



# COMMUNITY VISIONING & LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION PLANNING



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# INTRODUCTION

The State of Florida continues to be one of the fastest growing states in the nation in terms of population, exceeding 23.3 million as recently as July 2024, its growth rate second in the nation only to Texas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Further, the State's population is expected to grow to 26,682,000 residents by 2040 and 28,065,000 by 2050 (Figure 1) based on 2024 Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR) medium projections (The Office of Economic and Demographic Research (EDR), The Florida Legislature, 2024). Motivated by a number of factors, including the state's warm climate, favorable tax policies, and strong economic opportunities, individuals both domestic and abroad have increasingly been making Florida their home.

Accompanying this growth are a myriad of challenges posed by sprawling development pressures. Perhaps nowhere are these challenges more felt than the state's natural landscapes. These vital lands play a critical role throughout the state, not only for natural plant and wildlife habitats, but often in managing overall water quality, stormwater management during severe weather events, and offering opportunities for passive recreation and enjoyment, creating a positive connection between humans and nature, while supporting physical and mental health (Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010). Unchecked expansion can lead to habitat destruction, reduced biodiversity, and a decline in overall environmental and ecological quality (Foley, et al., 2005).

## RESOURCES, ORGANIZATIONS, AND INITIATIVES

Fortunately, several organizations and programs help to identify, prioritize, and secure conserved lands. These groups and programs can take many forms and include statewide conservation programs such as Florida Forever and the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, which apply general state revenue funds towards strategic conservation and agricultural land acquisitions and easements, respectively. Other nonprofit groups help to promote environmental stewardship such as The Nature Conservancy in Florida, which advocates for environmental protection through policy reform, land acquisition, and research and restoration efforts; as well as 1000 Friends of Florida, which also works at the state level to impact policy change while also educating, engaging, and empowering communities and their residents with

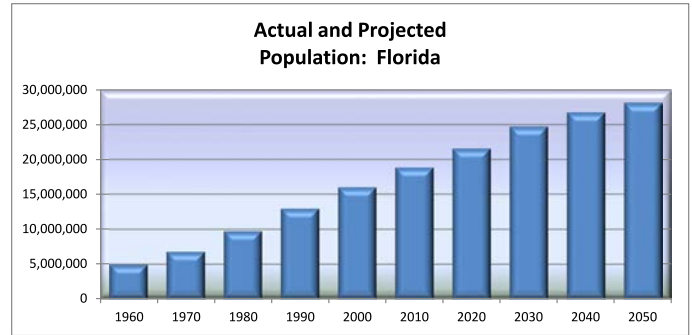


Figure 1. Florida Actual and Projected Population (1960 - 2050), based on 2023 estimates (Source: The Office of Economic and Demographic Research (EDR), The Florida Legislature, 2024)

sustainable growth practices and environmental stewardship.

Additionally, research organizations rooted within institutions of higher learning, such as the University of Florida's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning and Florida State University's Florida Resources and Environmental Analysis Center and Florida Natural Areas Inventory provide invaluable research, data, and insights that help to guide and direct the efforts of the earlier listed groups in the most strategic and impactful ways possible.

The Florida Wildlife Corridor, illustrated in Figure 2, is one such initiative that has been supported by such groups in collaboration with partner organizations and citizen groups, including the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation and Live Wildly. A model for large-scale conservation efforts, the corridor aims to not only protect Florida's wildlife but also the state's rural and agricultural heritage, promoting sustainable land-use practices. Notably, following decades of advocacy efforts, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act was signed into law in June of 2021. The act promotes land conservation and the protection of wildlife corridors, resiliency and biodiversity, as well as water quality and climate benefits. As cited in the state statute, the purpose of the act is to "create incentives for conservation and sustainable development while sustaining and conserving the green infrastructure that is the foundation of this state's economy and quality of life" (Florida Wildlife Corridor Act, 2021).

Working together, private landowners, state and federal agencies, local governments and conservation partners have helped to identify and secure millions of acres of sensitive lands throughout the state, keeping them protected in perpetuity.

## THE ROLE OF COMMUNITIES

While these partners and programs have had a significant impact on conservation goals throughout the state, effective and lasting change requires active participation and responsible planning from communities of all sizes. And where this is most applicable and actionable is a community's comprehensive plan. Under the Community Planning Act in Florida, local governments are required to adopt comprehensive plans that address land use, conservation, and development, which must include public hearings, workshops, and other avenues for community input. This ensures that conservation strategies are not only informed by expert analysis but also reflect the values, concerns, and goals of the local community, making the plan both legally sound

and practically relevant. The legal framework provides transparency, accountability, and a structured process for integrating stakeholder feedback, ensuring that the final conservation efforts are both enforceable and widely supported.

Beyond basic education, engaging citizens as stakeholders in the visioning process fosters meaningful understanding, ownership, and action to support land preservation initiatives. In doing so, communities not only become active stewards of their environment but also gain a stronger collective voice in local policy decisions that impact their futures and those of future generations.

This report explores the significance of public participation in long-term planning, the role of science-based planning in land-conservation efforts, and sheds light on several recent case studies that have effectively integrated community engagement into visioning processes. By delving into successful methods, case studies, and actionable insights, the goal is to provide strategies that empower communities to take an active role in shaping their future while prioritizing environmental stewardship.

Communities that proactively address conservation and growth management can create sustainable, balanced environments that serve both present and future generations. This requires not only sound technical planning but also ongoing dialogue that allows for adaptive strategies as new challenges emerge.

