

THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY

IN BALANCE

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY



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Photo: Geoffrey Smith

How a Grassroots Land Conservation Initiative Topped One Million Dollars in Pledges and Donations

THE INCREDIBLE EFFORT TO PROTECT MARTIN COUNTY

Significant progress has been achieved on the “Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative” over the last several months. Since we first reported on this conservation project in the Spring “In Balance” newsletter, pledges and donations have exceeded the initial \$1,000,000 threshold!

In spite of COVID-19 precautions complicating our ability to have one-on-one meetings with potential supporters, the effort to permanently protect properties along Bridge Road between I-95 and U.S. 1 has gained ever-growing support, with pledges and contributions coming at all levels from a wide variety of donors.

The Guardians of Martin County and the

Treasured Lands Foundation were the initial sponsors of this initiative. The Conservation Fund, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, with experience in environmental preservation, is handling the project acquisition using the donations it receives. You can find more information about the Initiative by accessing the website: <https://bit.ly/LoxaLucie>

The Loxa-Lucie Headwaters project has recently been endorsed by the Town of Jupiter Island, the Loxahatchee River Management Coordinating Council and the Martin County chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society. Additional endorsements are expected in the months ahead.

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Our Martin County Difference is Under Increasing Pressure

With intensifying worries due to the spread of Covid-19, the national preference for wide open living spaces has exploded, resulting in a general migration from dense urban areas to less populated and less developed areas like Martin County. In fact, recent reports have tracked more than 1,000 new residents on average moving to Florida every day.

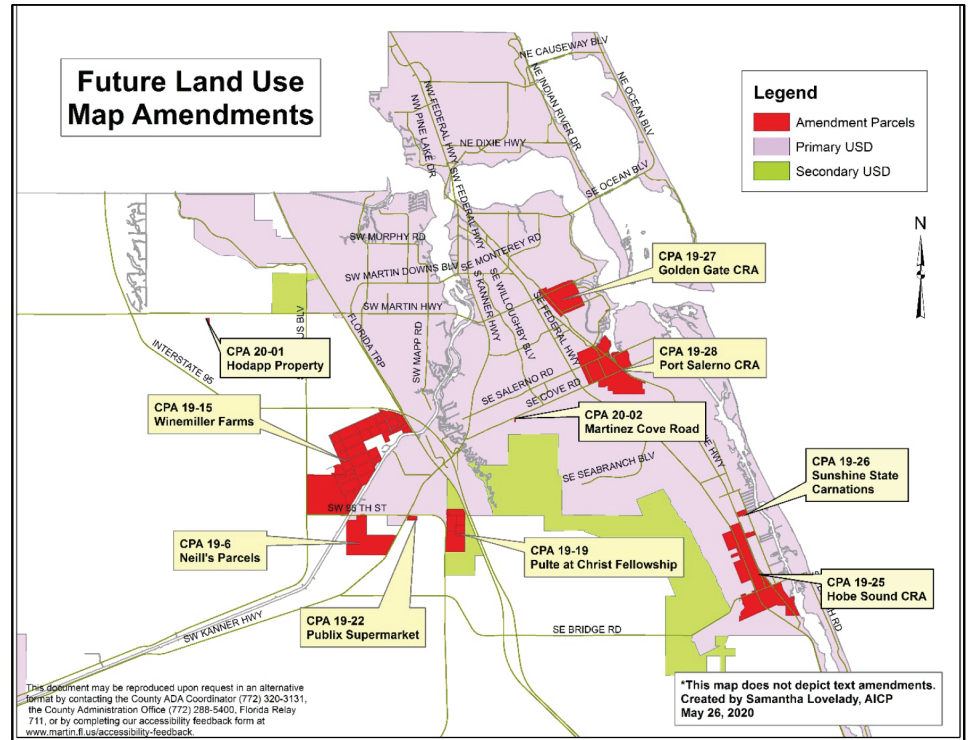
This trend has increased demand for housing and commercial development, which in turn has resulted in new requests to amend Martin County's Comprehensive Growth Management Plan, challenging our long-standing 4-story height limit and requesting expansion of the Urban Services District.

The City of Stuart has also experienced incremental pressure for infill development and to approve projects that replace "old Florida" type homes with more intensive development projects.

