

ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS ACQUISITION SELECTION COMMITTEE

MINUTES

MAY 11, 2011

**THE MINUTES WERE PREPARED
IN AGENDA ORDER AS
PUBLISHED AND NOT IN THE
ORDER IN WHICH THE ITEMS WERE HEARD**

6:30 PM TO 8:30 PM

**WEST PASCO GOVERNMENT CENTER, BOARD ROOM
NEW PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA**

Members:

Mr. Brian Panico, Chairman

Mr. Clark Hull, Jr.

Ms. Eva Bailey

Mr. Ed Lawlor - **ABSENT**

Ms. Lisa Baltus

Ms. Amanda Craig – arrived at 6:45 p.m.

Mr. Mac Davis

Dr. Chris Miller - **ABSENT**

Ms. Patty Fesmire – arrived at 6:47 p.m.

Mr. Bob Blanchard - **ABSENT**

Mr. Chad Allison

Staff:

Mr. Keith Wiley, Environmental Lands Program Manager

Mr. Ron Daniel, Environmental Lands Program Coordinator

Ms. Christina Esposito, Lands Manager

Ms. Lisa Henningsen, County Biologist

Ms. Michele Baker, Chief Assistant County Administrator - **ABSENT**

Ms. Elizabeth Blair, Assistant County Attorney - **ABSENT**

I. Call to Order

Chairman Panico called the meeting to order at 6:41 p.m.

Ms. Donalee Schmidt, Deputy Clerk, called the roll. Mr. Lawlor, Dr. Miller and Mr. Blanchard were absent. Ms. Craig arrived to the meeting at 6:45 p.m. and Ms. Fesmire arrived to the meeting at 6:47 p.m.

II. Announcements

There were no announcements.

III. Old Business

A. Approval of March 09, 2011 Minutes

Chairman Panico requested a motion for approval of the March minutes.

Mr. Ron Daniel corrected the March minutes to reflect that Ms. Rene Wiesner Brown was absent from the meeting, but that Mr. Keith Wiley was present.

MR. DAVIS MOVED approval of the March minutes as corrected; **MR. ALLISON SECONDED.**

Chairman Panico called on the motion; the vote was unanimous and the motion carried.

B. Acquisition List Update

Mr. Daniel explained the item and distributed a map showing the properties included on the acquisition list.

1. Fleamasters

Mr. Daniel explained an appraisal had been completed on the property and that Staff had worked closely with Hernando County because the properties were together. The land owner did not want to sell one portion of the property without the other. Both sides had made offers on the property and the land owner did not except the offers that were made. They were currently at a standstill, but Staff would "leave the door open" in case the property owner wished to work with them at a later time.

MS. AMANDA CRAIG ARRIVED TO THE MEETING AT 6:45 P.M.

2. Morsani Ranch

Mr. Daniel explained the BOCC had approved the purchase of the remaining rights and approximately 384 acres. Tomorrow was the scheduled closing date for the County to purchase the remaining interest in the ranch.

C. Update on Renaming of Upper Cotee Preserve

Mr. Keith Wiley explained the item was still going through the administrative process.

D. Five-Mile Creek Mitigation/Restoration (Meres Crossing)

Mr. Wiley explained there was an issue regarding a utility line that needed to be resolved.

MS. FESMIRE ARRIVED TO THE MEETING AT 6:47 P.M.

IV. New Business

A. Scheublein Nomination (Phase II)—Full Review

Chairman Panico asked if the request was for acquisition or a conservation easement.

Mr. Daniel said it was undermined at this time with the landowner. The landowner wanted Staff to review all of his property. He noted a there was a nice home and a horse barn located in the middle of the parcel.

Mr. Wiley explained the item and described the area. The site was approximately 213 acres, 132 of which were uplands and 82 acres were wetlands. The site was located just south of the Starkey to Connerton critical linkage, it was in the Upper Cotee EPU, and also the Upper Cotee and Anclote watersheds. He reviewed the objectives of the EPU and noted the site included 117 acres of improved pasture. He spoke further regarding the wetlands located on the site, the current zoning, the future land use, and that the FWC map showed there was not a lot of high priority habitat within the property. The total average score for Phase II of the property was 48.5.

Discussion followed between Staff and the Committee Members regarding effects to the use of the critical linkage; the phases would be done as two separate recommendations; they were very interested in the purchase of phase one; the Bexley Ranch DRI; listed species located on the property; Staff had been unsuccessful in getting on the Bexley property to evaluate the plants on the property; the subject parcel did not merit out right fee simple acquisition, but may be a potential easement; this property would probably be pricey; the Ridge Road extension; and the property value.

MR. HULL MOVED to not recommend acquisition.

Discussion continued regarding the size of the parcel; this was a decent size piece of natural land; an island was not necessarily a bad thing; the Ridge Road extension design; wildlife underpasses; development in the area; and management of the property.

