

Would you pay extra tax to buy natural lands? Seminole considers putting it to a vote

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A Winter Springs attorney, who is president of the nonprofit [Save Rural Seminole](#), is leading an effort to place a referendum on the Nov. 8 general election ballot that would ask Seminole voters for a temporary property tax to raise money for the purchase of natural lands for conservation.

“There is no better way to preserve our green spaces than to have land acquisition programs. That’s the best thing you can do,” said David Bear about his proposed natural lands program. “Whether the citizens want to pay a little more to preserve Seminole County’s natural beauty would be up to them.”

According to the proposal, property owners would be assessed 20 cents for every \$1,000 of taxable value over the next decade. So for a home with an assessed value of \$300,000, minus the \$50,000 homestead exemption, the tax would be \$50 a year.

The levy would raise \$77 million before expiring in 10 years, according to estimates based on the county’s annual tax growth. The funds would be used toward purchasing environmentally sensitive lands for conservation and passive recreation.

Seminole commissioners on July 26 are scheduled to discuss whether to place the natural lands referendum on the November ballot.

If approved by voters, it would follow similar [natural lands programs](#) [Seminole](#) enacted in the past three decades.

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

Using the additional tax revenue from both programs, the county purchased more than 6,500 acres of environmentally sensitive land, including Spring Hammock Preserve,

the Econ Wilderness Area, Lake Harney Wilderness Area, Black Hammock Wilderness Area and the Chuluota Wilderness Area.

In 2006, however, Seminole voters rejected a similar [land acquisition program](#) that would have been used to pay for trails and bridges. County officials at the time noted it was rejected during a time of high gas prices, anti-government sentiment and a rise in property values that led to larger tax bills for homeowners — conditions the new effort would also face.

Still, Bear points out his idea has so far drawn the support of several conservation groups.

“It’s the best money that citizens could spend, because look at what they’re getting,” said resident Grey Wilson, who sits on the executive committee for the Friends of the Wekiva. “People should see this as an investment into their county’s future and their quality of life... because as time goes on, development and developers will continue to reach for these virgin lands.”

Paul Owens, president of the smart-growth group 1000 Friends of Florida, said his organization is “inclined to support” the measure as it has long supported public investment in land conservation throughout the state.

“Seminole County is projected to grow substantially in population in decades to come, and so that’s going to increase development pressure,” Owens said. “As the population grows, the need for open spaces for recreation, for water recharge, for wildlife habitat is going to continue.”

Charles Lee, director of advocacy for Audubon Florida, said there has been growing support among Florida residents, regardless of political leanings, toward land conservation.

“It’s not a blue thing or red thing. It garners supporters from across the political spectrum,” he said. “We’re obviously hopeful that Seminole County will have something on the ballot.”

If Seminole voters approve the referendum, the county could qualify for millions of state dollars for conservation land acquisition, Lee said, including through the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program designed to protect agricultural and ranchlands.

Lee also noted that natural lands programs provide large landowners in rural areas another option to sell their properties rather than to a developer.

But commissioners this week had mixed feelings about placing the issue on the November ballot.

“I think this is a great idea,” said Commissioner Jay Zembower, whose district includes Seminole’s rural boundary.

“We continue to hear about people that want additional parks,” he said. “I think there’s nothing more democratic of a process than doing something like this.”

He also noted that the funds could be used to leverage state money to acquire land to connect disjointed trails in rural areas

But Commissioner Amy Lockhart opposed placing a tax referendum on this year’s ballot at a time of high gas prices and inflation.

“Philosophically, I am opposed to increasing property taxes just because it’s a great idea,” she said. “I’m not saying natural lands are not a great idea. They’re wonderful... but we and the citizens deserve to have this fully vetted before we put it on the ballot. And I don’t think we’re going to get that in the next month.”

Commissioner Andria Herr said she was opposed to a resident asking commissioners to place the issue on the ballot, rather than collecting signatures through a ballot petition.

“I think generally this sets a precedent that I am uncomfortable with,” she said. “We’re opening ourselves up to a significant differential in terms of future requests for ballot referendums to be zipped right through to the ballot; regardless of how legitimate your request is and how wonderful the request is... I just don’t think this is the way we should do this. ... I’m at a no, based on process, not based on what you’re asking for.”

But Commissioner Lee Constantine said residents deserve to decide for themselves on the tax.

“I think you all know that I’m a big fan of conservation land,” he said. “One of the things during the pandemic that we were so excited about was the 600 percentage increase in the use of our public lands.”

Bear and others noted that nearly two dozen counties in Florida have recently enacted similar natural lands acquisition programs, including [Alachua](#) in 2016, and [Volusia](#), [Collier](#) and [Manatee](#) counties in 2020.

“These ballot referendums are not just our idea,” he said. “These are going on throughout the state.”

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