Habitually, the Guardians review such requests to amend the County's Comp Plan on a regular basis. We comment on projects that we believe, if approved, would not be consistent with our philosophy of responsible growth and our mission of protecting the quality of life and the best interests of our residents and community.

Of the 10 projects featured in the accompanying graphic that are presently in some stage of review by the County, we have presented our case to the County Board of Commissioners in opposition to Comp Plan Amendment 19-9 (Pulte at Christ Fellowship). This proposed CPA however, was approved by the Board and

Figure 4 Current FLUM Amendment Requests



transmitted to the state's Department of Economic Opportunity for its review, prior to being referred back to the Board for final approval. The Guardians will continue our opposition in the hope we might be able to influence some beneficial modifications before the Commission considers this CPA for final approval.

We appreciate our collaborative relationship with the Hobe Sound Concerned Citizens Coalition and thank them for their diligence in informing the community about the request to re-zone the Sunshine State Carnation site located off Gomez Avenue in Hobe Sound, with CPA 19-36.

Our advocacy seeks to minimize adverse impacts on existing residents

while allowing Martin County to grow responsibly at a sustainable rate.

Our ability to advise our elected officials about how we feel about projects that may affect us is more difficult with the challenges associated with COVID-19. Participating in meetings and hearings remotely is less effective than face-to-face meetings, but the Guardians continue our advocacy through a combination of electronic communications, conference calls and in-person interactions with proper safety precautions in place.

If you are concerned about the implications of growth-related proposals, we encourage you to let us know your thoughts and suggestions. Please stay informed through our website:

www.theguardiansofmartincounty.com.

BRIGHTLINE UPDATE

BRIGHTLINE ENDS VIRGIN TRAINS ALLIANCE

Brightline trains have not run since March 2020 due to Covid-19. When the line resumes service, the bright red "Virgin Trains USA" logo will no longer be seen on the trains, because Brightline ended its 20-year licensing agreement with Virgin Enterprises at the end of July 2020. Brightline made this announcement in bond documents to investors. The partnership was originally confirmed in November 2018, but other than renaming the Miami station, "Virgin MiamiCentral," the rebranding of the trains never happened.

U.S. SUPREME COURT TURNS DOWN INDIAN RIVER COUNTY APPEAL

Despite a grassroots effort to raise more than \$400,000 from private citizens to finance an appeal to the United States Supreme Court against Brightline and the Federal Railroad Administration, the Court denied the request for review. At stake was Brightline's access to \$2.7 billion in tax-exempt private activity bonds to fund construction of the rail service from West Palm Beach to Orlando, which Brightline expects will proceed in the months ahead. A similar bond sale failed in November 2020 when Fortress Investment Group, the owners of Brightline, tried to sell \$5 billion in bonds to pay for another rail project, between southern California and Las Vegas.

TRAIN SAFETY

Denial by the Supreme Court to review the lower court ruling has cleared the way for Brightline's expansion to Orlando. Nevertheless, we continue to collaborate with other grassroots groups fighting for train safety measures, such as pedestrian gates, bridges, and fencing. After the train started operating in January 2019, on average nearly one person a week had been killed on the tracks. An analysis by The Associated Press found that this was the worst death rate per mile of any of the nation's railroads. Learn more on the following website:

www.citizensagainststhetrain.com ■

35 Billion Gallons of Water Discharged from Lake O in One Month!

While Martin County's average annual rainfall is 55 inches, as of October 30, the National Weather Service had already measured 75 inches in Stuart.

The very rainy summer and fall has led not only to unexpected flooding in Martin County but also resulted in discharges from Lake Okeechobee into our estuaries beginning in October, carrying nutrients and suspended solids and posing the risk of algae blooms, like those which contaminated our waterways in past years.

But there is some good news on the efforts to reduce those discharges. The South Florida Water Management

District (SFWMD) has unanimously approved fully funding the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir Project's Stormwater Treatment Area (STA).

Consequently, the pending \$64 million transfer from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection will provide SFWMD all the funds it needs to complete the 6,500-acre Stormwater Treatment Area (STA) that will clean water stored in the EAA Reservoir and facilitate its flow south to the Everglades. SFWMD expects to complete the STA portion of the project by 2023.

