

Natural Resources Branch – Lee County Recovery Task Force

Meeting Minutes

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

Call to Order

At 10:30 AM on May 12th, 2023, Dan DeLisi, the Branch Lead convened the Natural Resources Branch meeting. The following members were present:

Branch Members:

- Dan DeLisi, Lead
- Maya Robert
- Fred Forbes
- Emily Porter
- Ryan Berger
- MaryBeth Saunders
- Kate Gooderham
- Matt Caldwell
- Daniel Andrews
- James Evans
- Joanne Ribble
- Holly Milbrandt
- Bethany Brosious
- Richard Thompson (On behalf of Justin Mahon)

Facilitators and Branch Support:

- Harrison Newton, Hagerty Consulting
- Robbie Heere, Hagerty Consulting

Introductions

Harrison Newton, facilitator of the Natural Resources Branch, provided an overview of the Recovery Task Force (RTF) structure and the Branches structure. He emphasized the priority

of the Branches: to identify emergent issues and bring them to the RTF to resolve. Mr. Newton reviewed the timeline for the RTF, emphasizing that the Branch is moving towards the action phase of the plan.

Mr. Newton noted the purpose of the meeting (i.e., determine if initial community engagement feedback aligns with Branch priorities; review initiative development framework; and review and validate workshop design).

Recovery Task Force (RTF) Updates

Harrison Newton provided a review of the RTF meeting held on April 28, 2023. The RTF meeting focused on: discussion of capital improvement projects, emergent issues, a conversation about resilience, and next steps.

Capital improvement project priorities that emerged were septic-sewer conversions, hardening water infrastructure, hardening power infrastructure, hardening infrastructure of schools, and special needs populations.

The resiliency conversation stemmed from the Chair of the Recovery Task Force, Commissioner Kevin Ruane, who engaged the RTF by asking, “What are you willing to move forward on resiliency?” Mr. Newton said that this question was aimed toward density across communities.

Special Presentation

Dr. Eban Bean, Extension Specialist of Urban Water Resources Engineering, University of Florida began a presentation. He provided information on water resources in Southwest Florida and the benefit of green stormwater infrastructure and low impact development on water quality. The resilient policies include mitigation of impacts by utilizing best practices that include green stormwater infrastructure.

Mr. Evans discussed local government leadership and stormwater preemptions at the state level that might hinder progress on that subject.

Dr. Bean stated that the group wanted to recognize the conditions on the ground to get something adopted but did not go far enough to progress at the state level.

Community Feedback

Mr. Newton reviewed the community engagement process, noting that there have been 13 Town Halls so far, with more coming up.

Mr. Newton reviewed initial survey feedback from the ResilientLee.com website, noting top priorities that have emerged (i.e., housing and homelessness, environmental issues, crime, violence, and public safety, mental health, and hunger and food insecurity).

Mr. Newton reviewed initial Town Hall feedback from members of the community, highlighting the priorities that have emerged (i.e., stormwater runoff, decrease septic tanks to help reduce red tide, long term program to remove debris and clean up Imperial River and Canals, maximize green infrastructure to protect shorelines, help individuals with vegetation restoration, sidewalks and better drainage in Morse Shores, The Shores, and River Forest).

Mr. Newton reviewed initial feedback from On The Table, an event on March 30, 2023, highlighting the top 10 issues identified (i.e., housing and homelessness, mental health and substance abuse, healthcare access and cost, K-12 education, well-paying jobs and economic development, hunger and food insecurity, environmental issues, public transportation and traffic, early childhood development, and generational poverty).

Members were asked, "How does community feedback align with Branch priorities?"

Mr. Evans stated that being able to quantify the value of these systems and look forward to developing projects that use economic analysis and including conversation throughout the county region and looking at areas that are most vulnerable and the impact on storm events.

Members expressed interest in producing an economic analysis of natural resources to account for their contributions, particularly mangroves.

Ms. Robert noted the correlation between better environment and economic makeup of a community. Branch members should look at the source of development and rebuilding a resilient community and preserving green space when recovering.

Ms. Gooderham stated that the issue of reopening beaches is both a natural resources issue but also an economic issue.

Mr. DeLisi emphasized the need to think countywide and of the effects of other storms.

Mr. Andrews stated there is a direct link between access to natural resources and the health and wellness of the community. The access to natural resources and quality of life in the area is important to reiterate. The presentation was geared to future development instead of retrofitting the area to improve natural resources. Without solving the issue of current messes and issues within the ecosystem, the county cannot move forward.

Mr. DeLisi urged the group to think on two tracks, to be able to incorporate development in Lee County and whether it can be done in a sustainable way. He stated the county must retrofit current projects and areas to do it in a more distributive way to deal with water.

Mr. Andrews wished there was more funding to support the work of County Environmental Resources staff and work within Homeowner Associations (HOAs) and try to work with them to improve water quality.

Mr. Evans stated that these areas do not include low impact or green design. He encouraged the Branch to think about restoring our buffers and policies through updates to the Lee Plan to build back better.