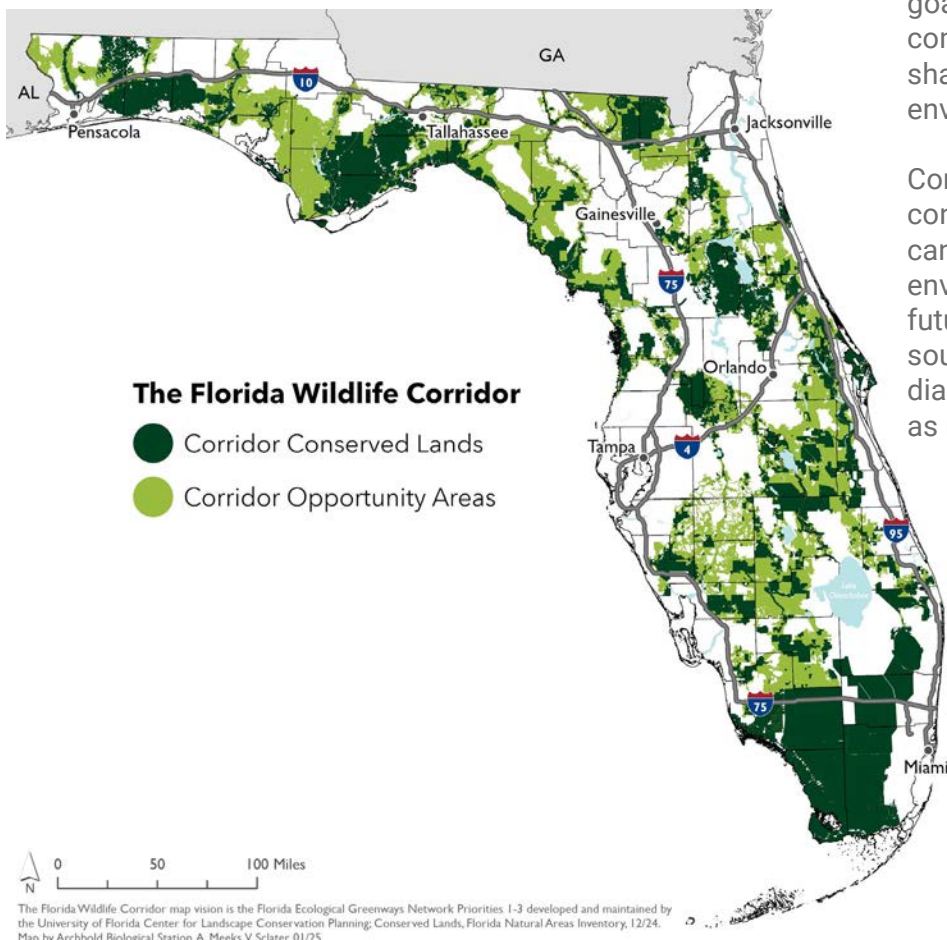


Figure 2. Map of the Florida Wildlife Corridor by Archbold Biological Station reflecting existing conserved lands and opportunity areas. Opportunity areas were identified using the Florida Ecological Greenways Network Priorities dataset, managed by the University of Florida's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning as well as data from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory.

(Source: Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research)

The Florida Wildlife Corridor map vision is the Florida Ecological Greenways Network Priorities 1-3 developed and maintained by the University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning: Conserved Lands, Florida Natural Areas Inventory, 12/24. Map by Archbold Biological Station, A. Meeks, V. Sclater 01/25

# AN EMPHASIS ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Effective growth and conservation planning requires a collaborative approach that integrates ecological preservation with development requirements and the needs and aspirations of local communities. Engaging with the public serves a critical role in ensuring that these growth and conservation efforts align with broader social, economic, and cultural values (Figure 3). Without meaningful public participation, strategies risk being met with resistance, misunderstanding, or inefficacy in addressing local priorities.

Florida Statutes Chapter 163.3181 states that “It is the intent of the Legislature that the public participate in the comprehensive planning process to the fullest extent possible.” Adding that towards this end, “local planning agencies and local governmental units are directed to adopt procedures designed to provide effective public participation in the comprehensive planning process and to provide real property owners with notice of all official actions which will regulate the use of their property.”

Public participation should play a crucial role in shaping the future of communities, and for good reason, as there are extensive benefits associated. Engaging residents and stakeholders in long-term planning not only fosters a sense of ownership in such a vision but ensures diverse perspectives are considered, ultimately leading to more sustainable and widely supported outcomes (Innes & Booher, 2004). Additionally, the planning process can be better informed by understanding the preferences and needs of individuals and groups that live within or interact with the study area as well as offering opportunities for validation of data or other findings and gaining insight into potential nuances or context-specific issues that would otherwise be overlooked.

## INHERENT CONSTRAINTS

Despite the many benefits of public participation, there are also several inherent limitations and challenges that must be considered. Available resources, and most notably time and money, represent a common constraint to effective public engagement programs. As urban planner Jennifer Hurley notes in her dissertation entitled *How Planners Design Public Participation* (2022), “resources are an even more pressing issue when pursuing a more intensive engagement strategy, because a deliberative approach to participation requires more staff, time, skill, and

money than a shallow approach to participation (Lewanski & Ravazzi, 2017).” As a result, it is anticipated that the extent to which municipalities and counties can facilitate robust community engagement programs will vary greatly based on factors such as available staffing capacity and budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, while public engagement programs require significant time and financial investment, the realized benefits of improved decision-making, increased public trust, and more sustainable policy should not be undervalued. Reinforcing this, Creighton (2005) emphasizes that despite the upfront costs, meaningful public participation leads to greater stakeholder buy-in, reducing long-term conflicts and costly project delays.

Outside of available resources, other challenges have been associated with public engagement processes, including limited participation, the management of misinformation and conflicting interests, and inequitable accessibility. For some, these challenges may lead groups to avoid public engagement or to conduct as minimal as possible out of fear or concern for political backlash, loss of control, or generally prolonging the planning process or not attaining the desired outcome. However, what these challenges underscore is the need for careful planning to mitigate them by establishing clear goals, managing consistent communication, ensuring accessible and inclusive engagement, and being purposeful in the development of public participation activities and programming.

## EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION ESSENTIALS

The effectiveness of public participation efforts largely depends on two factors, including the promotion of engagement events and the design and facilitation or execution of engagement activities. Recognizing that a lack of awareness is a common factor for individuals not participating in public participation events (Day, 1997), it is very important that communities place an emphasis on developing a communication plan or campaign that uses a variety of media to reach and attract a wide spectrum of stakeholder groups and individuals. For Alachua County, Florida, a series of communications around the County’s Agricultural Land Protection Strategy Public Workshop included social media posts across Facebook, Instagram, and X as well as a press release with coverage by local news outlets such as the Alachua Chronicle (Figure 3).

In addition, purposeful programming ensures meaningful dialogue and informed decision-making. Hurley (2022) writes, the “right” technical solution cannot be successfully implemented without adequate buy-in and support from the community. This point underscores the value of incorporating science-based planning into visioning efforts, not only to educate the public and other stakeholders but enhance their awareness, understanding, and appreciation, so as to secure a greater degree of informed and engaged community backing.

For instance, Lake Wales Envisioned, a community vision plan for the City of Lake Wales, Florida coordinated a Project Kick-Off and Best Practices Symposium (Figure 4) wherein informational map exhibits and experts with backgrounds on a variety of topics, including ecology, transportation and mobility, and traditional neighborhood design provided presentations. Heavily promoted through various media, including social media and local news outlets, a 100-person auditorium at Bok Tower Gardens was packed full, offering attendees an opportunity to learn about the concepts, principles, research, and science that would ultimately inform the plan. Organized just a few weeks prior to the public charrette week, the event offered residents and other stakeholders a chance to learn how peer communities are addressing similar challenges before providing feedback during the charrette’s hands-on design workshop and open-design studio events. A recording of the event was published to the project website to allow additional participants the opportunity to view at a time convenient for them and get caught up on the community conversation.

Collaborative approaches, where residents contribute local knowledge while experts provide scientific data, enhance credibility and improve the likelihood of long-term success (Healey, 1997). This report supports this approach, demonstrating how the sharing of technical insights combined with comprehensive engagement and input from a wide variety of stakeholders can best deliver a sound, community-supported vision and plan. Further, this report does not attempt to prescribe the “right” process but rather highlights various processes, tools, and ideas while showing how customization has been effective as part of other community visioning project examples in recent years throughout the state.