The reservoir and STA are a combined Everglades restoration effort being

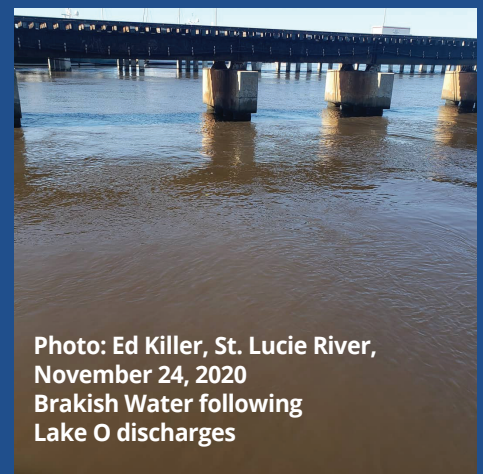


Photo: Ed Killer, St. Lucie River, November 24, 2020
Brackish Water following Lake O discharges

completed by SFWMD and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

When completed, these steps will cut discharges by 63% according to SFWMD. ■

Grassroots

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HERE ARE SOME QUICK QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE PROJECT:

Q: What is the Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative?

A: A grassroots multi-year effort to permanently conserve an undeveloped area of nearly 70,000 acres in Martin County and thereby protect it from future development.

Q: Where is the land located?

A: The protected ecological corridor envisioned will connect the sources of the Loxahatchee River's Kitching Creek watershed and the South Fork of the St Lucie River, providing a preserve for native plants and wildlife along Bridge Road between I-95 and U.S. 1.

Q: How can thousands of acres be purchased when the state's land-buying program has limited funds?

A: Properties that have willing sellers have been identified and prioritized as key parcels for permanently protecting the corridor through fee simple purchases, conservation easements and/or possible donations for conservation.

Q: Where is Phase 1 and what is the financial goal?

A: Phase 1 is a 2-mile stretch (138-acres) along the north side of Bridge Rd. on both sides of Powerline Avenue. The fundraising goal for Phase 1 is between 2 and 2.5 million dollars.

Q: Are donations tax-deductible?

A: Yes, as The Conservation Fund is a 501(c)(3) entity, donations are generally fully tax-deductible.

LONG-TERM BENEFITS

Dedicating this land to public conservation will help restore the flow of water to its more natural condition and the likelihood of regional flooding such as that which

southeastern Martin County experienced this past summer. The property will provide for water storage and also opportunities for recreational enjoyment.

One other beneficial result of this project is potential corrective action after summer monitoring revealed a high level of wildlife mortality on Bridge Road (with more than 450 instances so far this year, generally disregarded by passers-by). Improvements to water management will enhance wildlife protection in the ecological corridor between Jonathan Dickinson and Atlantic Ridge Preserve State Parks.

Congratulations and thank you to Martin County residents and other donors for your determination to protect both the wetlands and their surrounding buffers.

There remains much work to do and more land to purchase. For more information, please go to:

www.loxalucieheadwaters.org ■

In Memoriam: A Tribute to Our Board Member DAVID A. BERENSON

It is with great sadness that we share the loss of our long-time Board Director, David Berenson. David, 86, passed away on August 2, 2020, peacefully at his home in Tequesta. We were so fortunate to benefit from David's expertise for nearly a decade.

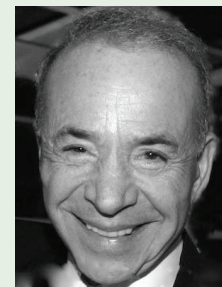
Before embarking on his professional career, David joined the U. S. Air Force, reaching the rank of Captain while serving in Vietnam. Among highlights of David's

impressive business achievements, he served as Ernst & Young's National Director of Tax Policy and Legislative Services. As a volunteer, David served as Chairman of the Board of Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts, in which role he helped preserve the Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia for posterity.

Most of all, David was a loving and caring husband, father and grandfather.

He was especially proud, however, to be an American, always trying to represent the best our country has to offer.

David's experience, advice and contributions are greatly missed. ■



Our Mission

The Guardians of Martin County is a 501(c)3 organization committed to helping shape a positive future for Martin County, by educating residents about the value of balancing natural and man-made resources to enrich the quality of life in our communities.