cultural Resources	6	7	6.5
Surface Water	4.5	6	5.3
★ Threatened and Endangered Species and Habitats	1	1	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>27</b>	

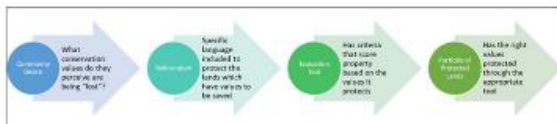


## LINE OF SIGHT

### CLAY COUNTY LAND CONSERVATION REFERENDUM TO PROTECT WATER QUALITY, WILDLIFE HABITAT, FORESTS AND FARMS

To acquire and manage lands that protect water quality in rivers, lakes, creeks, and drinking water sources; conserve wildlife habitat, natural areas, and working forests and farms; reduce flooding; and provide outdoor recreation, shall Clay County issue general obligation bonds up to \$45 million, maturing within 20 years, bearing interest not exceeding legal maximum rates, payable from ad valorem tax up to 0.2 mills, with annual audits, citizen oversight, and full public disclosure of spending?

YES  
 NO

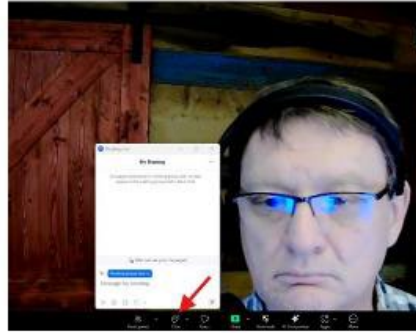


TIMEFRAME



Questions?

- Use the raise your hand function
- Put questions in the text box



TAKE A BREAK!

ENGAGED LISTENING AND PARTICIPATION IS HARD WORK – TAKE A BREAK

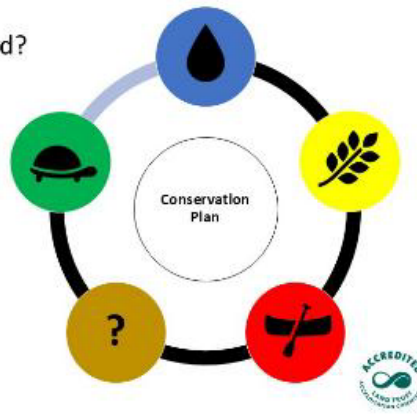
BE BACK IN 5 MINUTES



### HIGH LEVEL – RESOURCE CATEGORIES

1. Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward?

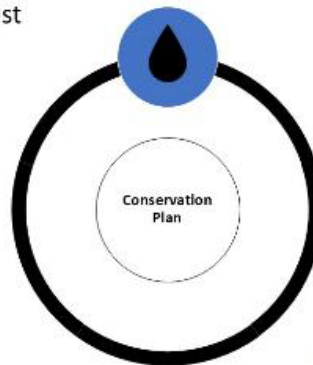
- a) Water Issues
- b) Habitat and Species Protection
- c) Working Lands and Rural Lifestyles
- d) Outdoor Recreation and Quality of Life
- e) Other?



### WATER RESOURCES CATEGORY

2. Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the county going forward in the category of Water Issues?

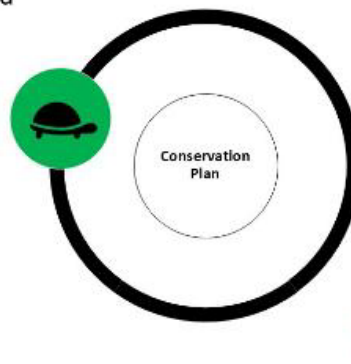
- a) Surface Water Quality
- b) Storm Surge and Flooding
- c) Potential area for water quality improvement projects
- d) Aquifer Recharge Areas
- e) Other?



### HABITAT & SPECIES CATEGORY

3. Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Habitat and Species Protection?

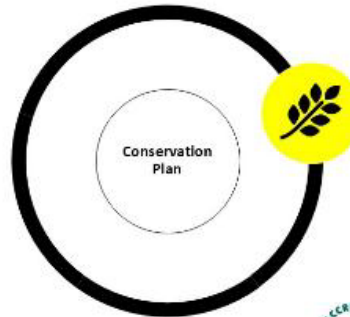
- a) Priority Natural Communities
- b) Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas
- c) Most Vulnerable Habitats
- d) Wildlife Corridors
- e) Other?



