



Agenda Item Summary

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Agenda Item Name:

Alachua County Agricultural Land Protection Strategy Update

Presenter:

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Description:

Update on the development of an Agricultural Land Protection Strategy in Alachua County.

Recommended Action:

Hear presentation

Prior Board Motions:

On 2/28/2023, the Board adopted the FY23 Strategic Guide, including the following strategies and objectives related to agricultural lands (also initially adopted by the Board on 5/25/21) (Exhibit 1):

- Strategy: "Invest in and Protect Our Environment" with an objective of "Continue Wild Spaces and Public Places and include agricultural lands as well"
- Strategy: "Achieve Social and Economic Opportunity for All" with an objective of "Work with public and private partnerships, including farms and local food entrepreneurs to build a community food system".

On 2/7/23 the Board passed a motion approving the implementation of the 10-Year Land Conservation and Management Program plan and strategies as presented (Exhibit 2).

On 6/28/22 the Board passed a motion to establish BOCC Resolution 22-066, providing and amending the process for selecting and acquiring environmentally significant lands purchased using Wild Spaces and Public Places local government infrastructure surtax proceeds (Exhibit 3).

Fiscal Note:

Funds for development of Agricultural Land Protection Strategy Framework have been encumbered in 001.55.5500.537.31.00 (\$25,000) and 146.55.5511.537.31.00 (\$25,000).

Funding for acquisition of conservation easements on working agricultural lands will utilize Wild Spaces and Public Places surtax revenues, as a component of a broader Agricultural Land Protection Strategy.

Strategic Guide:

Environment

Background:

The mission of the Alachua County Forever (ACF) Program is to acquire, improve, and manage environmentally significant lands that protect water resources, wildlife habitats and natural areas suitable for resource-based recreation. Established in 2000 after the Alachua County Forever Bond referendum was approved by the voters of Alachua County, the program has been supported by voters in three subsequent Wild Spaces and Public Places ballot referenda, in 2008, 2016, and most recently in 2022. The Alachua County Forever Land Conservation and Management Program 10-year plan presented to the Board on February 7, 2023, identified the strategy for continued pursuit of the ACF program mission and County Comprehensive Plan (2019-2040) goals; with emphasis on local conservation priorities, while considering state, national, and global conservation benchmarks.

The ACF Program 10-year (2023-2032) plan identified the geographic priority corridors and project areas for protection of environmentally significant lands within the County, but also identified the need for expanded review of protection of working agricultural lands as a component of the County's land conservation goals. Over the past 50 years, Alachua County has lost over 50% of its farmland, and much of the remaining agricultural land is at a high risk of conversion to housing and suburban development. Conversion of these agricultural lands impacts local food production networks, remnant wildlife habitat, and increases stormwater runoff, pollutants transported by runoff, and water consumption. Furthermore, much of the remaining agricultural land in the western part of Alachua County contains sandy, high recharge soils, which are essential for the future viability of the Upper Floridan Aquifer that provides fresh drinking water and feeds the springs and rivers contained within Alachua and neighboring counties. Agricultural land protection can serve to strengthen ACF's corridor-based strategy, while also further supporting water quality protection, aquifer recharge, and additionally supporting local food production on agricultural lands.

The process for development of an Agricultural Land Protection Strategy was outlined in the ACF Program 10-year plan as follows:

- **Year 1-2:** Complete study to describe strategy framework (including land protection priorities, geographic analysis and ranking, property evaluation matrix specific to agricultural lands, assessment of program implementation needs including staffing, contracts, and equipment, review funding partner programs, recommended advisory board structure, and draft resolution language, and County process, etc.).
- **Year 3-10:** Implement Agricultural Land Protection Strategy through acquisition of agricultural easements.

In September, 2023, Alachua County engaged the non-profit land trust, Alachua Conservation Trust, to develop the framework for an Agricultural Land Protection Strategy following a process similar to that used in ACF program protection of environmentally significant lands (Exhibit 4).

A stakeholder charrette was held on November 28, 2023, to gain input into the development of the strategy. Additional opportunities for public input will be included in the process as well.

In addition, Alachua County has been awarded a grant from the American Farmland Trust to provide additional support for landowners with planning for the transfer or sale of their lands with conservation easements to a next generation landowner.