

Natural Resources Branch – Lee County Recovery Task Force

Meeting Minutes

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM | JULY 21, 2023 | COLLABORATORY | 2031 JACKSON STREET,
SUITE 100, FORT MYERS, FL 33901 | PUBLIC MEETING

Call to Order

At 10:30 AM on July 21, 2023, Terry Mazany, facilitator, convened the Natural Resources Branch meeting. The following members were present:

- Dan DeLisi, Branch Lead
- Bethany Brosious
- James Evans
- Ryan Berger
- Fred Forbes
- Ron George
- Justin Mahon
- Daniel Andrews
- Holly Milbrandt
- Maya Robert
- Samantha Sellbach (on behalf of MaryBeth Saunders)

Facilitator and Branch Support:

- Terry Mazany, Collaboratory
- Jon Romine, Collaboratory
- Robbie Heere, Hagerty Consulting

Introductions

Mr. Mazany provided a review of the work of the Recovery Task Force (RTF) and its Branches. Mr. Mazany reviewed the timeline for the RTF, emphasizing the move from Phase One to Phase Two of the Recovery and Resilience Plan (the Plan).

He noted the purpose of the meeting to discuss the Branch Initiative Matrix and discuss what Initiatives might need a Technical Brief.

Branch Initiatives Discussion

Mr. DeLisi began by stating the importance of considering Lee County projects that are currently underway and engaging with the Southwest Florida Water Management District flood control. He asked for more specificity pertaining to policies, conduct reviews, unintended consequences, and the specific needs of shoreline policies and development. Mr. Evans asked if the unintended consequences are related to seawalls and how a policy will be approached. Mr. Mahon suggested the unintended consequences of seawalls be developed as a public awareness campaign in coastal areas.

Mr. Evans discussed a tree planting plan and post-storm and commercial buffers. He asked about the re-establishment of buffers in Lee County. Mr. DeLisi responded that planned developments are still required to comply and post-storm effects do not change those requirements in the codes.

Ms. Roberts brought up the balance between recovery and the loss of the tree canopy post-storm. Members discussed legislative changes in tree planting and trimming ordinances.

Ms. Milbrandt brought up mangroves and the need for project language to be broader. Mr. Andrews stated that incentives to plant mangroves and restoration exist and partners that can support them. He stated that a target goal would include using mangroves and enhancing the existing barriers. He discussed a need for incentives that could include an educational component on mangroves and seawalls in Florida.

Members discussed the encouragement of planting, replanting, or planting through partnerships with nonprofits, and financial incentives for businesses and homeowners. They suggested awareness campaigns for municipalities or non-profits to support the restoration and reestablishment of mangroves through partnerships. Ms. Milbrandt discussed that mangroves will need restoration efforts to support the recovery of mangrove forests.

Mr. Forbes suggested expanding on the Lee County Conservation 20/20, a land acquisition and stewardship program that protects natural areas within the County. Mr. Evans suggested Keep Lee County Beautiful as a potential partner to replant mangroves. Members discussed the existing and potential funding of Conservation 20/20 for Initiatives. Mr. Forbes suggested that Conservation 20/20 buy more mangrove acreage. Roland Ottolini, Natural Resources Director, Lee County, was recognized and provided information

on the budget of the Conservation 20/20 funding. Mr. DeLisi suggested 20/20 funding be used for the conservation of coastal wetlands and mangroves.

Mr. Mahon brought up the original priorities for seagrass, oyster, and mangrove protection. Mr. Evans discussed the permitting for benthic areas and lauded the County's efforts in permitting. Mr. Mahon said the re-use of potable water should be a policy and dock space should be under Infrastructure.

Mr. Andrews discussed the lack of commercial and sport fishing docks, which has been a barrier to accessing natural resources. He stated that the fishing industry is a driver of the tourism industry and suggested an interim solution for the charter industry to have access to.

Members discussed the larger economic impact and validation of the work being done in the other branches.

Ms. Milbrandt discussed debris management and recently acquired conservation lands that may not be available. Mr. Evans stated that land was needed for staging and equipment. Members discussed interlocal agreements for the areas of the fishing and boating industry.

The Members discussed mitigation efforts of storm damage with pre-planning. Mr. Andrews suggested partnering with businesses with large parking lots and looking at infrastructure off the barrier islands that can store vehicles and equipment. Mr. Berger stated that the islands do not have adequate access to moving products and building materials that are open to the free market. Mr. DeLisi discussed that a space for disaster planning is a parking lot or a garage that is already built to prevent the flooding of cars.

Mr. Evans discussed reuse water and stated that advanced wastewater treatment should be expanded on. Members agreed that the increased costs are worth the investment to reduce nutrient loading in the waters of the area. Mr. Evans then discussed developing estuary research and the funds needed to conduct it. Members agreed that there are already organizations that could support the existing estuary research, but funding is needed.

Ms. Milbrandt discussed the natural resource assessments and how to include that data in the emergency planning such as water quality impacts on first responders. Mr. Forbes suggested an Initiative around an action plan to remove debris and disaster materials from natural resources. Ms. Roberts discussed the debris management plan for waterways that are currently in place.

Mr. George stated that beach access in Bonita Springs balances public access and supports the protection of the environment. He discussed that all of Bonita Springs's frontage should

be considered to lessen impacts. Mr. George stated that Lover's Key is underutilized and could be upgraded; protecting Bonita Beach from storms and utilizing and optimizing beach access across other areas and not forced into one area.

Mr. Evans stated that public access does impact the carrying capacity of the beach for wildlife and stressed the need to responsibly consider the number of access points. Mr. Evans also stated that renewable energy needs to be included. Mr. Romine discussed the inclusion of renewable energy initiatives in the Branches and the Recovery and Resilience Plan. Mr. Forbes supported solar and renewable impact Initiatives.

Branch Technical Briefs

Mr. Mazany explained the development of Technical Briefs, Branch Action Plans, and Initiatives in the development of the Plan.

Mr. Heere introduced the Green Infrastructure Technical Brief. Mr. DeLisi stated that the environment in Florida does not necessarily lead to green roofs. Mr. Romine responded with the tradeoff of green roofs and requirements implemented in the area.

Ms. Milbrandt stated that o Babcock Ranch said it took extreme measures to implement green infrastructure. She suggested the words be softened from "extreme" to "unprecedented".

Mr. DeLisi stated that the specific needs come down to nitrogen removal on the coast. Mr. Evans suggested that the state regulations have been a point of contention for two decades and supported consideration of other limiting nutrients in best practices for water management policies.

Branch Action Plans

Mr. Evans stated the economic developments and benefits of natural resources and expressed his concern about blue-green algae and real estate. Members asked for more information about lost economics due to limited access to natural resources and Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program (CHNEP) Economic Valuation Study in 2020.

Ms. Roberts suggested a resiliency and climate change compact looking at how the government functions and turning to insurance and credit agencies that stopped insuring natural resources.

Questions and Next Steps

The next Branch meeting is scheduled for August 4, 2023, from 10:30 AM to 12:00 PM.

Public Comment

Marsha Ellis asked that Bonita Beach and Barefoot Beach be addressed, and suggested a collaboration with Collier County. Ms. Ellis stated that Hurricane Ian impacted the trees and the potential to work with geo-engineering of trees that could protect and prevent tree toppling. She suggested looking at data from Puerto Rico in terms of wildlife and natural resources. She stated that the environmental benefits should be included in the economic development numbers.

Concluding Remarks and Adjournment

Mr. Mazany thanked the members for attending and then adjourned the meeting at 11:57 AM.