## WORKING LANDS CATEGORY

4. Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Working Lands and Rural Lifestyles?

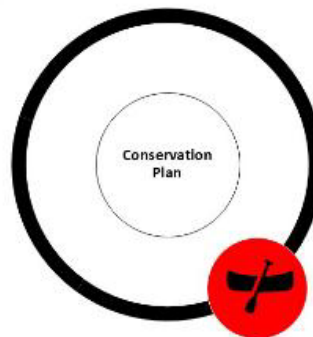
- a) Sustainable Agriculture
- b) Prime and Significant Farmland Soils
- c) High Productivity Agricultural Lands
- d) Existing Farms and Ranchlands vulnerable to conversion
- e) Other?



## RECREATION & QUALITY OF LIFE CATEGORY

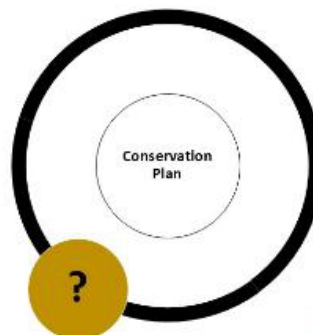
5. Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Outdoor Nature-based Recreation and Quality of Life?

- a) Service Area Density
- b) Underserved Areas for Parks
- c) Adjacent to Parks and Recreational Land
- d) Proximity to planned and existing trails and blueways
- e) Historic Resources
- f) Military Installation Buffers
- g) Other?

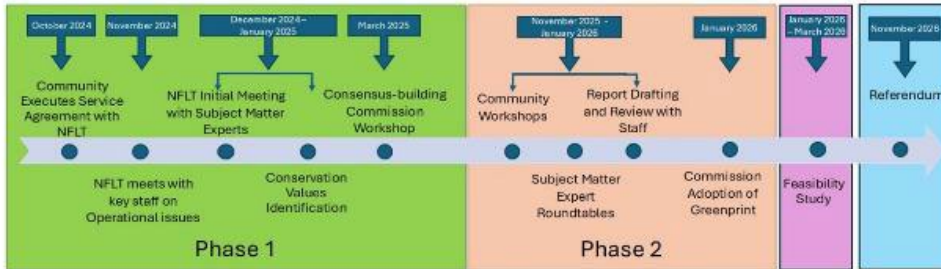


## ANY CATEGORIES WE MISSED?

6. Is there a conservation value or other category you feel is locally important?

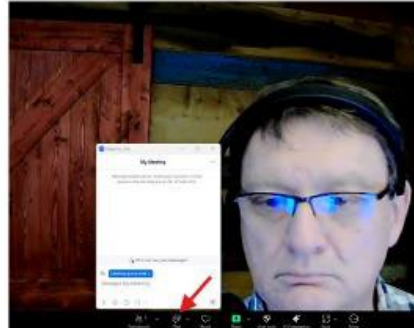


## WHATS NEXT?



## QUESTIONS?

- Use the raise your hand function
- Put questions in the text box



## THANK YOU!



Allison DeFoor  
 PRESIDENT/CEO

Ramesh Buch  
 DIRECTOR OF CONSERVATION ACQUISITIONS

Heather Nagy  
 STRATEGIC CONSERVATION COORDINATOR

Will Wanzenberg  
 CONSERVATION ACQUISITIONS ASSOCIATE COORDINATOR

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**Exhibit B Cont'd. SME Presentation and Polling Responses:**

