



## Agenda Item Summary

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**File #: 24-00500**

**Agenda Date: 6/4/2024**

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**Agenda Item Name:**

**Agricultural Land Protection Strategy - Development Update**

**Presenter:**

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**Description:**

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

**Recommended Action:**

Hear presentation (Exhibit 1)

**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):

- 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.

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 2)

**Fiscal Note:**

Funds for the development of Agricultural Land Protection Strategy Framework have been encumbered in the Environmental Protection Departmental budget.

General Fund: 001.55.5500.537.31.00 (\$25,000)

Stormwater Management: 146.55.5511.537.31.00 (\$25,000)

Funding for acquisition of conservation easements on working agricultural lands under this strategy will utilize Wild Spaces and Public Places surtax revenues in accordance with requirements within

**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. The Alachua County Land Conservation and Management 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.

In alignment with program mission, the ACF property evaluation process and property scoring matrix, as established in Resolution 22-066, were developed with an emphasis on protection of environmentally significant lands; but are not readily applied to evaluation of working agricultural lands as candidates for protection. As a result, protection of agricultural lands through less-than-fee land acquisition under the ACF program can only occur when the properties also meet most of the ACF mission goals. To better address the needs for agricultural land protection and the distinct values and services provided by these agricultural lands, a framework for evaluation and ranking of agricultural lands together with funding strategies for acquisition of conservation easements on these lands is under development.

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 work with staff 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 3).

During the development process, public and stakeholder input in the strategy development has been sought in the following forums:

- November 28, 2023- Stakeholder charrette for agricultural landowners and agency funding partners.
- December 5, 2023 – BoCC Special Policy meeting presentation and discussion
- February 20, 2024 - Rural Concerns Advisory Committee (RCAC) presentation
- April 25, 2024 – Land Conservation Board (LCB) presentation
- May 7, 2024 – Environmental Protection Advisory Committee (EPAC) presentation
- May 21, 2024 – Rural Concerns Advisory Committee (RCAC) presentation
- Multiple one-on-one interviews with working farm and ranch landowners.

Feedback received on this strategy update will be reviewed for return to the Board in August, with staff recommendations for implementation.