



Volusia Forever Advisory Committee Listening Session Minutes



Wednesday, April 21, 2021

County Council Chamber

123 West Indiana Avenue, DeLand, FL

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT

Mary Anne Connors, Chair
Wanda Van Dam, Vice Chair
Gerald Fieser
John Gamble
Jessica Gow
Derek LaMontagne
Derrick Orberg
Suzanne Scheiber
Steve Crump

STAFF PRESENT

Clay Ervin, Growth and Resource Management Director
Dona Butler, Community Services Director
Bradley Burbaugh, Ag Extension Director
Ryan Ossowski, Chief Financial Officer
Ginger Adair, Environmental Management Director
Tim Baylie, Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Director
Russ Brown, Senior County Attorney
Danielle Dangleman, Special Project Coordinator
Nick Dunnam, Land Management Activity Manager
Sarah Presley, Administrative Aide

Call to order:

Chair Connors called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Presentation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUOCP7ag48k>

Public Participation

Michael Pleus, City Manager of DeLand, thanked the committee members for their service and the opportunity to speak. Spoke to the previous success of the program. He encouraged the committee to look at lands outside of the conservation corridor, specifically parcels around cities. These properties would preserve lands that allow close access to city residents, break up development patterns, and facilitate opportunities for partnerships with cities.

Bill Riggle asked about the selection criteria for conservation easements and if will they be publicized/published. He requested copies of the current guidelines.

Chair Connors suggested Mr. Riggle have the property owners he represents review the current criteria and bring back any recommendations for changes to the committee.

Doug Weaver suggested the organizational framework of the Volusia Forever remain the same. It was originally designed with input from the public and staff. Technical changes will be required, but he believes substantive changes should wait until this committee has some experience. An important element is the willing seller aspect, it helps begin the negotiations on the right foot and maintain good relationships. The

present set-aside of 10% for land management needs to be reviewed and may need to be increased to 15% to help cover the increased costs associated with land management.

David Griffis believes the small lot acquisition aspect is an important part of the program and encouraged the committee to continue with that part of Forever. He thanked the committee for their service.

Wendy Anderson thanked the committee for their service and encouraged maximizing the dollars available with partnerships. There are multiple programs that are available, and a goal of the Soil and Water Conservation District, is to become a clearinghouse for these programs. They hope to become a resource to the landowners and to help guide them towards a program. She encouraged inclusion of the farm land trust for food production and food security purposes.

Pattie Gertenbach (online) requested the presentation be available online as well as the list of lands purchased. She believes the committee should encourage partnerships to maximize the program.

Sarah Presley advised the presentation is available online.

Chair Connors asked if there is a forum or process for partnerships and invited Doug Weaver to come speak on the topic.

Doug Weaver explained partnerships are achieved by approaching agencies and extending invitations for partnerships. Establishing relationships is vitally important because they are trying to find partners too.

Ginger Adair staff is working on these relationships. Staff is already speaking with the St Johns Water Management District as well as the Trust for Public Land. There are other opportunities that will be explored as we move forward.

Chair Connors asked if other agencies have maps of their priorities.

Ginger Adair advised some do and some don't. The DEP has priority acquisition areas and a 5-year plan. The St Johns Water Management District is working on acquiring lands that are adjacent to existing management areas/properties they own.

Chair Connors asked about the inclusion of farmlands.

Ginger Adair advised forest and farmlands were added as language in the ballot and will be a new priority.

Member LaMontagne asked about the potential of flyers to hand out. He also asked if the committee members are allowed to contact people in Tallahassee for partnerships.

Chair Connors said they should take their direction from County Council on this.

Ginger Adair advised there is language in the resolution that she will locate and provide.

Suze Peace (online) thanked the committee for serving, Doug Weaver for his work, as well as staff for their hard work. She does not feel that approaching people for interest in their land is advisable as it will encourage the sellers to raise their prices. She also stated she thought the 15% land management set-aside was already approved by council.

Melissa Lammers (online) thanked the committee members for serving. She stated that she will be sending a white paper to be submitted into the record.

Chair Connors reminded the public of the upcoming weekly listening sessions.

Member Gow asked to allow Ginger Adair to provide the following resolution language to the committee:

Ginger Adair, Resolution 2021-11 on page 5 states “Members of the committee are prohibited from representing the Volusia Forever program or county interests to any public or private land acquisition or preservation support entity including the St Johns River Water Management District, the State of Florida and the United States of America unless otherwise directed by the county council or county manager or the designee.”

With no more discussion Chair Connors asked for a motion to adjourn.

Vice-Chair Van Dam made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Member Gamble; the meeting adjourned at 6:50 p.m.

ECHO VOLUSIA FOREVER

IMPLEMENTATION OF VOLUSIA FOREVER AND VOLUSIA ECHO

The Volusia Forever/ECHO Alliance is a successor to the political action committee that coordinated the successful campaign to approve Volusia Forever and Volusia ECHO. This position paper represents a consensus among the stakeholders for successful implementation of these programs based on polling and information gleaned from the voters who overwhelmingly approved both programs.

Volusia Forever and Volusia ECHO represent important values of our citizens. In 1986, Volusia County was the first in the nation to approve a bond issue for conservation lands acquisition. In 2000 Volusia Forever and ECHO were approved as programs to work in tandem to protect conservation lands and fund improvements for environmental learning centers, cultural and arts projects, historic preservation, and outdoor recreation. Approval of continuation of these programs by 72.4% (ECHO) and 75.6% (Forever) of the vote is a mandate for these quality-of-life programs and places Volusia County among the highest tier in the country.