		Q1: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward?				Q2: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the county going forward in the category of Water Issues?				Q3: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Habitat and Species Protection?				Q4: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Working Lands and Rural Lifestyles?				Q5: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Outdoor Nature-based Recreation and Quality of Life?					
		A: Water Issues	B: Habitat and Species Protection	C: Working Lands and Rural Lifestyles	D: Outdoor Recreation and Quality of Life	A: Surface Water Quality	B: Storm Surge and Flooding	C: Potential Area for Water Quality Improvement Projects	D: Aquifer Recharge Areas	A: Priority Natural Communities	B: Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas	C: Most Vulnerable Habitats	D: Wildlife Corridors	A: Sustainable Agriculture	B: Prime and Significant Farmland Soils	C: High Productivity Agricultural Lands	D: Existing Farms and Ranchlands Vulnerable to Conversion	A: Service Area Density	B: Underserved Areas for Parks	C: Adjacent to Parks and Recreational Land	D: Proximity to Planned and Existing Trails and Blueways	E: Historic/Cultural Resources	F: Military Installation Buffers
Group	Name	1A	1B	1C	1D	2A	2B	2C	2D	3A	3B	3C	3D	4A	4B	4C	4D	5A	5B	5C	5D	5E	5F
		<b>AGR: Agriculture</b> <b>CHR: Cultural, Historic, &amp; Recreational</b> <b>NGO: Non-governmental entities</b> <b>RES: Resource Agencies.</b>																					
AGR	Ally Bennett	2	3	1	4	3	1	4	2	4	3	1	2	3	4	2	1	1	5	3	2	4	6
AGR	Ben Butler	2	4	1	3	1	3	2	3	3	3	1	2	2	3	3	1	3	4	1	2	5	6
AGR	Bert Harris	2	3	4	1	1	3	2	5					1	2	3	4		3	1	2	4	
AGR	Emma Ezell	3	5	1	2	1	2	3	4	2	3	1	4	5	3	2	1	4	1	2	3	5	6
AGR	Noah Handley	1	5	2	3	1	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	2	1	4	3	5	2	1	6	4
AGR	Ray Royce	3	5	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	2	1	4	1	4	3	2	4	3	2	1	5	6
AGR	Sarah Childs					1	3	2	1	2	3	1	4					4	3	2	1	6	5
AGR	Susie Bishop	3	2	1	4	3	4	2	1	3	1	2	4	2	4	3	1	2	6	4	1	5	3

<b>AGR</b>	Trevor Murphy	2	3	1	4	2	4	3	1	4	2	3	1	2	4	3	1	4	3	2	1	5	6
<b>CHR</b>	Beneshea Frazier	4	3	1	2	2	3	1	4	1	3	4	2	3	4	1	2						
<b>CHR</b>	Deena Wright	3	2	4	1	1	2	4	3	4	1	2	3	2	3	4	1	6	2	3	1	5	4
<b>CHR</b>	Joe Gentili	4	1	2	3	1	3	2	4	3	2	1	4	2	4	3	1	1	4	6	5	3	2
<b>CHR</b>	Sarah Beth Murphy	2	2	2	2	1	2	3	4	4	3	2	1	2	4	3	1	4	5	1	2	3	6
<b>CHR</b>	Sheila McNamara	1	3	2	5	3	2	4	1	3	4	1	2	1	2	3	4	4	2	6	3	5	1
<b>NGO</b>	Chelsea Wisner	3	1	2	4	3	1	4	2	3	2	4	1	4	3	2	1	3	2	4	1	5	6
<b>NGO</b>	Chris Bergh	3	1	2	4	1	4	3	2	1	3	4	2	4	2	3	5	5	3	2	5	6	1
<b>NGO</b>	Elizabeth Guthrie	1	3	2	4	1	3	2	4	4	2	3	1	1	4	3	2	1	4	3	5	6	2
<b>NGO</b>	Joshua Daskin	3	1	2	4	3	1	2	4	1	4	2	3	2	4	3	1	1	2	3	5	6	4
<b>NGO</b>	Ken Keck	4	2	1	3	2	4	3	1	4	1	3	2	3	4	2	1	4	2	3	5	1	
<b>NGO</b>	Paul Gray	3	4	1	2	1	4	2	3	2	4	1	3	1	3	4	2	5	1	2	3	4	6
<b>NGO</b>	Rachelle Selser	2	1	4	3	3	4	2	1	2	1	3	4	2	3	4	1	4	3	2	1	5	6
<b>NGO</b>	Steve Blair	2	1	4	3	1	5	2	3	2	1	3	4	1	2	3	4	4	2	3	1	3	1
<b>NGO</b>	Vivienne Sclater	2	4	1	3	1	2	4	3	1	4	3	2	2	4	3	1	2	1	3	4	5	6
<b>NGO</b>	Zach Franco	3	1	2	4	1	3	2	4	3	4	1	2	3	1	4	2						
<b>RES</b>	Alex Seasholtz	2	1	4	3	1	5	2	3	3	4	1	2	2	1	5	3	7	3	2	1	1	3
<b>RES</b>	Buck MacLaughlin	2	4	1	3	3	1	4	2	4	3	1	2	4	3	2	1	1	4	4	6	3	2
<b>RES</b>	Cindy Rodriguez	1	2	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	1
<b>RES</b>	Cory Snyder	4	2	1	3	1	4	2	3	2	4	1	2	1	4	5	3	4	5	1	2	6	3
<b>RES</b>	Elysia Dytrych	4	1	3	2	1	4	3	2	1	4	2	3	2	3	4	1	4	5	1	2	6	3
<b>RES</b>	Jenna Bobsein	1	2	4	3	1	4	2	3	2	3	1	4	2	3	4	1	2	1	5	3	4	6
<b>RES</b>	Libby Pigman	1	3	4	2	1	5	2	3	5	2	3	1	3	5	2	1	3	7	1	2	7	2