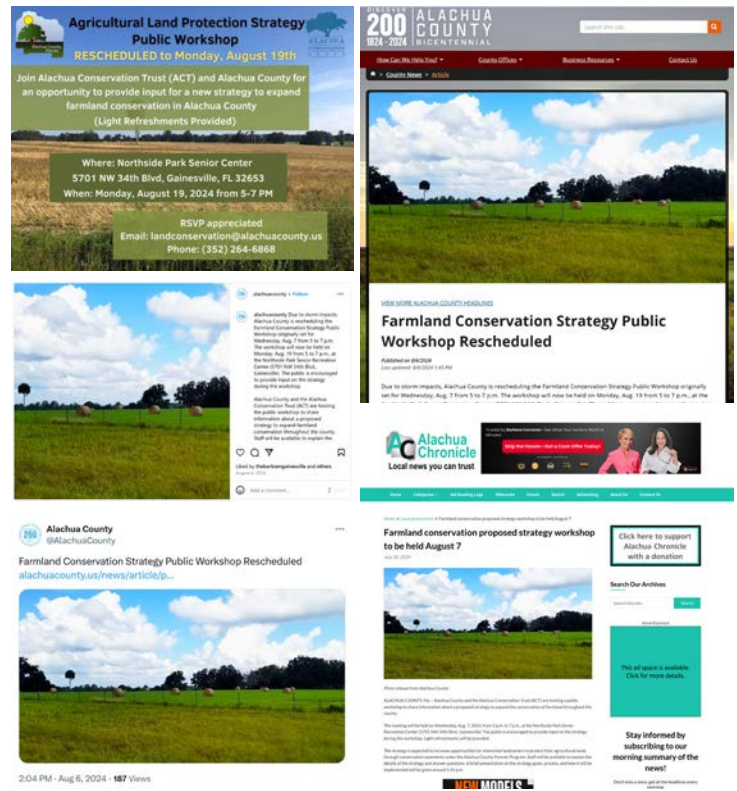


Figure 3. Alachua County communications promoting the Farmland Conservation Strategy Public Workshop across a variety of channels, including social media platforms, local news publications and the County website.



Figure 4. Presentation at the Lake Wales Envisioned Best Practices Symposium by Principal Ecologist Jay Exum of Exum Associates on the concept of ecological transects and its relevance to the design of a regional plan.

# SCIENCE AND DATA-BASED PLANNING TOOLS AND RESOURCES

In the context of land conservation, science- and data-based planning is an approach to decision-making that integrates empirical research, quantitative data, and analytical methods to guide land use, conservation, and environmental management (National Research Council, 1999). Utilizing evidence-based strategies allows planners to create comprehensive frameworks that account for ecological needs, community development, and resilience against environmental threats (Beatley, 2012). This section introduces several tools and resources that can help to inform any scale of community planning effort that incorporates some extent of land conservation. Lastly, this section briefly examines how these data have been used to advance statewide conservation priorities.

As mentioned earlier in the report, multiple organizations in the State of Florida have developed and continue to manage invaluable and publicly available research, data, and information that can help guide and direct land conservation and the application of smart-growth principles. This report identifies several valuable resources, the groups behind each, and the types of data managed as part of their efforts to promote statewide environmental protection and stewardship.

## THE FLORIDA ECOLOGICAL GREENWAYS NETWORK (FEGN), VIEWER, AND DASHBOARD

Florida is a very data-rich state in regard to environmental data. A good place to start for any community education or engagement process is the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN). Developed by the University of Florida's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning and updated approximately every five years, the FEGN "identifies and prioritizes a functionally connected statewide ecological network of public and private conservation lands" (University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, 2025). The network guides conservation efforts for the Florida Office of Greenways and Trails and serves as the "primary data layer used to inform Florida Forever, Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, and other state, federal, and regional land acquisition programs."

The FEGN data layer also serves as the scientific foundation for the Florida Wildlife Corridor, comprised of the top three priority layers. Enhancing the usability of this data, the Center developed the FEGN Dashboard

and Map Viewer (Figure 5) online tools, which provide user-friendly platforms from which individuals can view the data alongside other valuable context and reference layers, such as sea level rise, development trend scenarios, watersheds, and political and legislative boundaries. The Center makes its data available for public download on its website, including layers for the FEGN, Florida Wildlife Corridor, as well as 2040 and 2070 sprawl and conservation development trend scenarios, created as part of a GIS analysis of future population growth, development patterns, and sea level rise.

The FEGN Dashboard and Map Viewer, as well as user tutorials and supplemental reports can be found at: <https://conservation.dcp.ufl.edu/fegn/>. The tools can also be accessed from the UF Center for Landscape Conservation Planning Hub (The Hub) at <https://clcp-ufl.hub.arcgis.com/>.

## CRITICAL LANDS AND WATERS IDENTIFICATION PROJECT (CLIP)

The Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project (CLIP) serves as a spatial data-driven tool that integrates the best available scientific data to identify areas of statewide and regional conservation significance. The project is a collaborative initiative developed to support proactive, science-based conservation and land-use planning across the state of Florida. It is the product of a joint effort between Florida State University's Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), the University of Florida's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). This partnership was formed in direct response to a 2006 request by the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida, which tasked the team with identifying the lands and waters in Florida that are "critical to the conservation of Florida's natural resources" (Florida Natural Areas Inventory, 2025). The database includes three primary resource categories that identify priorities for surface water, landscape function, and biodiversity protection in addition to marine and groundwater resources.

CLIP data is publicly available and can be accessed through the Florida Natural Areas Inventory website at <https://www.fnai.org/services/clip>. The website also offers a user guide on how to access and use the data as well as a technical report that includes additional analyses conducted by the project team.

