



# Alachua County Environmental Protection Department

Chris Bird, Director

February 17, 2006

## MEMORANDUM

To: Alachua County Board of County Commissioners

Via: Randall H. Reid, County Manager

Via: Chris Bird, Director, Environmental Protection Department *CB*

Via: Ramesh P. Buch, Program Manager, Alachua County Forever *RPS*

From: Sandra Vardaman *SV*, Land Conservation Biologist, Alachua County Forever

Subject: Alachua County Forever Land Management Funding Strategy

### Executive Summary:

This memo expands on a September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005, memo to the Board of County Commissioners regarding the Alachua County Forever Stewardship funding strategy, including ways to reduce the general fund dollars necessary for stewardship. The ACF program has acquired approximately 5,655 acres of conservation lands. Of these, just over half are managed by partner agencies. The remaining +/-2,670 acres will be managed by the Alachua County Forever Program (ACF). ACF staff continually seeks creative ways to fund stewardship and minimize the general fund dollars necessary for stewardship.

The ACF stewardship strategy combines grants, volunteers, partnerships, interim agricultural activities, timber sales, prescribed burning, community service workers and inmate labor, donations and restoration projects resulting from mitigation or the resolution of violations to accomplish stewardship activities, such as, land management, invasive species control, restoration of natural areas and hydrological regimes, wildlife monitoring, fire management, public access, passive recreation, site security and recurring site maintenance.

Policy 6.6.11 of the Comprehensive Plan, Chapter 36 of the Alachua County Code, and in the ACF guiding principles adopted by the BoCC after the January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002, workshop, the BoCC acknowledged that the County will provide for ongoing land management of acquired properties. If it is the goal of the BoCC to remove or limit the ACF stewardship funding received from the general fund reserves, the BoCC should consider alternatives to meet this obligation such as a conservation lands impact fee, and/or appropriating that portion of the voter approved 0.25 mill ad-valorem revenue not used for bond debt service for the ACF bonds for funding stewardship.



**Purpose:**

The purpose of this memo is to outline the Alachua County Forever stewardship funding strategy, including ways to reduce the amount of general fund dollars necessary for management. This memo builds on a previous memo from the Alachua County Forever Program to the Board of County Commissioners dated September 28, 2005.

**Background:**

The Alachua County Forever Program (ACF) was approved through a referendum passed by 62.5% of Alachua County voters on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000, which asked "Shall Alachua County be authorized to issue bonds to acquire, improve and manage environmentally significant lands to protect water resources, wildlife habitats and natural areas suitable for resource-based recreation in one or more series not exceeding a total principal amount of \$29,000,000 payable from an annual ad-valorem tax not exceeding one-quarter of one mill maturing not later than 20 years and bearing interest at a rate not exceeding the maximum legal rate."

Alachua County Code Chapter 36 Land Conservation Program, Sec. 36.06; states "Up to ten percent of the proceeds of these bonds may be used for initial land management and providing public access to the properties. The County and property co-owners will provide for ongoing land management of acquired properties."

Alachua County Comprehensive Plan 2001-2020, Conservation and Open Space Element, Land Conservation Program, Management, Policy 6.6.11 states "The County shall provide continued funding for ongoing operation and maintenance costs associated with County-owned lands."

On January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) held a workshop to develop guidance for land conservation project selection, financing and stewardship under the Alachua County Forever program. At this meeting the BoCC adopted the following guiding principles relating to stewardship:

-"The BoCC is aware that there are long term stewardship costs associated with projects selected but no funding source other than the General Fund Reserves has been identified. To minimize stewardship expenses while the Program is in this initial acquisition phase, staff will use a strategy of "no loss of conservation values" stewardship. The initial stewardship program will reflect this strategy. As the program matures and other funding sources materialize, the stewardship program may be enhanced. "

-"Any stewardship of ACF sites shall be consistent with the ACF's primary goal of preserving, restoring and enhancing environmental values. A stewardship plan will be developed within 12 months of acquisition and made available for public comment prior to BoCC approval."