**Exhibit C. SME Polling results Summarized:**


	Q1: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward?				Q2: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Water Issues?				Q3: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Habitat and Species Protection?				Q4: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Working Lands and Rural Lifestyles?				Q5: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Outdoor Nature-based Recreation and Quality of Life?					
	A: Water Issues	B: Habitat and Species Protection	C: Working Lands and Rural Lifestyles	D: Outdoor Recreation and Quality of Life	A: Surface Water Quality	B: Storm Surge and Flooding	C: Potential Areas for Water Quality Improvement Projects	D: Aquifer Recharge Areas	A: Priority Natural Communities	B: Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas	C: Most Vulnerable Habitats	D: Wildlife Corridors	A: Sustainable Agriculture	B: Prime and Significant Farmland Soils	C: High Productivity Agricultural Lands	D: Existing Farms and Ranchlands Vulnerable to Conversion	A: Service Area Density	B: Underserved Areas for Parks	C: Adjacent to Parks and Recreational Land	D: Proximity to Planned and Existing Trails and Blueways	E: Historic/Cultural Resources	F: Military Installation Buffers
	1A	1B	1C	1D	2A	2B	2C	2D	3A	3B	3C	3D	4A	4B	4C	4D	5A	5B	5C	5D	5E	5F
<b>AGR AVG</b>	2.3	3.8	1.5	2.9	1.8	2.9	2.3	2.4	2.9	2.5	1.6	2.9	2.4	3.3	2.5	1.9	3.1	3.7	2.1	1.6	5.0	5.3
<b>CHR AVG</b>	2.8	2.2	2.2	2.6	1.6	2.4	2.8	3.2	3.0	2.6	2.0	2.4	2.0	3.4	2.8	1.8	3.8	3.3	4.0	2.8	4.0	3.3
<b>NGO AVG</b>	2.6	1.9	2.1	3.4	1.7	3.1	2.6	2.7	2.3	2.6	2.7	2.4	2.3	3.0	3.1	2.0	3.2	2.2	2.8	3.3	4.6	4.0
<b>RES AVG</b>	2.1	2.1	2.7	2.6	1.4	3.4	2.6	2.6	2.7	3.1	1.4	2.3	2.3	2.9	3.4	1.6	3.1	3.9	2.3	2.4	4.1	2.9
<b>Total AVG</b>	2.4	2.5	2.1	2.9	1.6	3.0	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.0	2.5	2.3	3.1	3.0	1.8	3.3	3.2	2.6	2.5	4.5	4.0
<b>Percent Voting #1</b>	20	30	40	7	61	16	6	19	17	17	47	17	23	10	7	60	21	14	21	38	7	15

**Exhibit D. SME Comments received:**


❖ In response to Q1 What is the most significant issue facing the County.:
➤ “Water issues should be funded by the broader area not our county. Because the District is using our county for a recharge area for other cities.”
➤ “The public should be allowed to use the land we pay [for].”
➤ “Development of cities/towns”
❖ In response to Q2 Water Resources issues priorities.
➤ “Water Storage and Watershed Restoration Opportunities”
➤ “Water Supply”
➤ “Aquifer recharge should be paid by others.”
➤ “Water Quality should be our local expense to cure our impacts.”
❖ In response to Q3 Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Habitat and Species Protection?
➤ “I do not like this limitation created by this question. “
➤ “T&E Plant Species.”
❖ In response to prioritizing Q4 Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Working Lands and Rural Lifestyles?
➤ “Pay for the cheapest lands first. Forget the ag lands near downtown. Those should be developed.”
➤ “Consider working lands that are important for wildlife corridors”
➤ “Private Landowner engagement and "buy in" to conservation programs. I.E. NRCS Farm Bill Programs, USFWS Partners Programs, FWC Panther PES Program”
➤ “Do we consider solar fields an aspect of agriculture? That would fall into the working lands category to me. That is [pertinent] to the current state of citrus industry in Highlands County”
➤ “Partially impacted but with high ecological value/connectivity, or restoration opportunities”
❖ In response to Q5 Quality of Life priorities.
➤ “Emphasis on passive recreation for the agency.”