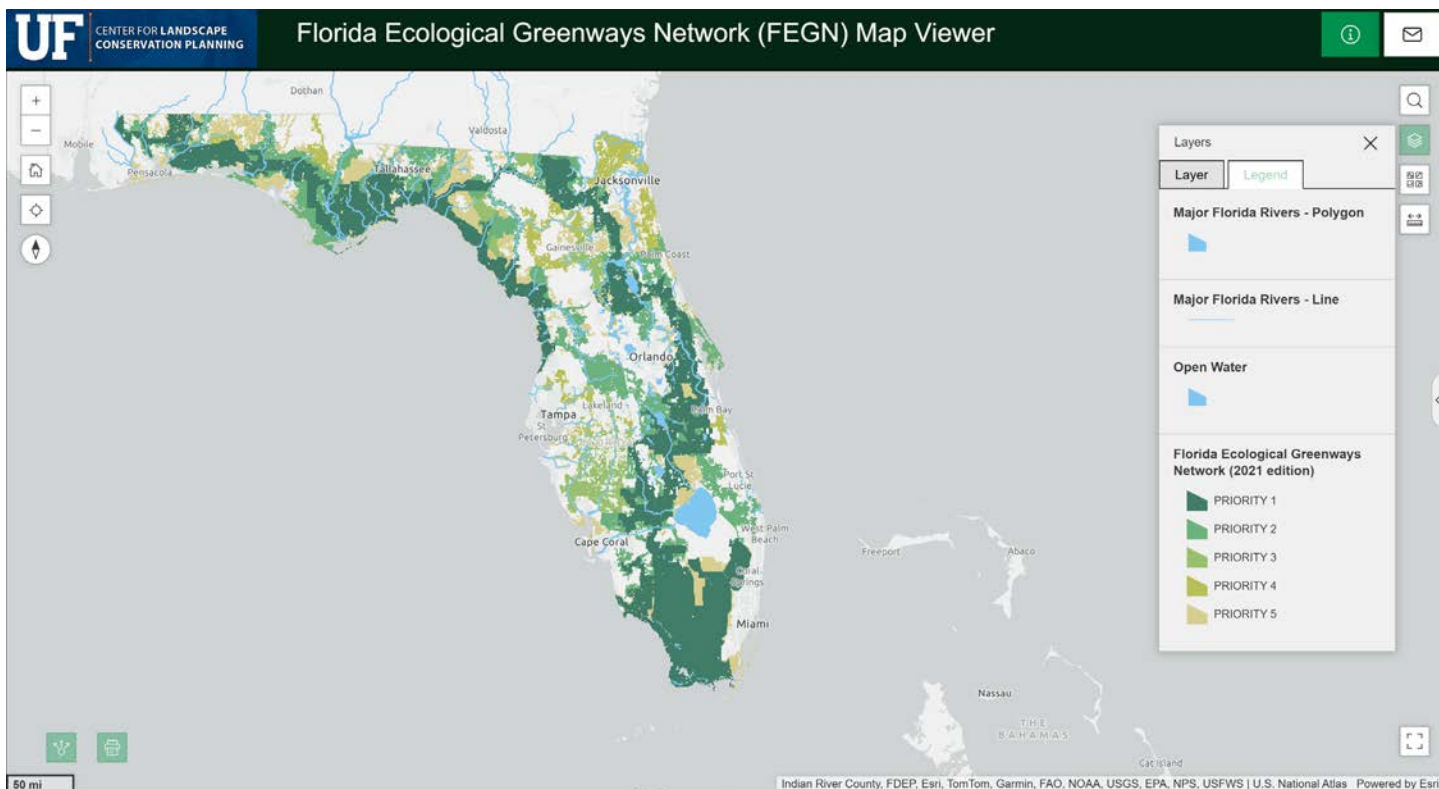


Figure 5. Screenshot of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network Map Viewer depicting the five priority levels. Priorities 1 to 3 comprise the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

## OTHER GIS DATA, TOOLS, AND MAPS

Additional GIS data and tools that can help support landscape conservation planning efforts are available from a number of other sources.

The Ecological Connectivity Planning Viewer or EcoCon is another web-based tool hosted on The Hub. “With pre-set data suites targeting themes like connectivity, conservation status, development threats, and land ownership, users can perform basic spatial analyses, import their own datasets for comparison, export data, and generate custom maps for printing and sharing” (University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, 2025). The platform is particularly useful for those with an existing ArcGIS Online account as some functionalities and analyses require a user subscription.

The Florida Geographic Data Library ([www.fgdl.org](http://www.fgdl.org)), hosted by the University of Florida’s GeoPlan Center, features a repository of federal, state, and other GIS data layers that can be viewed using the online Map Viewer or downloaded for further geospatial analysis.

The FNAI hosts additional tools and data on its website at <https://www.fnai.org/>, including the Florida Conservation Land Acquisitions Dashboard (Figure 6), created with support from the non-profit advocacy organization, Live Wildly. The site also includes a Florida Map of Biodiversity Importance created in partnership with NatureServe, the Interactive Florida Conservation Lands Map and Florida Biodiversity Matrix tool, as well as other downloadable GIS datasets and more.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) also hosts a GIS data hub ([www.geodata.dep.state.fl.us](http://www.geodata.dep.state.fl.us)), which includes other valuable datasets, including statewide hydrography, groundwater contamination, and others. Additional, more context-specific data may also be found on other state agency and non-governmental organization websites while localized data for particular study areas can often be found on the local county or municipal GIS data hub.

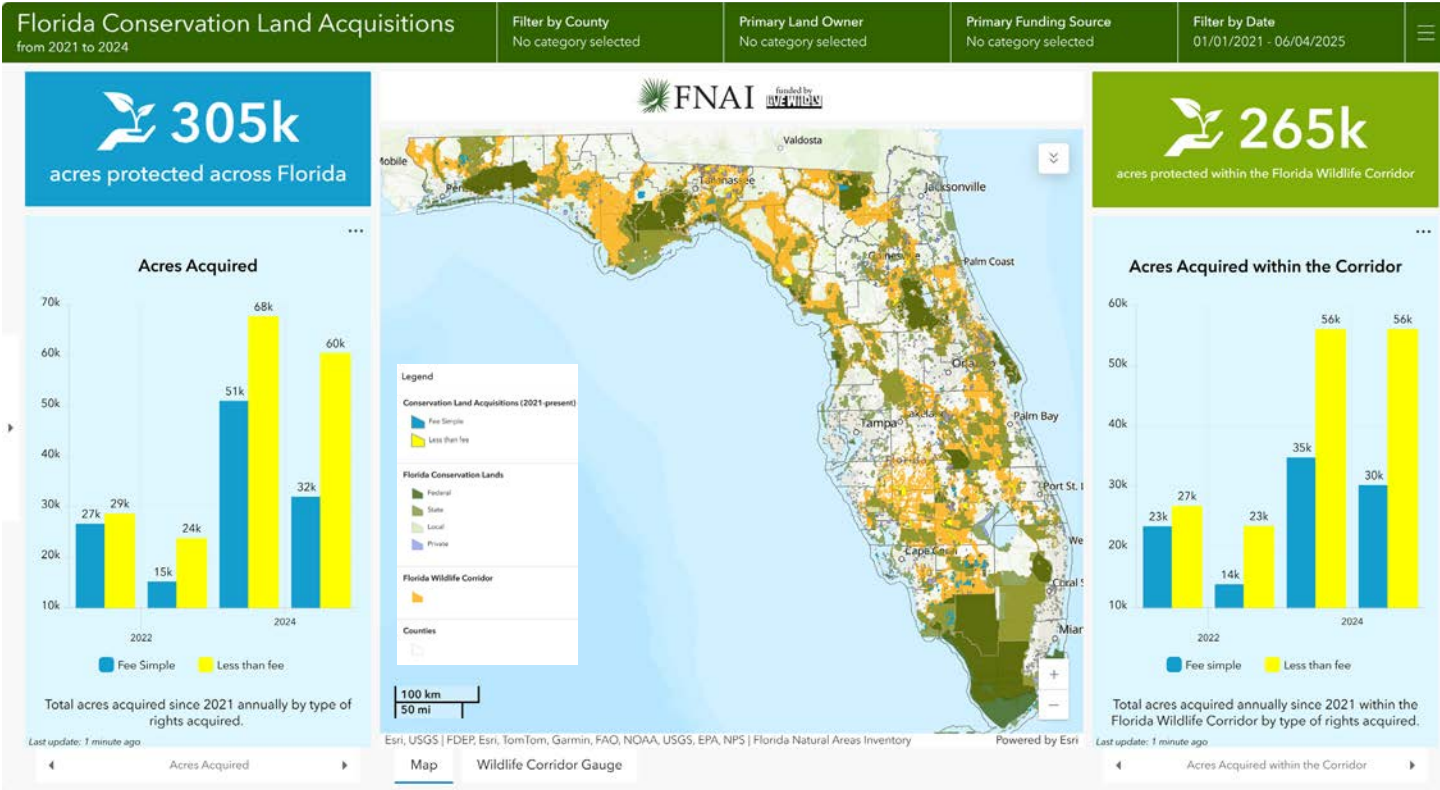


Figure 6. Screenshot of the Florida Conservation Land Acquisitions Dashboard, including total protected acres across Florida and within the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