Mr. DeLisi said that recommendations about changing the land development code could be made to the RTF. Mr. Evans stated that the members need to know what the regulations of land development codes are to make those recommendations.

Initiative Design

Mr. Newton reviewed the purpose and approach of the Action Plan that the Branch will develop. The purpose is for the Branches to develop Action Plans as an initial step in framing identified and approved initiatives. The Action Plan will: provide a prioritization framework for existing plans and projects; illustrate the planned approach for new initiatives; and identify key policy changes that can support community resilience. The three buckets that the Branch will be focused on when developing the initiatives are: projects, prioritization, and policies.

Mr. Newton identified the responsibilities of the Branch members during this process, emphasizing that Branches are responsible for facilitating the design (i.e., concept and approach) of the initiatives and identifying a lead to facilitate initiative implementation. Branches will need to identify the lead, initiative description and progress, measures of success, and partners.

Mr. Newton reviewed the special nature of the Planning & Capacity Branch, which is in the process of developing a resilience overlay.

He noted the purpose of the overlay is to identify and address potential risks and hazards in a specific geographic area or to a set of plans, and communicate priorities across planning processes and budget development. Mr. Newton explained that overlays often identify and visualize potential risk areas in advance to reduce disaster impacts.

Mr. DeLisi stated that there needs to be coordination among the Branches. A resilience overlay could display impacts from coastal flooding areas contained in a silo. He suggested having a joint discussion on the intentions of a resilience overlay.

Ms. Gooderham stated that the overlay should include stricter mangrove removal criteria and green coastal infrastructure that should be strengthened.

Mr. Evans said the Branches should not justify building housing in flood-prone areas.

Mr. DeLisi talked about development of affordable housing in Harlem Heights and how the Lee Board of County Commissioners were able to balance the development in a coastal high hazard zone. If there is not higher density in our urban areas, it stresses the environmental impacts of suburban areas.

Mr. Evans said there are areas that are developed in coastal high hazards zones for redevelopment existing in a fully functioning ecosystem. He encouraged the Branch to keep the benefits of natural resources in mind.

Ms. Gooderham stated that the work of the Branch requires communication with the state legislature to stop the chipping away at the local community's ability to make local choices.

Ms. Saunders stated that educating the public is crucial. She added that there needs to be public awareness campaigns that involve our community to move us forward, including the educational institutions.

Workshop Design

Mr. Newton began discussion about what the purpose of the workshops are, highlighting the themes, topics, and subject-matter experts (SMEs) requested. The topics include Attainable and Resilient Housing; Critical Infrastructure; Community Resilience; and Supporting Business and Workforce. Imbed natural resources in this conversation.

Ms. Gooderham stated that the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) should be included as an SME for restoring natural resources.

Mr. DeLisi stated the importance of accounting for the economic benefit of natural resources. He said that planning is happening in silos. The Natural Resources Branch should be involved to make sure natural resources are integrated in that infrastructure.

Ms. Roberts stated that attainable and resilient housing and several low-income housing projects are located close to hazard zones and are prone to flooding. She suggested incorporating buffer zones into future or existing low-income housing projects.

Mr. Newton said the Natural Resources Branch can provide the Planning & Capacity Branch with the policy recommendations that need to be included in the overlay.

Discussion and Questions

Mr. Andrews stated that we must prioritize water infrastructure and resources. He shared that people come to this area to access the waterways. He stated the need to focus on one workshop for natural resources.

Mr. Forbes stated that this area was historically prone to flooding. During Irma he was able to see water everywhere. He stated that this topic is often simplified, and historic flooding should be realistically considered in planning. Retention ponds can only hold so much water and the Branch should investigate better ways to improve the development of the area.

Members expressed interest in working with the stormwater systems as the foundation of the priorities. Mr. Evans stated that without proper management of water, nothing else can exist.

Ms. Porter stated the need to gather more information on the themes that were identified. She suggested that SCCF and Captains for Clean Water provide a white paper to inform the Recovery and Resilience Plan. She suggested topics such as utilizing native plants for storm protection. Ms. Roberts suggested including quality of life and conservation measures as people desire green space to improve their quality of life.

Mr. DeLisi suggested having more time to have a dialogue among Branch members.

Next Steps

Mr. DeLisi said that the next Branch meeting would be June 9th, 2023, from 10:30 am – 12:00 pm, unless there is a workshop in its place.

Public Comment

Marica Ellis commented that the overlay described already exists. The same one that exists is riskfactor.com. She stated that this information has been provided by the First Street Foundation, including 500-year flood event and climate change modeling. It is superior to FEMA to inform planning. The other tool is a community scoring and rating system to speed up this process of incorporating green infrastructure and development. There are 10,000 lakes mapped in Southwest Florida. By putting houses and development around

lakes, this land is being exploited to increase the price. There should also be a regulation to stop allowing abuse of the aquifers.

Concluding Remarks and Adjournment

Mr. DeLisi thanked the members for attending and then adjourned the meeting at 12:04 PM.