

CUSCOWILLA

WHERE NATURE & CULTURE MEET



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For over half a century, the 212 acre Cuscowilla (f/k/a Camp McConnell) was utilized as a summer camp destination, teaching thousands of youth how to reconnect with nature and connect with others to form lifelong friendships. The property was sold at public auction to Alachua County on June 22, 2017 for \$1,027,000, plus 10% buyer's premium.

The property features more than 40,000 sf of buildings under roof with amenities including:

- ◆ Olympic size pool
- ◆ Day cabin facility w/rec hall, pool baths-locker rooms & storage
- ◆ Camp store
- ◆ Air conditioned cabins
- ◆ Lakeside outdoor chapel
- ◆ Infirmary
- ◆ Horseback riding center w/stables
- ◆ Paintball & obstacle courses
- ◆ Nature & mountain biking trails
- ◆ Archery, rifle & bb gun ranges
- ◆ Basketball, tennis & volleyball courts
- ◆ Soccer, disc golf and tug of war fields

Upon purchase, the County shuttered the property and, after a period of time, advertised it to multiple agencies in hopes that a qualified group would come forward to purchase or lease it as a camp. Basecamp Ventures submitted an initial proposal in December 2018, which it later withdrew. The Board then accepted an offer from Friendship Circle in September 2019. However, during their inspection period, they also withdrew. Camp Florida expressed interest in the property at the December 10, 2019 Commission meeting wherein they would purchase the property and enter into a public/private partnership with the County. Since the County's initial purchase of the property, many Alachua County

residents expressed a desire for the County to operate the property either as a camp and retreat or a public park. In January 2020, the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners voted to keep the property as a County owned and operated facility. That summer, they voted to invest \$2.7 million in Wild Spaces Public Places funding and renamed it from Camp McConnell to Cuscowilla to honor its Seminole heritage.

The town of Micanopy holds a long Native American history. While the Indian trading post and white settlement was named Tuscowilla, Cuscowilla was the name given to the Capital Village of the local Seminole people. Cuscowilla was the dwelling of Chief Micanopy, and what was left of the Seminole tribe, before being captured, thereby ending the Second Seminole War.

A small group of citizens decided to form a 501(c)3, "Friends" group in the summer of 2020 to assist with improvements, programming, special events, tours, and fundraising. This volunteer nonprofit organization is made up of working professionals, retirees, students and community members who care deeply about the future of Cuscowilla. The Friends have an open membership policy and welcome people of all races, colors, national origins, sexes, and religions.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Cuscowilla is ideally located between the Micanopy and Williston Road I-75 exits in southern Alachua County, west of Paynes Prairie off US Hwy. 441. Years of neglect and lack of use have resulted in a need to invest an estimated \$3 million to renovate or demolish existing infrastructure in the 30-acre "active" area.

The remaining 180 acres are proposed to be set aside in a perpetual conservation easement. A preliminary

report indicates 78 gopher tortoise burrows and a broad spectrum of natural communities including about 78 acres of wetlands. The County’s Conservation Lands division can include this piece in their inventory and provide land management services to ensure the removal of exotic, invasive species and restoration of natural areas.