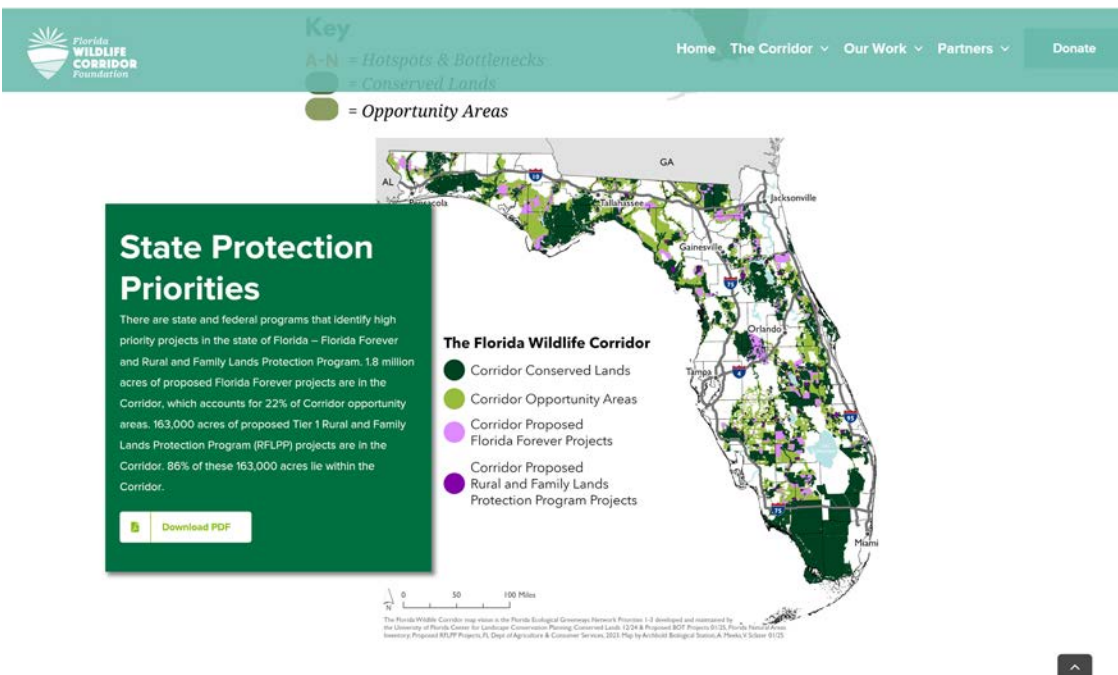


Figure 7. Screenshot of the State Protection Priorities Map hosted on the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation's website and available for download.

# NON-PROFIT ADVOCACY GROUPS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to GIS-driven tools and datasets that can be used to geospatially analyze land-use planning initiatives, other resources have been produced by non-profit advocacy groups and partners including Live Wildly, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation, 1000 Friends of Florida, and Archbold Biological Station that are being used to support land conservation planning and Corridor protection.

## FLORIDA WILDLIFE CORRIDOR FOUNDATION

The mission of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation is “to champion a collaborative campaign to permanently connect, protect and restore the Florida Wildlife Corridor” (Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation, 2025). It achieves this through public awareness, storytelling, and strategic partnerships taking the form of a multi-day Corridor Connect summit, expeditions, film screenings, exhibits, and more. The Foundation’s website includes several resources, including a series of downloadable PDF maps that highlight critical information specific to the Corridor, such as opportunity areas and critical connections, state protection priorities (Figure 7), and links to other external resources and datasets. The website also includes links to short films that capture expeditions conducted by scientists, ranchers and farmers, and outdoor enthusiasts. Each film explores a different area of the state, with an emphasis on chokepoints and the need to protect critical linkages of the corridor.

## 1000 FRIENDS OF FLORIDA

1000 Friends of Florida is a non-profit advocacy organization promoting smart growth and the protection of Florida’s natural lands, wildlife, and quality of life. The group actively conducts a series of webinars on a range of topics, including planning, development, and growth, as well as a specialized Planning to Protect the Florida Wildlife Corridor series, focused on the intersection of agriculture and landscape conservation, addressing inherent challenges and opportunities throughout the state. 1000 Friends of Florida also produces several specialized publications, including the recent Sea Level 2040/2070 and Agriculture 2040/2070 reports that examined how these issues interact with potential long-term growth and conservation scenarios.

## ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

Archbold Biological Station is a non-profit organization focused on ecological research, conservation, and education. The group’s mission is “to build and share the scientific knowledge needed to protect the life, lands, and waters of the heart of Florida, and beyond” (Archbold Biological Station, 2025). From its research station in Highlands County, Florida and dozens of sites throughout Central Florida, the organization conducts a number of projects, making research and monitoring datasets, aerial drone imagery, and more available for use by both scientists and the public. One recent example was a study on Climate and Wildlife Corridors, examining how the Florida Wildlife Corridor enhances resilience to climate change. The initiative and final report can be found at <https://www.archbold-station.org/projects/climate-and-wildlife-corridors/>.

## LIVE WILDLY FOUNDATION

Launched in 2022, Live Wildly Foundation “is a 501(c)3 organization that applies an entrepreneurial approach to the conservation of half the State of Florida while seeking to balance smart growth, a robust economy and a connected, resilient landscape” (Live Wildly, 2025). Through partnerships, donations, and creative coalitions, the group supports organizations that directly work to “protect wild Florida and the Florida Wildlife Corridor.” As a unique resource, the group’s events, stories and blogs, and films help to visualize, tell stories, and at times directly experience the beauty, enjoyment, and significance of Florida’s natural landscapes.

The organizations and resources explored over the last two sections are only part of a larger collective but represent some of the leading environmental research, analysis, and advocacy groups operating at a statewide scale. By exploring the data and assets made available by these organizations and incorporating into the community visioning process, planners and stakeholders can make better-informed decisions that balance growth with environmental sustainability. Planning bodies of all scales, from small municipalities to regional agencies, may use these resources as part of their comprehensive planning toolkits and to directly support community engagement and visioning events and exercises.

# COMMUNITY VISIONING PROCESSES

Community visioning provides a structured framework for stakeholders — including residents, policymakers, conservationists, and developers — to articulate a shared future for their built and natural landscapes. Through participatory workshops, surveys, public meetings, interactive mapping exercises, and other means, planners can share and gather valuable insights on local environmental concerns, historical land uses, and preferred growth patterns. This inclusive process fosters a sense of ownership and stewardship among residents and other stakeholders, increasing long-term support for plan principles, including conservation initiatives.

