

# Coordinating Regional Land and Acquisition Management

## Initiative Summary Statement:

Conserve and protect the land of Lee County and municipalities through the acquisition of natural areas.

## Initiative Description:

**Objective:** Acquire additional environmentally sensitive lands of regional importance to strategically preserve and restore natural areas, mitigate the negative impact of future storms, and maximize the social and economic benefits of these natural resources. When ecosystems are protected, the natural environment serves as the first line of defense against damage to future disasters. In the County, functioning natural ecosystems also provide many societal, recreational, health, and economic benefits. These areas offer benefits in the areas of wildlife habitat, passive public recreation, open space conservation, surface water management, water quality and water recharge and supply, and flood control. In 1996, the Lee County's voters agreed to establish Conservation 20/20, a land acquisition and management program for environmentally sensitive areas. Continuing to support this program as well as other strategies to protect environmentally sensitive lands can mitigate the adverse effects of catastrophic events while augmenting the socioeconomic advantages of managing the land.

**Need:** Continued proactive identification and acquisition of environmentally sensitive land will ensure an effective and purposeful balance between protection and development.

According to Lee County Economic Development, population growth since 2010 has increased 21.5% and will continue to increase, which will place pressure on developers to build new housing communities and expand onto undeveloped land. The acquisition of additional lands through Conservation 20/20 will be crucial to reduce flood risk and mitigate the negative impacts of catastrophic events. Acquisition of lands will also assist with surface water management and protect the drinking water supply for Lee County citizens.

Protecting natural and sensitive areas through land acquisition can safeguard biodiversity, prevent the spread of disease, support local economic success, ensure food and water security, and build resilience against rising sea levels. Undeveloped wetlands and uplands currently buffer Low to Moderate Income (LMI) housing in many areas throughout the County providing vulnerable communities with numerous ecosystem services from the wetlands including clean water, flood protection, and control of harmful animal species.

**Regional Approach:** The acquisition and conservation of lands through the Conservation 20/20 Program and other means can be expanded to obtain additional land in environmentally sensitive areas in the County. One specific area to consider is Yellow Fever Creek, an LMI housing development. Acquiring lands that are adjacent to Yellow Fever Creek for conservation would prevent the development of additional impervious areas within the flood zone and protect the LMI areas from further flood risk with the added benefit of offering recreation and quality of life improvements to the local areas.

There are also opportunities for private land acquisitions to conserve and protect natural areas throughout the County. Private conservation partners, non-profit partners, or private landowners support land conservation privately. Expanding areas managed by these partners that reach across jurisdictional boundaries can help connect greenways and corridors for the benefit of the region.

While effective, acquisition is not the only solution to protecting land and natural areas. Innovative implementation of this Initiative throughout the region may look different for each community. Alternative measures could include a regional tree planting program providing additional environmental benefits like protecting wildlife habitats, improving water quality, preventing erosion, absorbing carbon dioxide, and producing more oxygen. Additional advantages of this tactic include property value increases, mitigation of extreme heat, the enhanced appeal of neighborhoods, and a bolstered sense of community through social cohesion derived from volunteerism.

**Impact:** Protecting and conserving environmentally sensitive lands through acquisition balances the impacts of future growth while buffering complex ecosystems from encroachment. Effectively acquiring lands will improve water quality standards and preserve the local natural habitat from further water quality degradation. Land acquisition through Conservation 20/20 or other partners and tree planting programs would provide the added benefit of forest connectivity, increase the value of property, and promote resilience in the region. Protecting land balances, the impacts of future growth while buffering sensitive areas from encroachment. Environmentally sensitive lands perform free services for the region such as natural flood control, enhanced water quality, better air quality, wildlife habitat protection, and increased recreational spaces. The socioeconomic impact of acquiring land boosts local economies through tourism and jobs, saving money on healthcare, filtering drinking water, and providing natural disaster mitigation.

### **Key Considerations:**

- Consider the economic value of ecosystem services and benefits when prioritizing acquisition of environmentally sensitive lands.

- Consider mapping the links between Conservation Lands, Easements, and Recreation (CLEAR) across jurisdictional boundaries in a regional resilience overlay. This assessment should include an economic and cost benefit analysis to highlight the strategic value.
- Identify the land and water resources that provide economic value to the region through ecosystem services and advance protection and activation of these spaces through alignment with funding opportunities.

## Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Infrastructure, Planning & Capacity, Economic Recovery, Natural Resources

## Stakeholders:

- County departmental experts on natural resources, lands, parks, and recreation.
- Municipal departmental experts on natural resources, lands, parks, and recreation.
- South Florida Water Management District
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- University Partnerships
- Florida Forest Service

## Potential Funding Sources:

- Environmental Protection Agency
- National Park Service
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- United States Forest Service
- United States Department of Transportation
- United States Department of Agriculture
- United States Department of the Interior
- Florida Division of Emergency Management
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- Florida Department of Transportation

## Resources:

- [Conservation 20/20](#)