



## Agenda Item Summary

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**File #: 24-00831**

**Agenda Date: 9/10/2024**

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### **Agenda Item Name:**

### **Agricultural Land Protection Strategy Update**

#### **Presenter:**

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#### **Description:**

Update on the development of an Agricultural Land Protection Strategy in Alachua County, and recommendations on implementation

#### **Recommended Action:**

Hear presentation (Exhibit 1) and respond to staff recommendations:

1. Adopt BOCC Resolution codifying mission & ranking matrix & citizen board structure and operational process.
2. Allocate \$10M of Wild Spaces and Public Places funding to acquisition of agricultural land conservation easements through the Agricultural Land Protection Strategy (and authorize staff to fund 3 existing projects with this funding).
3. For Partner-Funded Easements, establish and require Minimum Easement Deed Requirements that retain county rights (enforcement, inspection, etc.).
4. Direct staff to prioritize projects with cost-sharing from partners or landowner donation.
5. Consider identified Staffing/Operational needs in upcoming budget cycles.
6. Direct staff to return in FY26 with recommendations for amendment after initial implementation, including re-evaluation of small farm (40 acre or less) inclusion and climate action plan concurrency.

#### **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 (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 under this strategy will utilize Wild Spaces and Public Places surtax revenues (fund 140.41.4160.537.xx.xx). This will utilize funding within the 80% allocation of one-half of the surtax. Staffing and operating expenses will also be funded from within the 80% allocation, but separate from the \$10M allocation for the easements.

The FY25 tentative budget includes 1.0 new senior planner to implement the Agricultural Land Protection Strategy and related operating expenses, including a computer. It does not include a vehicle or a second FTE. This is funded from the Conservation Land's portion of the Infrastructure Surtax, Fund 140.

**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 (2023-2032) 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, particularly the "30x30 initiative".

The 10-year 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 46% 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 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 develop the framework for an Agricultural Land Protection Strategy following a process similar to that used in ACF program protection of environmentally significant lands. A summary report of that year-long process, and recommendations is attached (Exhibit 5). The Final Report document is available on request.

Public and stakeholder input in the strategy development has been sought through staff and contractor (ACT) outreach in multiple open public meetings, advisory board presentations, at an agricultural landowner stakeholder charette, and in one-on-one conversations with farmers and agricultural landowners. The input and feedback provided at these sessions has been incorporated into development of the final recommended strategy in an iterative revision process.

Staff now recommends initial implementation of the strategy as presented here.

*Alachua County Comprehensive Plan Reference:*

### **3.0 ENERGY EFFICIENT LAND USE**

#### **OBJECTIVE 3.2**

*The County shall encourage long-term carbon sequestration practices on both public and private land.*

*Policy 3.2.1 Promote retention of sustainable agriculture and conservation land uses that serve as stable carbon sinks.*

### **6.0 RURAL AND AGRICULTURAL POLICIES**

#### **OBJECTIVE 6.1 - GENERAL**

*Rural and agricultural areas shall be protected in a manner consistent with the retention of agriculture, open space, and rural character, and the preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, and efficient use of public services and facilities*

- *Policy 6.1.1 The County shall encourage the continuation of productive agricultural uses through an integrated program of strategies, including innovative land use regulations in conjunction with transfer of development rights and support for use of local, State, and Federal incentives including pursuit of funds from state and federal programs for purchase of agricultural conservation easements and purchase of development rights. The County shall initiate a stewardship program utilizing strategies from but not limited to the Rural and Family Lands Protection Act, Section 163.3177 (11) (d) F.S. and Section 570.70, F.S., as appropriate*

to Alachua County.

- *Policy 6.1.2 Protection of important agricultural areas, based on factors such as the existing agricultural uses, soils, land use patterns, and economics of the county's agricultural community, shall be encouraged.*
- *Policy 6.1.3 The most recent, applicable best management practices for agriculture and silviculture shall be required consistent with Section 5.5, Agricultural and Silvicultural Practices, of the Conservation and Open Space Element. The County shall encourage sustainable and conservation-oriented agricultural practices for agriculture and silviculture, and shall work with landowners to facilitate participation in the County's Transfer of Development Rights program, voluntary certification programs whose standards meet or exceed best management practices, agricultural and conservation easements, and federal and state cost-share programs. The land development regulations shall be reviewed for the inclusion of incentives to encourage voluntary participation in certification programs.*
- *Policy 6.1.4 The County shall support the development of markets and programs that promote the sale of locally produced agricultural goods, including but not limited to farmers markets, community gardens, farm to institution programs, and agritourism opportunities. The County shall partner with local community groups and organizations and other local governments to pursue funding sources for the development of a sustainable local food system.*