These earlier programs were award winning and nationally recognized conservation efforts. Key factors in their success were (1) established transparent procedures to objectively rank property (2) insulation from political influence (3) ability to partner with other government entities (4) willingness to work with national conservation organizations, and local land trusts and (5) decision to bond early to make funds available as needed.

We appreciate that the County Council has appointed Volusia Forever and Volusia ECHO oversight committees that are participating in and hosting public listening sessions.

Volusia County should revise existing procedures to rank and review projects for funding to be consistent with the purposes and goals expressed in both the ballot language and Council resolution. The revised implementation procedures should be based upon objective standards of environmental values, management considerations, potential for partnership, and independent appraisals. The procedures should include the ability to partner with established conservation organizations such as an accredited local land trust or national conservation organization to provide experience and special skills with conservation lands acquisition. The Trust for Public Land was an important partner in this campaign. It contracted for the polling, assisted with ballot language, and provided important technical assistance to the campaign. It has vast nationwide experience in local government conservation finance. The county staff should engage TPL to develop a set of procedures and best practices to rank projects, negotiate offers, and administer the program.

Volusia Forever should be insulated from political influence. Council members should not be engaged in direct negotiations with landowners and the County Council should not independently decide that a property should be moved to a priority acquisition position prior to full review by staff and the oversight committee. Council members who have a contractual or property interest in an application under

consideration, should declare a conflict, not participate in the discussion with Council, and should abstain from voting on the matter

Volusia Forever projects should consider both acquisition in fee, and less than fee, otherwise known as conservation easements, or purchase of development rights. Conservation objectives can often be met through easements rather than outright purchase. The program should utilize only pre-qualified independent appraisers and offers should not exceed appraised value. The county should also consider reinstating the small lot acquisition program for specifically targeted areas such as Cape Atlantic and University Highlands that has been very successful. This sub-program could be utilized for shoreline conservation easements and habitat buffer zones restored with native plants.

As a beginning, priorities for the land conservation effort should be completing projects from the original Volusia Forever program, such as the Volusia Conservation Corridor. Partnering with Florida Forever, Florida Communities Trust, the Rural and Family Lands Program, and the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) to complete projects approved under Florida Forever and the WMD Five-year acquisition plan will be key to this process. Other priorities should be lands identified as potential conservation lands under the adopted Springs Basin Management Action Plans, Mosquito Lagoon Reasonable Assurance Plan (ML RAP), Indian River Lagoon Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP), East Central Florida Regional Resiliency Action Plan (ECF RRAP), Florida Department of Environmental Protection Greenways Plan, Volusia Council of Governments' "Map A", Environmental Core Overlay (ECO) lands, and shorelines along the St. Johns, Halifax, and Indian Rivers and their tributaries in Volusia County. Staff should be encouraged to track and meet the grant cycles of any available state and federal funding that can be matched to ensure local dollars are extended to the greatest degree possible. The county should become familiar with all of these conservation programs including the Great American Outdoors Act, passed by Congress last year.

The renewed Volusia Forever has goals which are broader than the previous programs. One of these goals is protection of forests and farmlands. We feel this is a good opportunity to utilize conservation easements and to track criteria in the Rural and Family Lands Program and Natural Resource Conservation Service USDA conservation easement programs.

The renewed Volusia Forever program is expanded to include water resource protection. Revised policies should also track recommendations in the water quality programs listed above, including shoreline buffers, acquisition of areas for restoration of wetlands, and lands identified in springs BMAPS, or IRL-RAP.

Given that Volusia Forever benefits from partnering with other government entities, and successful implementation requires resources from various departments within Volusia County Government, we recommend that it be administered by the County Manager's office with assistance from departments with historical knowledge of the program.

Interest rates for local governments are at a historic low. The county's finance staff should evaluate the relative costs and benefits of bonding some of the revenue toward the beginning of the program reauthorization to save properties and make investments that can be enjoyed as soon as possible.

For Volusia ECHO, we believe that for the most part, the current process works well. Nevertheless, we heard a number of concerns that should be addressed going forward. There is an ongoing concern

about transparency of the program, that should be addressed in revised procedures. All projects for funding should be reviewed by the ECHO Oversight Committee prior to approval by County Council. All projects should be considered or approved by the County Council only after they are fully documented with notice to the public and placed on the regular agenda. Consideration should be given to review of the match requirements for small projects and inclusion of Green Infrastructure.

Finally, we believe the current annual trails set-aside of \$1 million a year should be continued through the life of the renewed ECHO program. Volusia is at ground zero with The Coast-to-Coast Trail and The River to Sea Loop trail intersecting in our county. Both trails are of statewide significance, ranked 1 and 2 by Florida's office of Greenways and Trails. With approximately 70 miles now on the ground in Volusia, the need remains for a funding source to complete all sections of the showcase trails system, provide for amenities and ensure that the system is maintained as a first-class trails system for our residents and visitors.

The staff should also establish a dashboard on the county's website that includes the annual independent audits and key metrics to comply with the ballot language and ensure ongoing public accountability for these two respected and award-winning programs.