**Discussion:**

The challenge for long-term stewardship of preserve lands is to develop effective policies and procedures to implement and finance stewardship objectives. Alachua County Forever preserves require a variety of stewardship actions that include provisions for public access, passive recreation, environmental education, land management, site security, and recurring site maintenance. Control of invasive exotic species, fire management, restoration of natural hydrological regimes, endangered species monitoring, and a variety of other land management issues must be considered long-term responsibilities. Without a commitment to stewardship of ACF preserves, the County will not be able to maintain the investment the citizens made in their

conservation lands and the citizens will not reap the quality of life benefits that these properties can provide.

As of February 17, 2006, the Alachua County Forever (ACF) program has acquired approximately 5,655 acres of conservation lands, with an additional 120 acres under contract and expected to close by the end of March 2006. There is agreement in principle on another 3,700 acres of conservation lands.

Of the 5,775 acres either acquired or about to be acquired by the ACF program, three sites or 3,105 acres are managed by partner agencies. The St. Johns River Water Management District manages the 1,385 acre Longleaf Flatwoods Reserve and the 1,700 acre Newnans Lake Addition. The City of Gainesville manages the County's portion of the Cofrin Nature Park, approximately 20 acres. The remaining 2,670 acres will be managed by the ACF program, plus any additional acreage acquired after March 2006.

Recognizing the limited availability of management funds, the ACF program continually seeks creative ways to fund management. In addition to the portion of the bond proceeds designated for initial land management and providing public access to the properties, each year the Alachua County Forever Program is given a general fund allotment. This funding is extremely important for the ongoing management of the ACF properties and to protect the investment the tax payers of Alachua County made in their environmentally sensitive lands.

In the early phases of the ACF program while the highest priorities revolve around land acquisition, the general fund dollars are instrumental in funding maintenance and basic stop gap management activities that are essential for the protection of resources on ACF properties. As more properties are acquired and acquisition funding is depleted, the programmatic emphasis will shift toward management. The general fund dollars will then fund the ongoing maintenance of the sites, and along with bond funds, provide seed money for leveraging grant funds.

With any management task, staff examines the necessity of performing a particular task on various time horizons, and determines the ecological impact to the resource and the economic impact to the tax payers of not performing this task at a particular time. If waiting to perform a task is predicted to yield a significant decrease in the ecological value of the site and/or a significant increase in the cost of the task, the task becomes a priority. If there is no significant decrease in ecological value or increase in the cost of the task by waiting, the task becomes a lower priority. Additionally the availability of funding is used to determine priorities. Staff is opportunistic; if funding becomes available for a project through a grant, mitigation project or partnership, that project becomes a priority.

Management costs are generally influenced by the size and location of a preserve, level of disturbance, recreational uses and resource needs. Natural areas that are fully developed and can sustain high attendance levels have the largest costs and largest net positive economic impacts on local economies. Small sites, with high volume public use and high levels of restoration are more expensive to manage than large, pristine sites with low levels of public use. ACF has adopted a minimalist approach to site development due to the sensitive nature of the preserves and the anticipated low funding levels. ACF will provide parking areas and hiking trails with some interpretive information. As additional funding becomes available through grants or other sources, the visitor amenities may be enhanced and expanded.

## **Strategies:**

### Grants

Multiple strategies are used to accomplish management tasks. Grants will be sought to fund invasive plant control, restoration and development of public use facilities, i.e., trailheads, parking areas and interpretive signage. It should be noted that most grants require some form of matching funds. Staff time and a portion of the general fund allotment or bond proceeds will be used to leverage dollars to accomplish stewardship goals. Examples of grants staff will apply for are the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Bureau of Invasive Plant Management Upland Invasive Plant Removal Funds, Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program, the Office of Greenways and Trails, and Tourist Development Tax grants for public use facilities, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Division of Forestry for restoration and reforestation grants, Division of Historical Resources archaeological stabilization grants.

### Volunteers

Staff has used volunteers to assist with management activities and is working with Risk Management to further define the tasks volunteers are able to perform. While a strong volunteer program can off-set general fund needs, it must be balanced with an increase in the County's liability exposure. Therefore staff continues to work with Risk Management on volunteer appropriate activities. By utilizing license agreements and independent contractor status, individual volunteers may perform tasks like hog trapping, mowing and maintaining trails. Other volunteers have assisted with vegetation and wildlife monitoring. Also, volunteers may assist with trash removal, invasive plant control, native plantings, sign or fence installation, trail maintenance, interpretive material development and grant writing.