**Exhibit E. NFLT Presentation to BoCC, March 4, 2025**

 **Highlands County Ridge to River Conservation Planning Study**  
**Highlands County Board of County Commissioners**  
**March 4, 2025**



CITRUS GROVE, HIGHLANDS COUNTY, FLORIDA (CA 10281) Image courtesy: NC20331 Florida Memory



 **NORTH FLORIDA LAND TRUST**  
**Founded in 1999**


**Our Mission**  
 To preserve and enhance our quality of life by protecting North Florida's irreplaceable natural environment.

**Our Vision**  
 We Envision:  
 North Floridians feel more connected to and have a stronger appreciation for our unique native environment.  
 The North Florida Land Trust implements collaborative approaches for long-term solutions commensurate with rapid growth. By protecting more of North Florida's farms, forests, and natural areas, we maintain traditions, enhance lives, and sustain our expanding communities.

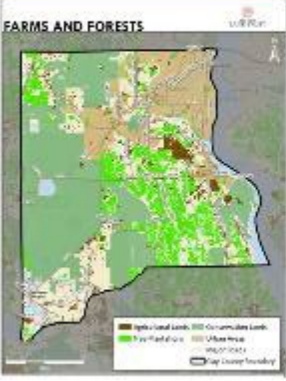
18 Staff



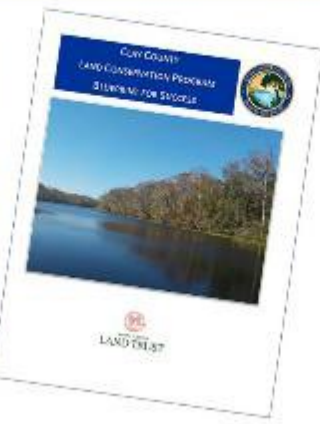


 **COMMUNITY CONSERVATION – “Greenprinting”**

**FARMS AND FORESTS**




**CLAY COUNTY LAND CONSERVATION PROGRAM \$100M FOR PEOPLE**




Since 1998 in Florida:

- 105/123 Referenda passed (85%)
- Average Margin 2:1 (64%) in favor
- \$5.5 Billion in voter-approved funds
- 27 Counties passed 73 of 84 Referenda

[www.landtrust.org](http://www.landtrust.org)







## CONSERVATION PLANNING



## COMMUNITY CONSERVATION - "GREENPRINTING"

1. Uses COMMUNITY INPUT to identify what benefits should be protected
2. Translate those benefits into CONSERVATION VALUES
3. Prioritizes those values based on SCIENCE
4. Provides RECOMMENDATIONS to achieve the protection – "Line of Sight"



Photo courtesy of Michael Drummond



## POSSIBLE TIMEFRAME





## REFERENDUM EXAMPLE

### ACQUISITION AND MANAGEMENT OF WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS BOND REFERENDUM

To acquire, preserve, protect, manage, and restore water resources, environmental lands and important fish and wildlife habitat, shall Polk County levy an additional 0.20 mill ad valorem tax and issue bonds payable therefrom in one or more series in an aggregate principal amount not exceeding \$75 million, excluding previously authorized indebtedness, maturing no later than 20 years from the date of issuance of such bonds, bearing interest not exceeding the maximum lawful rate?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES, FOR BONDS  
\_\_\_\_\_ NO, AGAINST BONDS

**Land Referendum Success**

- ✓ Clay County (2014-2015)
- ✓ Lake County (2014-2015)
- ✓ North County (2014-2015)
- ✓ DeSoto County (2014-2015)



## CONSENSUS QUESTION #1

Is there sufficient interest on part of Highlands County BoCC to work towards a November 2026 Referendum?



Image credit: Zach Pickett, Assistant Manager of Parks



## BREAK



Image credit: Greg Williams, LLC





# CONSERVATION VALUES



Images courtesy of Zaki Pasha, Gregg Wilkins, Jr.



## CONSERVATION PLANNING – Subject Matter Expert Panels

Q1: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward?