FUTURE VIEW

The Commission’s vision for the future of Cuscowilla, one that restores a sense of ownership and pride to Alachua County’s taxpayers, can include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Identify an appropriate naming convention for Cuscowilla such as Outdoor Learning Center; Retreat; Education Center; Environmental Center; Park; Educational Park; Nature Camp and Education Center; Outdoor Learning and Retreat Center; or Nature’s Classroom* Summer Camps with tiered pricing for Alachua County vs. out-of-county participants* Day camp / field trip destination for public or private camp providers and school groups such as special needs, home school and private school groups* Overnight Retreat Facilities for 4-H, churches, family reunions, artists and other groups* Conference Facilities for trainings, meetings and small events* Repair the low and high ropes course for corporate team building* Develop an RV and primitive camping area for Game Day and Gatornationals visitors* Promote eco-tourism through guided hiking, biking, and equestrian tours* Install a <i>Boundless Playground</i> allowing children, regardless of physical ability, an opportunity to play side-by-side	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Consider hosting special events such as Medieval Faire, the Greater Alachua County Fair and small outdoor concerts* Allow public access to the pool, trails, courts and fields when not rented for private use or summer camp* Relocate the County’s Parks and Open Space Department to the property* Identify, protect and preserve historically significant resources* Create exhibits celebrating cultural, historical and natural resources to provide an experiential learning environment* Attain accreditation through the American Camp Association* Partner with local restaurants for catering needs and establish other appropriate Public / Private Partnerships* Install bat houses to assist with insect control* Complete waterfront restoration to allow picturesque views of the lake and hand launch for canoes, paddleboards and kayaks and bank fishing* Partner with the Children’s Trust allowing them to utilize the property for the benefit of Alachua County’s children* Offer swim lessons to children residing in southern Alachua County.
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Parks and Open Space received approval to control exotic (non-native invasive) vegetation and maintain up to 300’ of herbaceous vegetation on the Cuscowilla shoreline of George’s Pond to allow recreational opportunities such as canoeing, kayaking and fishing in the fall of 2020. Sec. 406.50 of our Unified Land Development Code (ULDC) permits Alachua County Environmental Protection to authorize up to 50’, therefore, Commission approval was necessary under Section 406.06 (c), activities authorized by County approved management plan, to allow additional impacts to the lake for such a public purpose.

Historically and under previous ownership, 300 feet of Cuscowilla shoreline was maintained and used for recreational purposes. There are no trees and the majority of the herbaceous vegetation in this area consists of exotic (non-native) invasive vegetation. Staff is working to re-establish and maintain this area in the public interest for canoeing, kayaking and fishing.

The management strategy and plan is to mow up to 300’ shoreline on a regular basis during the summer months and as needed during the rest of the year and control aquatic vegetation on the lake so that patrons can safely access and recreate on the lake. No regulated trees will be removed and no areas that were not historically maintained for this purpose will be impacted. Because of the historic impacts and the extensive non-native vegetation in this area that is going to be controlled as part of this plan, no mitigation is necessary. However, staff is already intending to plant additional trees and vegetation at the park to increase tree canopy cover and re-vegetate some areas that have been cleared of vegetation. Parks and Open Space staff continues to work closely with Environmental Protection staff on this project to limit impacts to the lake and other

regulated natural resources.

FINANCIAL INVESTMENT

Alachua County Public Schools provided their profit / loss report for the management of Camp Crystal. Staff would estimate similar revenues (\$847,028) and on-going operating expenses (\$1,426,462) for Camp McConnell requiring an estimated initial subsidy of nearly \$600,000 annually. With Parks and Open Space staff housed at the facility, they can provide maintenance assistance to reduce the personnel costs. A dedicated, full-time, on-site maintenance person will be hired after April 1, 2021 to ensure the property and facilities are safe, clean and well maintained for visitors. Additionally, full-time manager will be hired after April 1, 2021 to market the facility for rentals, coordinate summer camp and reside on-site to respond to after-hours emergencies.

CONCLUSION

Cuscowilla is not the gem it once was, but Alachua County is committed to its restoration, as is evident by our previous successes and ongoing county-wide efforts. Alachua County's in-house professional staff is experienced and is dedicated to the success of Cuscowilla. Each property Alachua County has purchased through either Alachua Forever or Wild Spaces Public Places demonstrates pride in our ownership and stewardship of the resources that make Alachua County not only beautiful, but vibrant. In the process of rebuilding, Alachua County will ensure that renovations and upgrades are responsible and serve as showcases for resource protection. Cuscowilla will again be a destination Alachua County's citizens can be proud of with the bold leadership, direction and investment of the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners.

COMMISSION ACTIONS

July 14, 2020: Rename Camp McConnell to Cuscowilla and add the appropriate language based on the use such as Camp, Education Center, etc.

June 23, 2020: (1) Approve the amended Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) to include Camp McConnell; (2) Approve the budget amendment to move the budget to the required account lines and establish projects in order to track types of expenditures related to the restoration.

