

Wild Spaces and Public Places
Rationale for Continued Finding
August 16, 2019

Wild Spaces and Public Places is currently funded by a one-half cent sales tax. Collections began on January 1, 2017, and will continue through December 31, 2024. The portion of the tax committed to the purchase of conservation lands is expected to total about \$60 million over the eight year period.

For the current round of funding through July 2019, the County had expended \$7,608,715, not including expenses, for the purchase of 1,285 acres. Assuming that purchases continue at the current average price of \$6,000 per acre, approximately 10,000 acres could be acquired over the life of the tax. With partner funding and donations, a best case scenario might result in an average average price of \$2,000 per acre, allowing the purchase of 30,000 acres.

The backlog of properties on the Active Acquisition List is one way to measure the need for future funding. Each of the 120 properties currently on the list have been vetted by the Land Conservation Board and the Board of County Commissioners, and deemed to be of sufficient ecological importance to be acquired under the Alachua County Forever Program. These properties contain a total of 40,700 acres. Expected Wild Spaces and Public Places funding leaves the County unable to acquire at least 10,000 acres, and potentially as much as 30,000 acres of the properties on the list.

Alachua County has a total upland (non-submerged) area of 560,013 acres. At present, there are 116,877 acres of conservation lands in the County, or about 20.8% of the non-submerged area. Estimates for the amount of land needed to sustain current levels of biodiversity among all natural communities ranges between 30% and 50% of the total. Based on February 2019 figures from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, conservation lands across Florida as a whole amount to 30.8% of its non-submerged area.

To meet the suggested standards for the maintenance of biodiversity, The County would need to increase the area devoted to conservation to between 168,000 and 280,000 acres. Based on current funding, the total area of conservation lands in the County could be expected to reach approximately 127,000 acres using current average prices, or 147,000 under the optimistic scenario. Measured against even the 30% standard, the County would be 20,000 to 40,000 acres short of reaching the goal of ecological sustainability.

Funding has been allocated for a project with the University of Florida to update the analysis that underpins the Alachua County Forever program. Since 1996, the KBN Study has helped to guide land acquisition decisions for the County. Priorities for natural resource protection have shifted with development and other land use changes over the last 25 years. The impact of climate change was not even a consideration in the earlier analysis and should now be at the forefront of our planning. The next round of funding for Wild Spaces and Public Places will allow the County to address the new challenges and new opportunities.