Land conservation, including rural, open space, and agricultural lands, is frequently identified as a priority by communities as part of long-range or comprehensive planning efforts. Interestingly, these components of a planning process are not always emphasized as part of community-visioning efforts or residents are not well-informed on the data or research that goes into conservation strategies. Incorporating data or science-based methodologies into public engagement efforts can help to bridge this gap by providing tangible insights that enhance public understanding and support.

## PROGRAMMING CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned earlier, effective community engagement relies on a variety of interactive programming and activities that are context-sensitive and tailored to different audiences and objectives. One set of events or programming may be effective under one

scenario but may not be sensible or feasible under another. Additionally, the specific types of activities or exercises that make up a program can vary widely and must be tailored to the particular plan's context. This section begins to outline and identify a spectrum of community engagement programming that can be integrated into growth and conservation planning efforts but in no way is exhaustive. Some commonly used approaches include:

### Charrettes

A charrette is an intensive, multi-day collaborative planning process that brings together stakeholders, professionals, and the public to develop a shared vision for a project or plan. A charrette involves iterative design cycles, real-time feedback, and interdisciplinary teamwork to refine solutions rapidly. The process encourages active participation from a diverse group of perspectives, increasing the likelihood that the final vision is both technically sound and broadly supported. Charrettes are particularly effective for complex planning issues, including land conservation, where balancing ecological, economic, and community interests requires in-depth discussion and creative problem-solving. By fostering transparency, consensus-building, and adaptability, this approach is able to lead to actionable and community-endorsed planning solutions.



Figure 8. Community members from the City of Sanibel, Florida listen to a presentation by planning team members for the EPA Recovery and Resiliency Partnership Project, that supported recovery efforts for the city following Hurricane Ian in 2022.

### Community Workshops

A community workshop is a structured, single-session event designed to gather input, educate participants, or solve specific planning issues through facilitated discussions and activities. Workshops often serve as a means to introduce concepts, collect feedback, or refine ideas before moving into more detailed planning or design phases. As a result, workshops are often shorter in duration or are facilitated as part of a larger charrette with a focus on a particular topic or phase of a project. In this context, workshops are an effective way to begin a charrette, allowing for a structured and time-efficient forum to introduce a project, begin exploring key plan concepts or ideas, and gather valuable insights and feedback that can be further explored, discussed, and refined as part of later charrette programming (Figure 8).

### Open Design Studios

An Open Design Studio serves as a collaborative workspace where planners, designers, and stakeholders engage in real-time problem-solving and design iteration. Unlike traditional closed-door planning sessions, the studio remains open to the public, allowing for informal drop-ins, stakeholder meetings, and interviews that provide continuous feedback and unique perspectives. Invited stakeholders—such as community leaders, local officials, planning and other public services departments, business owners, property owners, and citizen groups—play a crucial role in shaping solutions by sharing insights, concerns, and desires. Scheduled meetings and targeted discussions ensure that key issues are addressed while spontaneous interactions foster transparency and inclusivity.

This dynamic, iterative environment allows for the rapid refinement of ideas, ensuring that final plans are both technically sound and reflective of community priorities. In the context of land conservation, providing readily available data and research through informative maps that community members may view at their leisure; having planning team members or topical experts available to answer questions; and promoting

environmentally-focused stakeholder meetings as open to the public to attend are just several ways to build community education, trust and support.



*Figure 9.*  
The Open Design Studio during the Lake Wales Envisioned project allowed for community members to drop in and discuss the project with the planning team while stakeholder technical meetings took place within the same space.

### Stakeholder Meetings & Interviews

Stakeholder meetings and interviews are structured discussions that gather input from key entities affected by planning decisions and can be coordinated as part of or separately from a charrette or open design studio setting. Opening these sessions to the public enhances transparency and allows broader community participation in the decision-making process. For instance, providing an opportunity for the public to sit in on a meeting with project ecologists or other environmental experts, while allocating a short period for questions and answers, can ultimately serve to promote public education, trust and support while potentially also identifying common questions or concerns that community members may have in that particular context (Figure 9).



Figure 10.  
Community members and other stakeholders participate in an Interactive Mapping Exercise during a Public Workshop for Seven50 (the Seven Counties, Fifty Years plan for Southeast Florida) in Miami, Florida.

### **Interactive Mapping Exercises**

Interactive mapping exercises are participatory tools used to visually illustrate and analyze spatial data within the constraints of a defined planning project and area. Depending on the design of the exercise, the activity can help to identify community priorities and collaboratively develop land-use strategies. These exercises engage stakeholders by allowing them to mark important locations, highlight areas of concern, and propose solutions directly on maps.

By integrating geographic data across a series of diverse stakeholder groups, planners can identify trends, conflicts, and opportunities that might not be evident through traditional discussions or technical analysis alone. In terms of potential growth and land conservation, when equipped with environmental insights and other contextual

information for a study area, interactive mapping exercises provide informed community members with a chance to prioritize areas for growth versus conservation. Assembling feedback from a wide number of groups and community members can help to build consensus and an overarching strategy that can be formalized into a project's plan (Figure 10).

### **Live Polling**

Live polling (Figure 11) is another interactive tool that is used to gather real-time feedback from community members on key issues, priorities, and preferences. It allows participants to anonymously respond to questions via mobile devices, keypads, or online platforms, offering immediate insights into community values, goals, and aspirations. By visualizing results instantly, live polling fosters engagement, encourages discussion, and helps planners and the impacted community to better understand public sentiment on various aspects of a project. To maximize effectiveness, live polling should be facilitated with clear, concise questions and a mix of multiple-choice, ranking, and/or very short open-ended response formats such as one-word answers to a particular question. Specific to landscape conservation, live polling could be used to gauge awareness of environmental challenges, assess public support for different protection strategies, or prioritize areas for open space and preservation.

### **Online Surveys**

Online surveys are another valuable tool given their ease of accessibility that allows for broad public participation from a diverse group of stakeholders. Surveys can provide quantitative and qualitative data that can help a planning team to identify trends, priorities, and potential areas of concern, helping to increase the likelihood that planning decisions reflect the needs and aspirations of the public. By reaching individuals who may not attend in-person meetings, online surveys enhance inclusivity and are capable of capturing a more comprehensive perspective on planning topics.

Similar to live polling, online surveys are most effective when they are clearly structured and include a mix of question types. Open-ended questions should be carefully structured so

that responses can be easily understood by the planning team and translated into an identifiable theme or category. In addition, using a distribution strategy that involves various channels, such as social media, email, and project websites, can help to increase response rates. In the context of landscape conservation, surveys can be tailored similarly to live polling, but it is important that respondents be provided any relevant contextual information. This might be in the form of illustrations, maps, or a brief video presentation prior to the question being asked.

### Written Feedback Forms

Feedback forms, whether physical (handwritten) or digitally submitted, are another helpful resource, allowing stakeholders to share their concerns, ideas, and preferences in a structured manner. Allowing for direct input from community members who may not have the opportunity to voice their opinions in meetings or workshops, feedback forms provide for a broader representation of perspectives. The collected feedback helps planners to identify recurring themes, uncover nuances or overlooked issues, and refine proposed conservation strategies to better align with community priorities. Offering the chance to submit both written and digital feedback forms can accommodate different accessibility needs, making participation more inclusive, but planners should be mindful and ensure that both audiences receive the same information.