January 14, 2020 - (1) County retains ownership of Camp McConnell; (2) Have staff reconcile the spent, funded, and unfunded active recreation projects and return back to the Board by email within 30 days to determine the exact available funds; (3) Convene a community design charrette with staff within 90 days to develop a potential community plan and capital improvement plan. The initial potential camp operating budget would be potentially 2 to 3 million. Florida Wildlife Care should be involved in the charrette. (3:1)

October 8, 2019: That staff schedule this for a future Regularly Scheduled Evening Board meeting for the Board to discuss. At that time staff is to bring any information/knowledge from interested parties and invite the public to attend.

To reject all proposals and inform anyone who submitted a proposal. Direct staff to reach out to the City of Gainesville to expressly understand their intent per their motion. Is it programming, capital, etc.? (5:0)

September 10, 2019: (1) To adopt the Resolution authorizing the conveyance of Camp McConnell to Friendship Circle, reserving a conservation easement to the County, and approve the Purchase and Sale Agreement with Friendship Circle of North Broward and South Palm Beach Inc.; (2) invite and encourage Friendship Circle and Camp Florida talk about how the pool will be instructed and used to determine if opportunity for a partnership (4:1)

August 27, 2019: (1) Staff open negotiations with Camp Florida as soon as possible to determine what their proposal is for Camp McConnell and bring back to the Board to discuss and consider prior to the Board making any final decisions on September 10, 2019. (3:2); (2) Friendship Circle provide Board of their intentions for capital improvements to the property and how they would operate it to the benefit of the citizens of Alachua County. (4:1)

July 9, 2019: the County Attorney and staff draft a conservation easement that lays out the restrictions on the entire property with some areas for traditional uses and other areas that are pure conservation and once that is suitable to both parties upon execution of the easement and the closing we then put the property in the registry of protected places. (5:0)

June 18, 2019: Place the Camp McConnell contract on the August 13, 2019 Board Meeting and not the currently scheduled July 9, 2019 meeting. (5:0)

June 11, 2019: Refer to staff whether or not conditions for the use of Camp McConnell property in the future can be loaded into the special use permit by the Board. (4:0)

June 6, 2019: Commissioner Cornell moved that prior to making a decision on selling or keeping Camp McConnell that staff provide their best estimate of how it might score on the Land Conservation Board. (5:0)

May 28, 2019: Withdraw the stipulation requiring of a lease agreement and authorize staff to negotiate a sale agreement with the provision of a conservation easement. (4:1)

April 16, 2019: By consensus, the Board directed staff to place the schedule meeting for the lease negotiation on hold until the information is gathered and the Board can make an informed discussion.

April 9, 2019: The Alachua County Board of County Commissioners accept the appraisal of the property as of 2019. Alachua County will enter into a lease with an operator, with the terms of the lease to include: (1) County approval of any sublease agreements; (2) \$100,00 for twelve years; (3) Credit (to be negotiated) regarding capital expenditures; (4) Option to purchase at the end of the initial lease term subject to a conservation easement on the entire property which specifies allowable uses and includes the ability for future County Commissions to modify the easement if there is not net loss in conservation value; (5) Provide a seat on the Board of Directions to the Alachua County Commission or their designee; (6) Require an annual report to the Alachua County Commission that includes: an accounting of capital expenditures; characterization of campers and users (where from, demographics, scholarships, etc.); summary of budget, accounting, and audits; one week use each year in the off-season for Alachua County to be reserved at least six months in advance; declare the property eligible for Tourist-Development Grand Funds, subject to any future grant programs; rank the proposers as: BaseCamp Ventures is #1 and Friendship Circle is #2. (4:1)

February 14, 2019: Authorization to issue an Invitation to Negotiate (ITN) for the sale, lease, partnership, or management of Camp McConnell. Any group that has had communication in the past with the County in any form about the Camp McConnell project should be able to participate in the Invitation to Negotiate. Make sure the ITN is available to all eligible entities that qualify under F.S. 125.38. Minimum Requirements: Conservation Easement; Reverter with Clear Conditions; Maximum Price; Sold As Is; Programming available to Alachua County Residents; Proof of Financial Ability; Non-discriminatory; The Commissioners will not have Communication with applicants during the process. (5:0)

