
TO: Board of County Commissioners

FROM: Ken Grudens, David Cox, Dan Lampson, George Glenn Jr.

DATE: January 25, 2022

RE: 2022 Land Conservation Bond Initiative

On behalf of the environmental community of Indian River County, we request that the Board of County Commissioners direct staff to bring forth a resolution referring a \$50 million bond to acquire and permanently preserve environmentally significant lands to the November 8, 2022 ballot, and to direct staff to work with the environmental coalition to draft the resolution and ballot language.

DESCRIPTION

The environmental community, including the Indian River Land Trust, Indian River Neighborhood Association, Pelican Island Audubon Society, Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County, Friends of the St. Sebastian River, Ocean Research & Conservation Association (ORCA) and the Pelican Island Conservation Society, are supporting the issuance of a new bond referendum to provide \$50 million to purchase permanent interests in environmentally significant lands throughout our County.

At the February 18, 2020 Board of County Commission (BCC) meeting, the coalition of environmental organizations pursuing this bond requested that the BCC authorize The Trust for Public Land (TPL) to provide assistance in the form of a feasibility study. That study was completed in 2020, and although at the beginning of 2020 it was hoped that the land conservation bond would be placed on the November 2020 ballot, the Covid-19 pandemic created too much economic uncertainty to move forward at that time. This effort was suspended.

The rationale for bringing the land conservation bond to the voters in 2020 was that the 2004 land conservation bond would be satisfied in September 2021, and an approval of a subsequent bond would not result in a tax increase to voters but would be a continuation (at a smaller millage) of an existing line item on property taxes.

Our County has environmentally significant lands that have already been identified by local and state agencies as priority purchases for preservation. They include lands identified on the Florida Forever conservation list, the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, the St. Johns River Water Management District priority list, and Indian River County's own priorities.

There is no shortage of lands worthy of permanent conservation in our county, including lands along the Indian River Lagoon, the Sebastian River Greenway, the native uplands along the I-95 corridor and our working cattle ranches in the western part of the county that are part of the vital link associated with the State's Wildlife Corridor Program.

It was noted in the February 2020 BCC meeting that Indian River County's population was experiencing strong growth resulting in a loss of open space and creating a detrimental impact on our water and wildlife resources. The last two years have seen that impact grow significantly with the influx of new residents from out-of-state and other parts of Florida. The TPL completed the feasibility study for a new bond in 2020 and has updated that in 2021.

Indian River County voters have approved local bonds twice: the first in 1992 and the second in 2004. Voters also overwhelmingly voted for Amendment 1 (2014) – the constitutional amendment received support in excess of 75% -- which was supposed to jump start the State's premier land-conservation program - Florida Forever. Our residents are keenly aware of the need to protect lands to protect our water, our open space and our quality of life.

If the BCC approves referring a land-conservation bond to the 2022 ballot, the local environmental organizations, with the assistance of TPL, will engage in an informational campaign with residents explaining the benefits of the bond.

We enthusiastically request that the BCC authorize the following action during Commissioner Adams corresponding agenda item:

MOTION by Commissioner _____ (Seconded by Commissioner _____): Direct staff to bring a resolution, including ballot language, back to the Board of County Commissioners on or before the March 8 meeting to refer a \$50 million bond to acquire and permanently preserve environmentally significant lands to the November 8, 2022 general election ballot. Staff should work with the citizens coalition supporting the referendum to draft the resolution and ballot language.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Feasibility Study