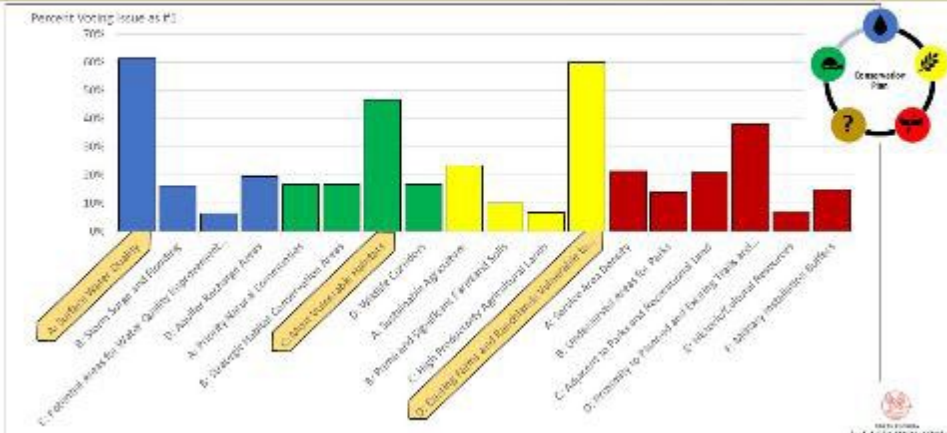
- A. Water Issues
- B. Habitat and Species Preservation
- C. Working Lands and Rural Landscapes
- D. Cultural Preservation and Quality of Life



<p>Q2: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Water Issues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Surface Water Quality</li> <li>B. Stormwater Management</li> <li>C. Freshwater Quantity/Quality/Availability</li> <li>D. Groundwater Quantity/Quality</li> </ul>	<p>Q3: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Habitat and Species Preservation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Preservation of Wetlands</li> <li>B. Wetland Restoration</li> <li>C. Preservation of Open Space</li> <li>D. Stream/Streambank Health</li> <li>E. Stream/Streambank Connectivity</li> </ul>	<p>Q4: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Working Lands and Rural Landscapes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Sustainable Agriculture</li> <li>B. Land Use Change</li> <li>C. Preservation of Agricultural Land</li> <li>D. Preservation of Open Space</li> <li>E. Preservation of Forest Land</li> <li>F. Preservation of Farmland</li> </ul>	<p>Q5: Which of the following areas will be of greatest concern to the County going forward in the category of Cultural Preservation and Quality of Life?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Historic Landmarks</li> <li>B. Historic Districts</li> <li>C. Historic Preservation</li> <li>D. Historic Landmarks</li> <li>E. Historic Preservation</li> <li>F. Historic Landmarks</li> </ul>
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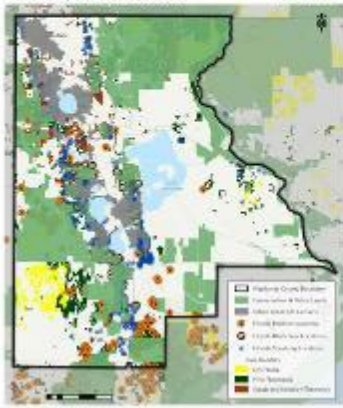
## CONSERVATION PLANNING – Subject Matter Expert Panels





## Conservation Values: Threatened & Endangered Species and Habitats

### THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES AND HABITATS



- This map displays the locations of some of the threatened and endangered species found in Highlands County.
- The Florida Scrub Jay is a federally threatened endemic species, meaning it is found nowhere else in the world.
- The Florida Panther is listed as an Endangered Species and needs large home ranges to survive.
- Protecting habitat for the iconic Florida Black Bears is important for their continued survival.
- The rare habitats data layer represents habitats that are not well-represented by current conservation lands. These are habitat types identified by the state of Florida as high priority for future conservation.



## Conservation Values: Surface Water Features

### SURFACE WATER QUALITY

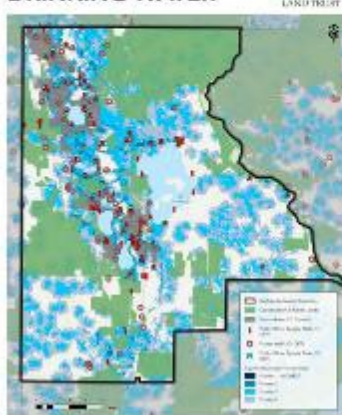


- This map displays the surface water features found in Highlands County.
- Includes wetlands such as lakes, rivers, streams, creeks and small isolated or intermittent wetlands.
- The TMDL, or Total Maximum Daily Load, is a calculation that limits how much pollution can enter the lake to meet water quality standards.
- MFL lakes, or Minimum Flows and Levels, are lakes with a limit on how much water can be withdrawn from the them.
- The flood zone layer displays the highest risk flood zones as identified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).