February 12, 2019: Accept the proposal from Basecamp Ventures proposal as the only qualified response under Florida Statute 125.38. Direct the County Manager and County Attorney to negotiate a contract that includes a purchase/sale with a conservation easement and reverter clause. Additional provisions should delineate how the operation will prioritize access for Alachua County children and persons with special needs. This can include incentive based grants from the Alachua County VCB. To include the terms that were deemed acceptable by Mr. Richmond in the February 11, 2019 email during negotiations. (3:2)

December 11, 2018: Direct staff to bring back a recommendation within 60 days after exhausting all opportunities. (4:1)

April 10, 2018: It is the intent of Alachua County to sell Camp McConnell to a government agency or a private organization (for profit or not-for-profit) who is most likely to use the property to benefit the residents of Alachua County, and to reimburse the Wild Spaces Public Places fund with the proceeds; therefore, (1) the County will draft appropriate restrictions on the property, which may include: a conservation easement, deed restrictions, reversionary interests (including right of first refusal), and a "silent second mortgage". These will not be placed on the property until the final closing agreement is negotiated with the potential purchaser, whose input on these restrictions will be considered; (2) the County's ranking of potential purchasers will consider several factors: a) purchase price and terms; b) how the proposed uses provide recreational and educational benefits for local resident's c) the plan for managing the facilities on the property; d) the plan for managing the stewardship of the natural resources; e) the experience of the governance and management of the organization.

(3) The County Commission will be provided an opportunity to review the offering package prior to its release and declaration that the property is surplus and is being offered for sale with conditions. (4) Refer this matter to the Open Space and Recreation Advisory Committee and the Environmental Protection Advisory Committee requesting they make a specific recommendation to the Board for the property. These Boards should receive the same presentation and backup that the Board just received. This should be done as soon as possible and prior to the offer being put before the public. (5:0)

November 14, 2017: Approval to issue a Request for Statements of Interest for the Operation and/or Management for Camp McConnell.

August 15, 2017: Direct staff to hire/contract with the current resident caretaker through December 2017 for ongoing maintenance; Authorize a modest \$20,000 budget for utilities and ongoing maintenance, funded through Wild Spaces Public Places from the active recreation side of the funds, until direction is made by the Board on the future operation of the facility; Start the RFP process and select a date/time for an Open House to gather public input on the future operation of Camp McConnell; Direct staff to bring the Board an RFP within 30 days. (5:0).

August 8, 2017: Approve the attached budget transfer moving the appropriate budget for the purchase of Camp McConnell.

July 11, 2017 – 1. To schedule a Policy Meeting as soon as possible with all five Commissioners present for the Camp McConnell issue. (5:0). 2. To allow the County to close in escrow with any signatures required as soon as available. (4:1).

June 27, 2017 – 1. That the Board ratifies the purchase and sale agreement for the staff to sign and that includes paying the deposit. (This is not subject to approval of contingencies.) 2. The County request a period for inspection and general access to the site. 3. That we request County environmental staff to conduct a phase 1 environmental audit or its equivalent. 4. That we accept the survey and title commitments once they are certified to Alachua County. 5. Permit the Chair's signature on closing documents within a 30 day time frame or any extension that may be granted to the County. 6. Run the acquisition of this through the Alachua County Forever Land Acquisition process with the LCD those portions that are still relevant. 7. That we have a signage and security plan upon closing developed by staff. 8. That we then come up with a plan for an open house for county employees and our Boards and then an open house for the public in a forum to solicit ideas and inform the Board on a request for proposals. 9. Staff should request an extension. 10. The County Attorney should bring back any items that are not part of this motion that the Board needs to approve on July 11, 2017. (3:2).

June 22, 2017 – 1. direct the County Representative at the Auction to bid up to \$1,000,000.00. (4:0). 2. raise the County bid to \$1,050,000.00 plus a 10% premium. (3:1) 3. authorize a check for \$225,940.00 and to appropriate the funds from Wild Spaces Public Places and further direct the County Attorney expedite the due diligence and authorize Assistant County Manager to sign on behalf of the Board and amend the Wild Spaces Public Places list to include the property. (4:1)