

Seminole commissioners to hear plans to acquire properties for preservation

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As more land critical to replenishing Florida's aquifers and in supporting a variety of ecosystems is lost to rooftops and parking lots, county Commissioner Lee Constantine is proposing a natural lands acquisition program called Seminole Forever that would emulate the state's decades-old conservation program, [Florida Forever](#).

"Conservation of land is so important, not just to look at and to recreate, but also to maintain the ecosystem that we are a very big part of," Constantine said. "Whether it's for air quality. Whether it's for water quality. Because if we don't conserve land now, it will cost us a lot of money in the future."

Under Constantine's proposal, which he plans to introduce at Tuesday's meeting, Seminole commissioners would establish a seven-member advisory group known as the Acquisition, Recovery and Management Committee, or ARMCO, that would recommend to commissioners properties the county should acquire for conservation and oversee the purchases.

The county's Leisure Services department would act as a liaison between ARMCO and commissioners, and it also would help manage the properties. ARMCO also would include auxiliary members from conservation and nature preservation groups, according to the proposal.

The county would dedicate \$5 million a year toward the Seminole Forever Land Trust, which would be used to acquire and improve the properties. The money could come from Seminole's \$318-million general fund, tourism development tax dollars and bonds issued by the county to acquire natural lands, Constantine said.

"We're spending millions and millions of dollars on transportation," he said. "You would think we can spend a very, very little bit of money to acquire land for conservation."

The main source of drinking water for most residents in north and Central Florida comes from underground aquifers. The aquifers are replenished, or recharged, by rainwater absorbed into the ground, according [to the St. Johns River Water Management District](#).

Although Florida receives about 52 inches of rain a year, not all that water is soaked into the ground. Most of it flows into rivers, streams or ponds, particularly if the land is paved over by parking lots, driveways and roads. Some vacant lands absorb more water and recharge the aquifer better than others.

Constantine and other environmentalists say it's therefore important to protect those high recharge areas from development.

Another proposal

Constantine will pitch his plan at the same meeting that Winter Springs attorney Dave Bear, along with members of conservation groups, will conduct a presentation urging Seminole commissioners to place [a referendum on the Nov. 8 general election](#) asking county voters for a temporary property tax to raise money for the purchase of natural lands for conservation.

According to Bear's proposal, property owners would be assessed 10 cents for every \$1,000 of taxable value over the next 20 years. That means for a house with an assessed value of \$300,000, minus the \$50,000 homestead exemption, the owner would pay about \$25 a year.

Representatives from [1000 Friends of Florida](#) and [Florida Audubon](#) also will speak Tuesday in favor of placing the referendum on the ballot.

However, Bear, who is also president of the nonprofit [Save Rural Seminole](#), said his proposal and Constantine's "don't have to be in opposition." The end goal is to acquire and preserve natural lands critical to the region's ecosystems from being bulldozed and paved over.

"The way they finance it is not a sticking point for us," Bear said. "Citizens want the county to preserve vulnerable natural lands. We proposed this referendum. But if the commissioners can promise us they will finance the [Seminole Forever] program great. If they aren't sure that they can finance it, then the citizens want the opportunity to vote on the referendum."

Bear pointed out that 84% of respondents supported Seminole acquiring more land for preservation and conservation, according to a public opinion survey conducted by the county in 2020.

He also noted that as Seminole's current population of about 475,000 residents is projected to soar to 710,000 by the year 2070, more sensitive land will be lost to development.

Seminole voters approved taxing themselves for similar natural lands acquisition programs in recent decades.

In 1990, 60% of voters agreed to a tax increase to purchase sensitive lands that raised about \$20 million over the following decade. Then in 2000, county voters approved another natural lands tax increase to raise an additional \$5 million for conservation and trails.

Under both programs, the county purchased more than 6,500 acres of environmentally sensitive land, including the Springs Hammock Preserve, the Econ Wilderness Area, Lake Harney Wilderness Area, Black Hammock Wilderness Area and the Chuluota Wilderness Area.

The model

Launched in mid-2001, the Florida Forever program has spent about \$3.3 billion to purchase nearly 900,000 acres of land for conservation and passive recreation, such as camping, fishing and horseback riding.

Under the state program, properties are recommended for purchase by the Acquisition and Restoration Council under the state's Department of Environmental Protection and approved by a board of trustees.

In January, for example, the state's DEP announced the acquisition of four parcels totaling 14,000 acres through the Florida Forever program. Those properties were located in Okeechobee, Hardee and Hendry counties.

Last year, the Florida Legislature allocated \$100 million to Florida Forever. However, under Gov. Rick Scott's tenure six years ago, state lawmakers tapped into and depleted the Florida Forever fund, which was never replenished.

Constantine said under Seminole Forever, any changes to the plan would require four of five commissioners voting in favor.

Commissioner Amy Lockhart said Friday she still had to delve into the details of Constantine's plan.

"But I think there is some merit to that," she said. "I am open to all sorts of creative ideas to continue to acquire, fund and support natural lands in Seminole County... I think natural lands have been a hallmark of our community."

She does not support placing a referendum on the November ballot asking voters for a tax increase.

"With inflation and the way that the economy is right now, I think it's the worst thing we could do," she said. "Let's take the time and plan to do it the right way."

Commissioner Jay Zembower said Friday he also had not studied Constantine's proposal. But he noted Seminole in recent years has studied implementing similar land acquisition programs funded by the county.

He noted it would benefit Seminole to have a program in place that acquires water-recharge properties for conservation as the county prepares to apply for water consumption permits from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection in the coming years.

"I would put this in the category of 'very important,' he said. "If we can show water quality and water conservation, then the county would get credit [from the state] for that when it comes time to renew our consumptive use permit."

Commissioner Bob Dallari said he looks forward to Tuesday's discussion. But he opposes using tourist tax dollars toward buying natural lands as proposed in the Seminole Forever plan. Those funds should be directed toward promoting tourism, he said. And Seminole will soon have to tap tourist tax dollars to improve the baseball fields at the county's Boombah Sports Complex.

"I have some serious concerns," Dallari said regarding the proposal.

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