

# Natural Resources Branch

## Lee County Recovery Task Force

### Meeting Minutes

2:00 PM – 3:30 PM | NOVEMBER 6, 2023 | COLLABORATORY | 2031 JACKSON STREET, SUITE 100, FORT MYERS, FL 33901 | PUBLIC MEETING

### Call to Order

At 2:01 PM on November 6, 2023, Dan DeLisi, Branch Lead, convened the Natural Resources Branch meeting. The following members were present:

- Dan DeLisi, Branch Lead
- Justin Mahon
- James Evans
- Joanne Ribble
- Holly Milbrandt
- Maya Robert
- Daniel Andrews
- Susie Hassett (on behalf of Lee County School District) (non-voting)

#### County Liaison

- Roland Ottolini
- Steve Boutelle
- Phil Gillogly

#### Facilitator and Branch Support:

- Jon Romine, Collaboratory
- Harrison Newton, Hagerty Consulting
- Robbie Heere, Hagerty Consulting

## Introductions

Mr. Romine provided an update on the work of the Recovery Task Force (RTF) and the Recovery and Resiliency Plan (Plan) process, which included collecting and analyzing the Branch feedback on the Initiatives.

## Upcoming Community Engagement

Mr. Romine provided a summary of the upcoming process to engage the community in November and December.

## Branch Initiative Feedback

The Support Team introduced the initiative profiles and Branch Members provided strategic level feedback.

### Supporting Natural Resources Community Outreach and Education

- Mr. Evans suggested that Initiatives should be data driven and include sea-level rise and climate change supported by data to educate area leaders. Outreach and education campaigns should also include the economic value of natural resources to educate leaders.
- Members suggested removing the reference to Waterkeepers Florida or broadening it to include non-profit organizations.
- Members suggested including nonprofit organizations and the Lee County School District in the stakeholder list.
- Ms. Susie Hassett provided background information of current programs. She coordinates Lee County Schools' environmental education. Her role is to coordinate efforts and collaborate with regional partners. The School District hosts an event in February to organize and tell the story of natural resources education to students who then educate parents.

### Protecting Ecosystems through Regional Wildlife Habitat Restoration

- Members stated that wildlife is going to be impacted by threats like climate change and sea-level rise.
- Members suggested including estuarine species that are at risk of temperature changes and ocean acidification. For context, terrestrial species are protected by land acquisition, but estuary species are not directly protected by that method.

- Members suggested describing an ecosystem approach that includes terrestrial and estuary ecosystems to prepare for future threats in the regional approach. These approaches should think of ecosystems holistically. Temperature differences in ecosystems like Six Mile Cypress and Estero Bay demonstrate the connection of changes to the terrestrial and estuarine ecosystems.

### Protecting Coastal and Natural Buffers

- Members suggested dunes are great buffers and restoration can be coordinated across jurisdictions. Dune restoration is also an example of nature-based solutions.
- Members suggested considering that dune restoration is often on private property and requires community education rather than direct implementation.
- Members suggested changing birding reference in content and expanding to include other species.

### Supporting Regional Land Management

- Members suggested Calusa land Trust, Public Trust for Lands, Audubon Society, J.N. Ding Darling Wildlife Society, The Nature Conservancy, and Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation are examples of private landowners. These entities can be referenced as private conservation partners, non-profit partners, or private landowners.
- Members suggested including privately-owned land opportunities in the regional approach. Regions with specific identified projects for acquisition such as Yellow Fever Creek need to be identified as specific examples.
- Members suggested broadening the regional approach section with regional impact examples.
- Members suggested the Objective Section should clearly state that the action is to acquire conservation lands, not continue to evaluate potential conservation lands.
- Members emphasized the strategic value of land acquisition to preserve and restore areas.
- Members suggested including policy overlay:
  - Suggestion was to include recommendations for an overlay that links greenspaces and green corridors across boundaries. Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) is an example for land acquisition that works across boundaries. Sanibel and Ding Darling have worked previously across jurisdictions with Lee County to preserve lands.
  - The full picture would be a Geographic Information System (GIS) layer of conservation lands County-wide. The Florida Department of Environmental

Protection (FDEP) has an inventory with CLEAR (Conservation Lands, Easements and Recreation).

- Economic and cost benefit analysis would be helpful to identify the strategic value.

### **Flood and Stormwater Management**

- Members suggested emphasizing working closer with the South Florida Water Management District for flood control level of service in Lee County. They also suggested emphasizing closer coordination with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) for planning and resilience.
- Members suggested including other causes of flooding such as rain, sea-level rise, and tidal flooding. Flooding is not always from tropical activity and should be broadened.
- Mr. Forbes suggested that Bonita Springs has completed development of flooding prediction models and design storm criteria to prepare for impacts for both rain flooding and storm surge flooding. Other cities are renewing or revisiting flood models and have their own flood plans.
- Members suggested that the expectation for the Initiative should be clearly stated because stopping 18 feet of storm surge is not the goal of this plan. Expectations should not be to stop all flooding.
- Members suggested including data driven conversations on flooding due to sea-level that contemplate the resilience and level of service. For context, a vulnerability assessment is the step forward for resiliency for sea level rise.

### **Water Quality and Utilizing Green Infrastructure**

- Members suggested including land acquisition when discussing nature-based solutions.
- Members stated that water quality was already deemed impaired before the storm and Hurricane Ian exacerbated the issue.
- Members suggested acknowledging the link of development creating more impervious surfaces which leads to runoff that worsens water quality. Storms exacerbate the forces that lead to impaired water quality.
- Members suggested the objective should be simplified and straightforward “to improve water quality.”
- Members suggested septic-to-sewer is one of the tools that addresses water quality but is not related to a green infrastructure objective.

### **Augmenting Resilient Energy Infrastructure**

- Mr. Evans suggested including the environmental and aesthetic benefits of undergrounding power lines and the benefits to wildlife. Planting trees also provides environmental benefits. However, underground power lines are not always beneficial, especially on barrier islands when there is storm surge.

### **Improving Resilient Wastewater Infrastructure**

- Members suggested including the environmental impacts of sewage spills.
- Members suggested including nutrients and not just bacteria when discussing pollutants.
- Members suggested including advanced wastewater treatment and methods to improve quality in a bulleted list.
- Members suggested including utilizing advanced wastewater treatment to remove harmful nutrients and bacteria and improve water quality.

## **Questions and Next Steps**

Ms. Robert suggested that the Natural Resources Initiatives could also be grouped in Regional Resilience Planning instead of Public Services.

## **Public Comment**

No request for public comment.

## **Concluding Remarks and Adjournment**

Mr. Newton thanked the Members for attending and adjourned the meeting at 3:33 PM.