### Guided Tours

Guided tours or hikes offer a unique and interactive tool that can be used in the planning process to provide firsthand experiences and understanding of local sites and landscapes. These tours allow community members, stakeholders, and planners to observe planning features in action, whether man-made or natural, while offering a forum to discuss strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and envision potential strategies in real time. By immersing participants in the environment, guided tours help illustrate the tangible benefits of planning efforts and

have the potential to foster a deeper understanding of how land-use decisions impact communities and natural environments.

Guided tours are most effective when they proactively establish a set of clear objectives, knowledgeable facilitators, and create opportunities for participants to ask questions and provide feedback. On the topic of land conservation, these can take the form of nature hikes that focus on specific environmental concerns, such as habitat management, watershed protection, or climate resilience. For example, a hike through a threatened wetland can help participants understand its role in flood mitigation, biodiversity, and water quality, strengthening public understanding and stewardship for its protection. In a real-world example, several ‘River Rambles’ were conducted as part of the Chattahoochee Riverlands project, where planners, ecologists, and community members explored segments of the river corridor together. The guided experiences allowed participants to witness both the beauty and challenges of the riverfront, fostering a deeper engagement amongst participants and shaping a shared vision for its future conservation and recreational use.



Figure 11. As part of the Project Kick-Off for Lake Wales Envisioned, attendees participated in a live polling session to better help the planning team understand community priorities and sentiments. In this particular example, “Protecting natural environment” received the most selections with 25% of the audience identifying as the “most important” for them.

# IMPACTING CHANGE

Community-vision plans and master plans, when paired with meaningful community engagement, can play a transformative role in shaping the future of a community. The plans serve as blueprints that reflect the collective values, goals, and priorities of residents and other stakeholders, that can guide long-term growth, conservation efforts, and policy development. Through public input gathered during charrettes, workshops, surveys, and stakeholder meetings, plans capture local aspirations and translate them into actionable strategies. Particularly, plans that incorporate maps and illustrations of key ideas tied to an implementation framework consisting of specific action items with defined time horizons as well as individuals or groups responsible, and potential funding sources (Figure 12), provide a clear path to achieving the goals and aspirations of the community.

*Figure 12. The implementation framework laid out by Lake Wales Envisioned is organized by plan themes, detailing a description of action to be taken, the associated timeframe, and responsible party or partners.*

## How Do We Get There?

The community has come together, the planning team has illustrated the vision, City leaders have a path forward to guide growth, development, preservation, and conservation, but how do we get there? The table below identifies the key action steps related to the lines of effort, the expected timeline, and who is responsible for getting it done. It's meant to be a guide for the community to refer back to and help work together towards this common vision. Understanding that change does not happen overnight, what is important is that Lake Wales now has a collective vision for the future of Olmsted's City in 10, 25, and 50 years – *Lake Wales Envisioned*.

| Description |   | Timeframe               |                     |                     | Responsible Party and Partners   |
|-------------|---|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--|
|             |   | Intermediate (year 1-3) | Mid-Term (year 4-6) | Long-Term (year 7+) |  |
| ECONOMY     | E1 Identify new sites for industry; update zoning and other City policy to attract new businesses and users   | X                       |                     |                     | City of Lake Wales / Chamber of Commerce & EDC   |
|             | E2 Provide job incubators / training programs   | X                       |                     |                     | City of Lake Wales / Non-Profits / Private Sector  |
|             | E3 Provide a variety of housing to attract employees and industry   | X                       | X                   | X                   | City of Lake Wales / CRA / Private Sector  |
|             | E4 Concentrate on employee quality of life; promote Lake Wales for remote workers   | X                       |                     |                     | City of Lake Wales / Chamber of Commerce / EDC   |
|             | E5 Promote the vision   | X                       | X                   | X                   | City of Lake Wales / Main Street / Chamber of Commerce / EDC   |
| GREEN       | G1 Pursue "Big Green Network" conservation and land protection strategy<br>Potential tools include: Acquisition; Regulations; Incentives for private property owners; Comprehensive Policy Guidance; Land Development Regulations; and COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS | X                       | X                   | X                   | City of Lake Wales / Polk County / Nearby Municipalities / Non-Profits / Local and State Agencies / Private Sector |
|             | G2 Pursue parks/trails improvements identified in the "Neighborhood Green Network"  | X                       | X                   | X                   | City of Lake Wales / Polk County / Nearby Municipalities / Non-Profits / Local and State Agencies / Private Sector |
|             | G3 Restore habitat and native landscaping along trail networks leading to conservation lands  | X                       | X                   | X                   | City of Lake Wales / Polk County / Non-Profits   |
|             | G4 Update parks and recreation plan with a focus on connecting open spaces and accommodating anticipated growth   | X                       |                     |                     | City of Lake Wales   |
|             | G5 Pursue "Green Building" approaches<br>Adopt incentives and Florida Friendly Landscaping certification; encourage backyard habitat programs from National Wildlife Federation and others  | X                       |                     |                     | City of Lake Wales   |

## POLICY ACTION, REFORM, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Upon project completion, community-vision plans and master plans are translated into policy through adoption by local governments. Through this process, local governments may also amend zoning codes, implement new land-use regulations, or incorporate plan recommendations into comprehensive plans, capital improvement programs, or other policy mechanisms. In conservation-focused plans, local governments may adopt overlay districts or an urban growth boundary, a specialized conservation fund, or incentivize conservation through easements or transfer of development rights, to protect sensitive ecosystems and prevent over-development of critical natural lands. In some cases, these proposals may be advanced through a public referendum for voter approval. One recent example is in Martin County, where a half-cent sales tax dedicated to purchasing and preserving ecologically sensitive lands was approved by referenda in November 2024. These funds will help to acquire key conservation lands within and surrounding the Florida Wildlife Corridor, including Pal-Mar and the Loxahatchee and St. Lucie Headwaters.

# CASE STUDIES

When vision plans are formally adopted into a government’s comprehensive plan, the goals, policies, and strategies from the vision plan become part of the legal framework guiding future growth and decision-making. The adoption process typically involves public hearings, planning commission reviews, and legislative approval by city or county commissions. The content of a vision plan is often reorganized in some manner to be integrated into the comprehensive plan’s various elements, including land use, transportation, housing, parks and recreation, and conservation components.

For instance, within the land-use element, the comprehensive plan may create or adjust policies for preserving rural lands, enhancing greenway networks, or promoting compact, sustainable development patterns based on the vision plan’s goals. Similarly, within the conservation element, the plan might reflect new environmental protections, such as habitat conservation areas, water-quality buffers, or open-space preservation strategies. And last, within the capital improvement element, recommendations for infrastructure investments, like park expansions or stormwater-management upgrades, may be integrated, ensuring alignment with long-term conservation and sustainability goals.