MS. BAILEY SECONDED THE MOTION.

Chairman Panico called on the motion; the motion carried with Mr. Davis and Ms. Fesmire voting nay.

B. Hawk Ranch Nomination--Full Review

Mr. Wiley reviewed the site information and noted the total acreage was 486 acres, with 343 upland acres and 143 wetland acres. The site was located within the Withlacoochee River EPU. He reviewed the objectives within the EPU which included to conserve 99 percent of the land area, check the river corridor outside public ownership, protect the integrity of the hundred year flood plain, sustain agricultural uses as buffers to the river, and ensure appropriate land uses within the Withlacoochee State Forest and Green Swamp. He reviewed the parcel boundaries; the EPU overlay; there was no critical linkage in the area; the land use was predominantly improved pasture and wetland systems; the soil types; the County category one wetland; the future land use was agricultural; the integrated wildlife habitat ranking system showed high scores throughout the property; photographs of the site; and the total score for the property was 61.75.

Discussion followed that the request was for a conservation easement; a possible partnership with the water management district; and that funding was an issue.

Mr. Steve Blasco, SWFWMD Land Acquisition Manager, said Swiftmud did have money to partner with projects. If the County wished to proceed with a partnership, they would need to submit a proposal to the Executive Director or the Land Resources Director. This property had a long history with the District. The District had made several offers on the property and was unsuccessful in concluding a transaction with the property owner. In 2006 an offer was made to place a conservation easement on the entire property of 457 acres at a price of 2.2 million dollars. In 2009 another offer was made on the 457 acres of 1.6 million dollars; this offer was also rejected by the property owner. The property owner indicated at that time, he had an expectation of \$5,500.00 per acre. After 2009 the District re-evaluated all the properties in the District in their five year plan. At that time, the property was actually taken out of the boundary of acquisition for the District. The property owner submitted a letter over his concerns of the removal. The District completed a full evaluation of that property specifically and ultimately came back with a determination that approximately 185 acres remained in an area boundary where the District would proceed with a conservation easement. He reviewed the area with the Committee. If the County wished to partnership then a

formal letter, which explained what the County wished to do and what level of participation from the District they were requesting, would need to be submitted.

Discussion followed between the Committee Members, Staff and Mr. Blasco regarding the specific area the District was interested in for the conservation easement.

Mr. Daniel noted the County had submitted a formal letter to Swiftmud requesting that they consider a partnership. In the letter Staff requested the property be taken under consideration as a possible partnership with the Environmental Lands Program. He was told that now all land buying was approved through DEP in Tallahassee.

Mr. Blasco said there was a new requirement to go through DEP in Tallahassee for the purchase of new land. He did recall a letter, but asked if they were requesting for participation of the whole property.

Mr. Daniel said at the time they wrote the letter it was for the whole property; however, any amount of participation would be helpful to ELAMP. He noted the site was adjacent to District land holdings. They would entertain any suggestions by the District.

Mr. Blasco stated they would need to determine what would be the appropriate level of partnership. The request was still being evaluated. Another concern involved the management of the site or professional monitoring of the easement. He explained further that when the new Governor came into office, an Executive Order was issued on his first day in office which required all contracts of a million dollars be sent to the Office of the Governor for his review. The Executive Order had expired in April and at that point the Governor had appointed specific department heads to review the items. On April 25th the District received a letter from the Department of Environment Protection which stated that before the Water Management District spoke with a landowner they were required to obtain DEP's approval. They would also need to obtain approval from DEP regarding the terms of the transaction and they could also be involved in the closing of the deal. The new system was actually impacting negotiations that were currently going on within the County involving Starkey Ranch.

Discussion followed regarding management and monitoring on various properties; past partnerships with Swiftmud; less than fee acquisitions had fewer management costs; fee acquisitions had more responsibility for the agency due to restoration, public access, etc.; a possible alternative of having a portion of the property being fee simple, with the remainder of the property being a conservation easement; this process would be done strictly through negotiation and eminent domain would not be used; the Committee could recommend the property be added to the acquisition list; conservation easements on pasture land versus conservation easements over natural habitat; land restoration; the Morsani Ranch negotiations; a clause was included in the documents which stated the County had the first right of refusal; and that the various issues could be discussed once the property was added to the acquisition list.

MR. ALLISON MOVED to recommend the property be added to the acquisition list, because of the functional wetlands and the ecological purposes served by the property at the present time; **MS. FESMIRE SECONDED.**

Chairman Panico called on the motion; the vote was unanimous and the motion carried.

Ms. Bailey asked what happened to the land once it was added to the acquisition list. She felt they should own most of these parcels and restoration could be done if needed. She understood that was not part of their criteria, but it was something that was important to the group.

MS. BAILEY MOVED to include in the recommendation a suggestion that if possible to obtain some of the property as outright ownership and the remainder in an easement.

