



## Agenda Item Summary

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**File #: 23-00320**

**Agenda Date: 7/10/2023**

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**Agenda Item Name:**

**Conservation Lands**

**Presenter:**

Andi Christman, Alachua County Environmental Program Manager, 352-264-6803

**Prior Board Motions:**

On March 22, 2022, the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) passed a motion adopting Ordinance 2022-088 levying a 1 percent local government infrastructure surtax effective only after voter approval at a referendum election, and authorizing the use of infrastructure surtax proceeds as follows:

1. Providing that 50.0 percent of the proceeds of the new surtax shall be used to acquire and improve lands for conservation, protection of natural resources, or public recreation, and to operate and maintain parks, recreational programs and Recreational facilities throughout the county (“Wild Spaces Public Places uses” or “WSPP uses”);
2. Providing that 50.0 percent of the proceeds of the new surtax shall be used to repair roads and improve road safety, construct or renovate fire stations and other public facilities, acquire lands for affordable housing, and fund economic development projects pursuant to Florida Statute 212.055(2)(d)(3), Florida Statutes (“non-WSPP uses”);
3. Providing that not more than 15.0 percent of the proceeds of the new surtax may be used to fund economic development projects pursuant to Florida Statute 212.055(2)(d)(3), Florida Statutes;
4. Providing for authorization and legislative findings; providing for a referendum election on November 8, 2022.
5. Providing for Alachua County’s Non-Recurring Municipal Partnership Program (Section 5) with the City of Gainesville (i) and the nine municipalities (ii).

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 Public Places local government infrastructure surtax proceeds.

On February 7, 2023, following presentations on the Alachua County Parks and Open Space Master Plan, and the Alachua County Land Conservation and Management Program 10-year Plan, the Board of County Commissioners moved the following:

1. Approve the implementation of the 10-year Land Conservation and Management Plan and strategies as presented.
2. Authorize funding, planning, and construction of the combined field support and office facility for the Land Conservation Program using WSPP surtax funds to the extent permissible.

3. Utilize an 80% Conservation and 20% Recreation split of WSPP infrastructure surtax proceeds to be dedicated to conservation lands and active parks for the 10-year surtax beginning January 1, 2023 and ending December 31, 2032.
4. Allow staff to utilize the surtax for startup operations and maintenance costs and ask staff to bring back recommendations during the budget process that includes a cap, a transition to General Fund, and a yearly report process recommendation for the Board to consider.
5. Adopt the Alachua County Parks & Open Space Master plan as a visioning document and ask staff to develop for the Board to review and bring back in approximately 90 to 120 days the following:
  - a. An overlay of the County's Bike and Pedestrian Master plan to identify short and midterm opportunities for trail and walkway connectivity.
  - b. Add an equity lens as defined in our Comprehensive Plan and identify short and midterm opportunities to enhance this visioning document.
  - c. Identify existing lands owned by the County that could be utilized in the short term to leverage the implementation of this plan; and work with the Conservation and Management Program to identify future acquisition sites that could be utilized for both Parks & Open Space and Land Conservation 10-year Master Plans

Provide an overlay of municipal parks and county conservation lands, and open space available to the public and bring back recommendations for the visioning document.

**Fiscal Note:**

Funding Sources include General Fund Transfer, Infrastructure Surtax (70% of ½), Grants, 5 Cent Local Option Gas Tax (ELM Nickel), Impact Fees, and Multi Modal Transportation ]

**Background:**

The Alachua County Wild Spaces Public Places/Local Government Infrastructure Surtax referenda have supported the following programs goals, building on the foundation of the Alachua County Forever bond referendum passed in 2000:

- In 2008, Alachua County voters passed the Wild Spaces and Public Places surtax referendum, establishing a 2-year, half-cent surtax to be utilized by Alachua County and the municipalities within Alachua County to acquire and improve conservation lands and create, improve and maintain parks and recreational facilities within Alachua County.
- In 2016, Alachua County voters approved a renewal of the Wild Spaces and Public Places initiative with a one-half cent sales tax to be levied for eight years.
- In 2022, Alachua County voters passed a referendum to fund local infrastructure projects with a ten-year one-cent surtax. This surtax repealed and replaced the last two years of the 2016 surtax, dedicating one-half cent dedicated to Wild Spaces and Public places projects, and the other half cent funding to other County infrastructure needs including road safety, affordable housing, fire stations, and other public infrastructure needs.

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. Since the program's inception in 2000, Alachua County has protected 33,037 acres of environmentally significant lands through fee simple lands purchases, purchase of conservation easements, and generous landowner donations. The ACF Program was established in 2000 after the Alachua County Forever Bond referendum was approved by the voters of Alachua County.

On February 7, 2023, the Alachua County Land Conservation and Management Program presented a ten-year plan to the Board of County Commissioners, reflecting 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 Alachua County Parks and Open Space Department presented the Parks and Open Space Master Plan to the Board of County Commissioners on February 7, 2023, providing a plan for the future of the County park system.

After discussion of county priorities for the projected WSPP portion of the surtax revenues, the Board moved to allocate 80% of the Alachua County surtax funds to Alachua County Forever/Land Conservation and Management program operation, and 20% of the surtax funds to the Alachua County Parks and Open Space Department operations. This allocation will be effective for Surtax revenue received by Alachua County from January 1, 2023 through December 31, 2032.

Key priorities for the next ten-year period will include:

- Conservation Land Acquisition: protection of the Santa Fe River corridor, protecting a viable footprint of connected conservation lands within the Alachua County portion of the statewide Florida Wildlife Corridor, an increased emphasis on protection of a southern corridor between Paynes Prairie/Barr Hammock, and Watermelon Pond, and implementation of a more focused agricultural land protection strategy to be implemented through conservation easement acquisition.
- County Preserve Stewardship: Currently, 22 distinct preserves acquired through the ACF program have been opened for nature-based public recreational use. Emphasis in the coming years will include opening additional newly acquired lands to public use; and restoring and improving habitat through activities such as invasive species removal, prescribed burning, tree planting, and other techniques.