## Conservation Values: Drinking Water

### DRINKING WATER

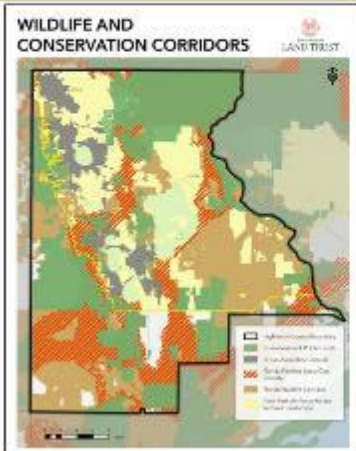


- This map displays the locations of known drinking water sources.
- Public Water Supply wells provide service to at least 15 service connections or to 25 residents.
- Private Wells layer displays known private well locations.
- The aquifer recharge data layer shows areas that allow for recharge to the Floridan and other aquifers.
- Areas in dark blue provide the highest potential recharge to springs, sinks, aquifers and water supply.





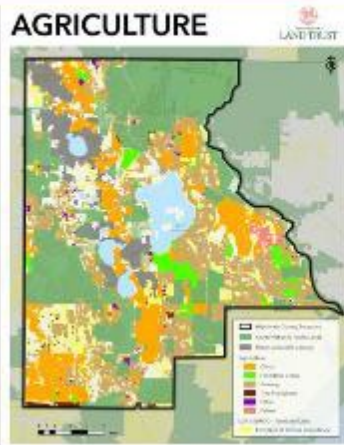
## Conservation Values: Wildlife and Conservation Corridors



- This map displays wildlife and conservation corridors
- Corridors provide a connected landscape where plants, animals and recreationalists can move freely.
- The Florida Wildlife Corridor, which is a statewide network of 18 million acres of connected lands and waters that are crucial to the survival of many of Florida's imperiled animals.
- Florida Panther "Least-Cost" Corridors are the potential pathways and corridors that panthers are most likely to use.
- This map also displays the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape boundary.



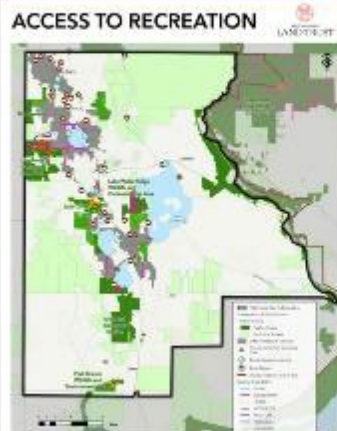
## Conservation Values: Agriculture



- This map displays the location of agricultural lands in Highlands County.
- Owners of working landscapes – farms, orchards, ranches, forests – make a living from the land, working hard to protect its productive and natural values.
- It also displays Farmland of Unique Importance, as identified by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. This is land used to produce specific high-value food and fiber crops.



## Conservation Values: Access to Recreation



- This map displays the publicly accessible and inaccessible conservation lands in Highlands County.
- This map also displays the location of boat ramps, beach access locations, and existing recreational trails in Highlands County, including hiking, biking, equestrian and paddle trails
- Living in areas with access to public parks, community recreation and trails is an excellent way to encourage greater physical activity and overall better health in a community.





## Conservation Values: Historic and Cultural Resources



- This map displays the historic districts in Highlands County as recorded by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).
- A county's historic and cultural resources are evidence of past human activity.
- These include historic railroad corridors, churches, homesites, military areas and agricultural lands.
- The historic structures data layer displays structures that have been identified by SHPO as historic from surveys, historical records or other sources.



## CONSENSUS QUESTION #2

What are the conservation values of the Highlands County BoCC?



Image courtesy of Florida Wetlands, Vithel Olanford



## WRAP-UP & NEXT STEPS

- Public Workshops
- Highlands County Land Conservation Program Greenprint
- **OUTCOME:** The Blueprint will assist the Highlands County BoCC develop land conservation policies, evaluate appropriate projects, and implement a successful land conservation program



Image courtesy of Todd Pearson

