

THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY

IN BALANCE

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY



In this Issue

- Rural Lifestyle Comprehensive Growth Management Plan Amendment Update 1
- Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative Update 1
- Brightline Update 2
- Water Issues Update..... 3
- Welcome New Advisers 4



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Rural Lifestyle Comprehensive Growth Management Plan Amendment Update

On March 17, 2023 Administrative Law Judge Francine Ffolkes released the Recommended Order in the challenge to Martin County’s adoption of the Text Amendment that would have created Rural Lifestyle as a new future land use in the county’s Comprehensive Growth Management Plan. In spite of concerns voiced by the Guardians and objections by the Friends of the Everglades and

a majority of those who spoke at the Adoption Hearing, on September 13, 2022, the Text Amendment had been approved by a 3-2 Commission majority (Commissioners Jenkins, Smith and Hetherington for, and Commissioners Heard and Ciampi opposed).
Former Martin County Commissioner and Palm City resident Donna Melzer had filed the challenge to the Amendment on

continued on last page

Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative Update

Having completed acquisition of a strategically-located three-mile stretch on the north side of Bridge Road, the consortium composed of the Guardians of Martin County, The Conservation Fund and the Treasured Lands Foundation has begun fundraising to acquire a 20-acre parcel on the south side of Bridge Road. The parcel consists of former agricultural lands that had gone fallow following its use as cattle pastureland. A contract is in place with the current owner, and tax

deductible contributions can be made by mail to The Conservation Fund, 18 Middle Rd., Stuart, FL 34996 or on-line at <https://www.conservationfund.org/projects/conserving-the-loxa-lucie-headwaters-a-mosaic-of-florida-s-critical-wetlands>
Once acquired, hydrologic restoration will occur and the property will serve as

continued on page 2

READ INSIDE:
Water Issues



Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative Update

continued from page 1

another piece in the puzzle of trying to permanently protect lands in the ecological corridor between Jonathan Dickinson and Atlantic Ridge Preserve State Parks.

In March, Guardians Board member Tony Zunino, Advisor Dr. Joe Woolston and Blake Capps, the new Local Planning Agency representative for the Commission District that includes Hobe Sound, were three of 20 people who participated in a field trip to the properties. During the visit, which was sponsored by Martin County's Water Ambassadors program, attendees visited the County's Kitching Creek Preserve, and the two Loxa-Lucie Headwaters properties, to learn more about how the Guardians' activities complement other regional water quality improvement projects while simultaneously addressing challenges of urban sprawl and ecological stewardship.

The Guardians and the Loxa-Lucie



Signage identifying the site of the Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative property. Photo: Greg Braun

Headwaters Steering Committee thank State Representative John Snyder and Senator Gayle Harrell for sponsoring Locally-Initiated Funding Requests in Tallahassee, which, if approved, would provide funds to match donations made by contributors to the Loxa-Lucie Headwaters project to permanently preserve the Acquisition #2 parcel.

Meanwhile, grant applications have been filed seeking funding for initial invasive species removal work

on the 138-acre parcel acquired for the Loxa-Lucie Headwaters project in 2021. Previous hydrologic manipulations that made the property more conducive for agricultural operations have allowed invasive earleaf acacia, melaleuca, Brazilian pepper and climbing fern to become established. A deteriorated culvert has been replaced and the Pegasus Foundation's new Executive Director, Theresa Mitchell, is helping the team identify grant opportunities that will help address ongoing wildlife mortality and driver safety on Bridge Road between U.S. 1 and I-95. In the last three months alone, a head-on car collision that resulted in fatalities, an overturned tanker truck that spilled fuel in front of our property, and ongoing wildlife roadkill, demonstrate the unfortunate consequences of usage of a heavily-used, high-speed evacuation route which bisects the existing wildlife corridor. ■

Brightline Update



Brightline's new double rail bisects Jonathan Dickinson State Park. Photo: Greg Braun

With upgrades of existing rails and on-going construction of additional train tracks, Brightline has begun trial runs of its higher-speed trains through Treasure Coast communities. Improvements are underway on the railroad bridge over the Loxahatchee River. A second set of tracks, however, is not proposed for the railroad bridge over the St. Lucie River, and the Guardians appreciate U.S. Representative Brian Mast's efforts with the U.S. Coast Guard to reduce adverse impacts on navigation

and push for greater rail safety.

Brightline's operations in highly-populated areas of south Florida have earned it the dubious distinction as the most deadly rail line per mile of its type in the United States.

Let's learn from those operations and recent train derailments in East Palestine, Ohio and Wisconsin, and do what we can to avoid or minimize those problems when Brightline's trains begin full-speed operation through Martin County later this year. ■

Water Issues Update

The Guardians are pleased to welcome Jim Moir as the new Indian Riverkeeper following the retirement of former Riverkeeper Mike Connor. Jim has been engaged in conservation advocacy in our area for years, and has been one of the local representatives on the Board of Directors of the Marine Resources Council. Jim will attend the Guardians Board meeting in April to present information about the challenges that the Indian River Lagoon faces, and what is being done to address on-going water quality issues.