Extensive discussion followed regarding possible “take downs” of the property yearly to allow restoration; management plans; negotiation of the terms; ultimately, the buyer would be the County Commission; the Swiftmud Model used a core preservation area; buffering of the core preservation area; and possible conditions to the recommendation.

MS. BAILEY MOVED to add an additional recommendation that as much of the land as possible be purchased and added as an easement, and that the language of the easement be made so that future restoration was possible; **MS. FESMIRE SECONDED.**

Chairman Panico called on the motion; the vote was unanimous and the motion carried.

C. Rock Lake Nomination—Initial Review

Mr. Wiley reviewed the site information and noted the parcel was nominated by a property management company. The site was approximately 219 acres, with 200 acres upland and 19 acres of wetlands. He noted the site was located within the Hernando Sand Hill EPU and explained the site had been approved for an MPUD. He reviewed the objectives of the EPU which were to conserve 40 percent of the land, ensure protection of listed species populations, protect connected habitat in the area, and to prevent additional fragmentation of the habitat. Staff was only able to obtain a nomination for a few of the parcels, but the idea would be to pursue the entire piece. He reviewed the soils and noted there were few wetlands outside of the lakes on the site. The future land use was residential. There was a score of 6 throughout the nomination parcel. He reviewed the powerline easement located on the property, displayed photographs of the property, spoke regarding ATV activity on the site, the acreage amount, and the possibility of a stand alone preserve.

Mr. Bill Short explained he was responsible for submitting the property. They had tried to contact the property owner of the parcel separating the two pieces, but had been unsuccessful.

Discussion followed regarding the size of the parcels.

Mr. Short explained his firm represented the owner of the 123 acres. He noted at one time the parcel was all zoned under one MPUD. The property owner was now a bank. The original developer had planned to develop the parcels. He explained there was a portfolio of various properties in the Tampa Bay area. Bids were due today for the portfolio as a whole; however they had entertained individual offers in the event the portfolio could not obtain an offer that the bank would accept. Several properties were in the direct path of development. He spoke regarding other properties that had been submitted to Pasco County for consideration. There could potentially be more land, but it would not be contiguous. He reviewed other parcels that were available for acquisition.

MR. ALLISON MOVED to schedule a site visit; **MR. DAVIS SECONDED.**

Chairman Panico called on the motion; the vote was unanimous and the motion carried.

Discussion followed regarding the Rock Lake parcel.

D. Management Update

Ms. Christina Esposito provided the update. For the Upper Cotee Preserve, Staff continued working on routine maintenance, had begun some exotic plant removal, planned for additional exotic plant removal in another area of the preserve, the FCT survey had been completed, maintenance was being done on the trail, the trail leading to the boardwalk was also being cleared, and the prescription burn scheduled was on hold because of the current weather conditions. She spoke regarding the Boy Scout Preserve and explained the Management Plan had been completed, plans for a picnic pavilion and bicycle rack, reopening the trail, a potential observation tower, an information kiosk would be installed, and the possibility of a canoe or kayak launch that would connect to the existing Blue Ways Trail. Staff would attend a paddling trail workshop next week. The BOCC had approved the purchase of the remaining rights for the Morsani Ranch with the closing scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. Once the County took ownership, the landowner had 90 days to remove the cattle. The ranch would be named Jumping Gully Preserve and the management plan was underway. She noted Staff was also working on a scope of service so that a cattle lease could continue on the property, with the cattle being phased out as the property was restored.

Discussion followed regarding creeks located on the Boy Scout Preserve; revenue from the cattle lease would be available for management; restoration; and burrowing owls on the site.

E. Grant—Nature Plat Society for Upper Cotee Preserve

Ms. Esposito noted a grant had been submitted for the Boy Scout property from the Coastal Partnership Initiative for exotic plant removal and to establish a picnic pavilion for \$60,000.00 with \$60,000.00 matching in kind. A Florida Native Plant Society grant was received in the amount of \$500.00 in order to continue with the landscaping around the nature center at the Upper Cotee Preserve. A grant had been submitted for the Withlacoochee Regional Invasive Plant Working Group in the amount of \$8,000.00 for the Upper Cotee Preserve for maintenance of the exotic plant program. For the FDRDAP grant Staff was working on writing a scope service with one contractor hired to do the parking lot, the bathroom and the boardwalk. She noted an intern from USF would be working with Staff. The intern was a senior in the Environmental Science and Policy Program and would be working with trail construction, maintenance, plant and wildlife surveys, environmental education, and volunteer coordinating.

Discussion followed regarding possible grants from the Fish and Wildlife Service for restoring wildlife habitat and the grant submittal process.

V. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

VI. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 8:09 p.m.

ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS ACQUISITION
SELECTION COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING
MAY 11, 2011

Office of Paula S. O'Neil, Clerk and Comptroller

Prepared By: _____
Donalee Schmidt, Lead Board Clerk
Board Records Department