If the liability issues can be overcome, staff would like to initiate a Volunteer Ranger program to enhance the security of the preserves. Volunteers will walk trails, assist visitors and report to program staff any incidences that are a threat to public safety or the resources. This program will provide a substantial savings to the general fund because this service is very expensive to contract and time consuming for staff. The presence of Volunteer Rangers will allow staff to direct their efforts to areas with known problems. Additionally the presence of Volunteer Rangers on the sites will help deter inappropriate activities and provide a safer more enjoyable visitor experience.

### Partnerships

Staff will pursue partnerships with the University of Florida and other organizations that promote research focused on specific site needs, i.e., control of invasive plant populations, restoration of disturbed areas, monitoring changes in plant or wildlife populations in response to management actions.

### Interim Agricultural Activities

Keeping in mind that the purpose of the ACF program is to acquire, improve and manage environmentally sensitive lands, there may be opportunities to off-set management costs and generate revenue from private sector partnerships through interim agricultural activities such as leasing existing pastures, groves or row crop areas to private parties until a restoration plan can be developed, funded and implemented.

### Timber Sales

Of the 2,670 acres that are expected to be under ACF management by March 2006, approximately 800 acres are pine plantation. The ACF stewardship strategy is to harvest/thin the planted pines over time, while simultaneously restoring the biodiversity of these areas through prescribed burning, ground cover restoration and replanting site

appropriate pine species. Proceeds from the timber sales will go into the management and restoration of the ACF properties. ACF staff anticipates placing these funds in an interest bearing account which will help augment management funding and reduce the need for General Funds.

#### Prescribed Burn Program

The implementation of a prescribed burn program is one of the most important and cost effective management activities that can be done on the ACF properties. To this end, ACF staff is working closely with the Alachua County Fire Rescue Department's Wildfire Mitigation Officer to develop and implement a prescribed fire program. Once implemented, the prescribed burn program will reduce dangerous fuel loads thus mitigating the threat of severe wildfires, and encouraging species diversity and healthy natural communities.

#### Community Service Workers and Inmate Labor

As the ACF program matures and more staff time is available for management, staff will utilize community service workers and inmate labor to accomplish tasks such as installation and maintenance of signs, trails and fences, removal of invasive plants, planting vegetation, and trash removal. The use of community service workers and inmate labor involves a greater commitment of staff time, but is much less expensive than contracting these projects through a private contractor, thus their use will save the County General Fund dollars.

#### Restoration Needs Book

Staff will develop a binder of unfunded ACF restoration projects that will be provided to agency staff (Alachua County, Water Management District, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, US Army Corp of Engineers, City of Gainesville) for use as potential mitigation or violation resolution projects.

#### Donations

ACF staff has considered placing "iron rangers" at trailhead facilities to encourage donations to the program, and will readily accept donations of money, services, supplies or equipment from willing parties, provided liability issues can be worked out.

#### Impact Fees and Ad-valorem Revenue

Other funding options that should be considered by the BoCC are the implementation of a conservation lands impact fee that would provide funds for acquisition and management of conservation lands, and the appropriation of that portion of the voter-approved 0.25 mill ad-valorem revenue not used for bond debt service for either funding 1) management activities until 2020 at which time the bond covenant expires, or 2) establishing an endowment fund for management that would last beyond 2020.

Recognizing the limited availability of management funds, ACF staff continually seeks creative ways to fund management and keep costs down. The stewardship philosophy revolves around a "no net loss of conservation values" unless funding can be obtained from outside sources. The ACF stewardship strategy combines grants, volunteers, partnerships, interim agricultural activities, timber sales, prescribed burning, community service workers and inmate labor, donations and restoration projects resulting from mitigation or the resolution of violations to accomplish stewardship activities. ACF Staff appreciates the support that the BoCC has given to the ACF program, and its interest in the effective and efficient stewardship of the ACF Preserves.