Welcome new Indian Riverkeeper Jim Moir.
Photo: Greg Braun

Simultaneously, we were pleased to be part of the Rivers Coalition's meeting at the St. Lucie Locks, where local water heroes Mark Perry (Florida Oceanographic Society), Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch (South Florida Water Management District Governing Board Member), Eve Samples (Executive Director of the Friends of the Everglades and member of the Guardians' Advisory



South Florida Water Management District Governing Board Member Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch with Brigadier General Daniel Hibner. Photo: Greg Braun

Board), County and City of Stuart Commissioners, among others, welcomed new U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Brigadier General Hibner and his entourage when they visited our area in March. Presenter and TCPalm fishing journalist Ed Killer quoted former Stuart News editor and book author Ernie Lyons and former County Commissioners from decades

ago who asked for Corps assistance when the devastating effects of Lake Okeechobee discharges were first becoming apparent.

With restoration of the Kissimmee River almost complete, a new Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual being refined, and continued progress on Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan projects, we are cautiously optimistic that better times for the St. Lucie Estuary and Indian River Lagoon may be on the horizon.

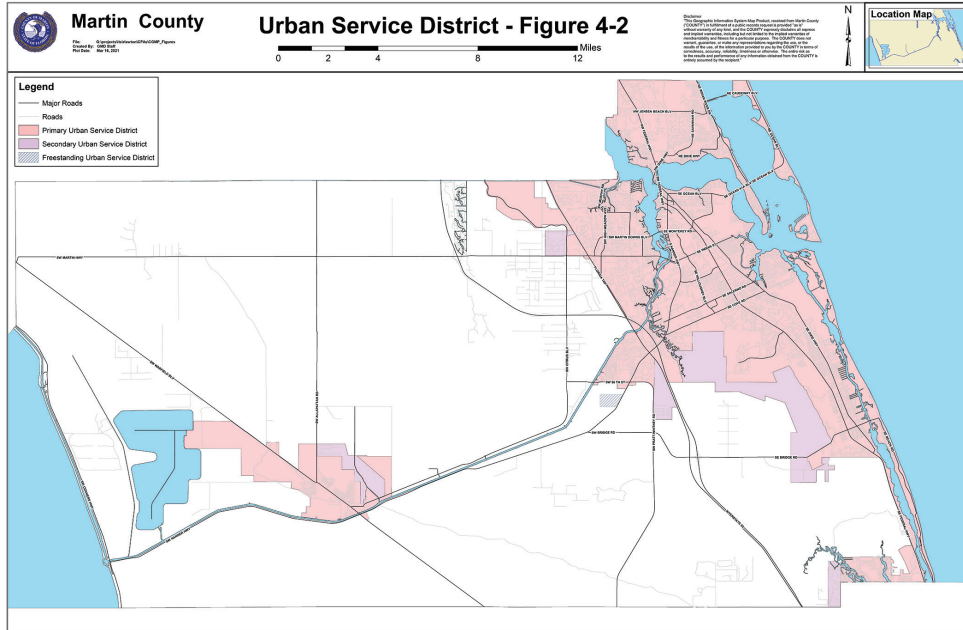
The Corps has indicated that the presence of visible Harmful Algal Blooms in Lake Okeechobee Waters will be considered when discharges from the Lake to the St. Lucie Estuary would otherwise be necessary. While the Everglades, Florida Bay and residents of South Florida need fresh water, discharges to the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico that threaten human health, kill oysters, seagrasses and other marine life should no longer occur. Send the Water South! ■



Martin County Commissioner Sarah Heard talks with Corps of Engineers officials during the Rivers Coalition's meeting at the St. Lucie Locks. Photo: Greg Braun

Rural Lifestyle Comprehensive Growth Management Plan Amendment Update

continued from page 1



because their use would be limited to residents, guests, and employees of the development, Judge Ffolkes determined that community stores are indeed commercial after all.

The Judge’s Recommended Order will be considered by the Governor and Cabinet at a date yet to be set.

In spite of the Judge’s Recommended Order, Martin County has approved the Applicant’s request to initiate construction, and land alteration activities have most recently begun on the 1,500-acre tract on the north side of Bridge Road east of I-95. ■

October 6th, contesting the Amendment’s legality in three separate areas: 1) The extent to which the Amendment was internally consistent with other elements of the Comp Plan; 2) Whether the Amendment established meaningful and predictable standards pursuant to the State’s Statutes; and, 3) Whether the Amendment was based on relevant and appropriate data and analysis.

Judge Ffolkes held a hearing on December 20 and 21, 2022, with Martin County as the Respondent and Becker B-14 Grove LTD as an Intervenor. In the 28-page Recommended Order,

Judge Ffolkes concluded that while the Amendment did establish meaningful and predictable standards and was based on relevant and appropriate data and analysis, it was not internally consistent with Policy 4.7A.2, which prohibits commercial uses in areas outside the County’s Urban Services Districts (See above). As adopted, the Amendment would have allowed community stores less than 6,000 ft² in size to be built and operated as part of Rural Lifestyle projects. While the County contended that community stores are not commercial enterprises

Welcome New Advisers

The Guardians are pleased to announce the following additions to our Advisory Board:

- Jeff Corwin
- Kate Miller
- Emilie Mead Pryor
- Caroline Vohr
- Eric Wesel

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.