

Wild Spaces and Public Places
Rationale for Continued Funding
September 25, 2019

Alachua County Forever

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 native species populations and a base level of biodiversity among all natural communities ranges between 30% and 50% of the total land area. 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 30% to 50% standards, 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.

Park Improvements

An initial budget of \$7.4 million for recreation improvements was approved at the outset of the current levy based on 10% of the original revenue projections. The budget was built on a prioritized list of parks with potential improvements for each. Implementation of those planned improvements is underway.

Even with the expenditure of the approved funding, it is anticipated that the County will still face unmet needs for recreation improvements. Categories for those needs are summarized below:

- The initial estimates for the cost of planned improvements were assembled in 2015. Increases in the price for both material and labor over the past five years are likely to add \$700,000 to \$1 million to total project costs.
- As we have begun developing designs and actual parks we have found that we need to meet a higher standard and greater capacity than had been originally envisioned. This is evident in the additional monetary needs for Veterans Park, Jonesville Park and Squirrel Ridge Park. This is anticipated to create a shortfall of about \$1.5 million.
- We have a need to meet ADA compliance in several parks at an estimated cost of \$350,000. This will predominately include interior sidewalk connectivity as well as improving or creating handicap spaces inside parks.
- The Board has indicated an interest in identifying opportunities for addition pocket parks in the urban cluster similar to Hopkins (SWAG) Park. The estimated cost to replicate that park is \$300,000. This includes all design, permitting and construction, but excludes the cost of land.
- The Parks Division is currently housed at Public Works. Space needs there are accelerating the movement of the Division to other facilities. Estimates for needed office, warehouse, and equipment space are \$900,000 to \$1 million.