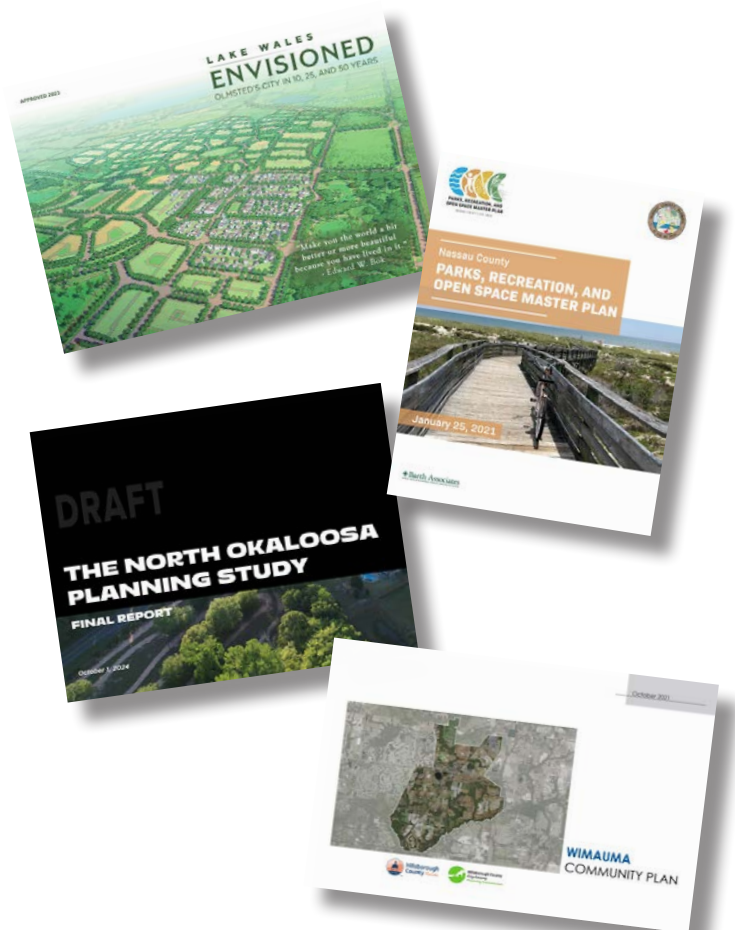
Once adopted, policymakers and government officials are generally held accountable to the plan through regular reviews, progress reports, and performance metrics. Comprehensive plans also often include implementation frameworks of their own with measurable outcomes. Planning departments and advisory committees should track progress and publish updates to further promote public transparency and government accountability. Additionally, tools such as zoning consistency reviews, development approvals, and capital project funding decisions must adhere to the policies and priorities outlined in the plan.

Finally, community advocacy groups and residents can play a critical role in holding policymakers accountable by attending public meetings, providing feedback, and monitoring whether decisions align with the adopted vision. Through this accountability framework, community-driven plans become living, actionable documents that shape future policy and investment, and with it, the form of a community’s growth, development, and conservation.

The following section explores several recent case studies within Florida that demonstrate an application of the ideas and recommendations from this report. Understandably, the selected examples do not represent an exhaustive list of projects that have used these tactics but have been selected to demonstrate various application efforts across a variety of project scales and sites from throughout the state.

The list of case studies highlighted in this section of the report, includes:

- **Lake Wales Envisioned**  
(Lake Wales, Florida)
- **Nassau Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan**  
(Nassau County, Florida)
- **North Okaloosa County Planning Study**  
(Okaloosa County, Florida)
- **Wimauma Community Vision Plan**  
(Wimauma, Florida)



# CASE STUDY

## LAKE WALES ENVISIONED

Lake Wales, FL

### CONSULTANT TEAM

Dover, Kohl & Partners Town Planning  
Exum Associates  
Inspire Placemaking Collective  
Kittelson & Associates



*Aerial photo taken of Bok Tower and the surrounding landscape at Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales, Florida.*

*Image credit: Dover, Kohl & Partners.*

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

With an historic downtown nestled between oak tree-lined walkable neighborhoods planned by the Olmsted Brothers and set amongst picturesque rural landscapes and rolling citrus groves, Lake Wales, Florida is a city rich in natural beauty, history, and community. Facing unprecedented regional development pressure, Lake Wales Envisioned represents a compelling, community-led vision to shape future growth and conservation. With support from local, state, and national partners, including 1000 Friends of Florida, the Olmsted Network, and the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation, the plan proposes a strategic regional conservation framework protecting critical Florida Wildlife Corridor priorities while identifying areas for future growth and encouraging better street and neighborhood design.

In dedication to the environment, the plan's green element advocates for conservation at the regional scale as well as the neighborhood and building scale. The "Big Green Network" seeks to protect large swaths of land designated by state experts and agencies as critical to biodiversity, rare species habitat, aquifer recharge, landscape linkages, floodplains, and other state conservation priorities. Separately, the "Neighborhood Green Network" establishes a localized framework of proposed parks, greenways, and trails. Overall, these efforts ensure all existing and future residents will have access to a park or green space within a short walk. Perhaps most notably, these networks revive original Olmsted Brothers' "city in a garden" park system plans.

Lake Wales Envisioned serves as an effective case study, demonstrating the extent of support, progress, and impact that can result from the strategic combination of science-based planning and robust, creative community engagement.

|               |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Project Type  | Vision Plan     |
| Project Scale | City + Environs |
| Project Year  | 2022 - 2024     |
| Year Adopted  | 2024            |

***"I think the standard that Lake Wales Envisioned initiates and follows is that growth need not be harmful, and growth can actually make things better or more beautiful, and that should be our standard."***

- Deputy Mayor Robin Gibson  
City of Lake Wales

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VISIONING

From the beginning, the City Commission set high expectations for the new city-wide vision and plan – that it be grounded in community ideas and values. The plan had lofty standards for civic engagement and communication, with a focus on educating participants about opportunities, challenges, and potential solutions, so they can provide informed input. To that end, a breadth of opportunities and events were available for people to get involved. In-person activities ranged from community events and speaking sessions to a week-long charrette, work-in-progress and community update presentations, and a documentary screening at the conclusion of the project. Virtually, a series of expert webinars were hosted on multiple topics ranging from economic sustainability to transportation, environmental protection, and the relationship of neighborhood design and health. Last, a virtual community update gave residents and other stakeholders an alternative to attending live, often a challenge for much of the population.

One of the aspirations adopted by City Council in early 2023 was to “assemble an enduring green network of open spaces and conservation lands.” To that end, the planning team placed a special emphasis on land conservation and environmental stewardship, beginning early in the planning process with presentations by industry professionals Jay Exum of Exum Associates and Steve Nygren of Serenbe, on the topics of the ecological transect and the award-winning biophilic community of Serenbe, at the Project Symposium and Kick-Off Event in March 2023. Later that summer, Jay Exum gave a virtual presentation on the plan’s progress specific to the conservation and open space strategy making up what became known as ‘The Big Green Network’ - a linkage of natural lands within the study area that would connect to existing conservation lands, forming a network of critical protected areas that also provide recreation opportunities, and establish a growth boundary.

*Shown right are a series of photos capturing moments of community engagement throughout the Lake Wales Envisioned planning process. From top to bottom: i) Dover, Kohl & Partners Founding Principal Victor Dover presenting to community members during the Project Symposium and Kick-Off event in March 2023; ii) City Manager James Slaton delivering a welcome address to community members attending the Charrette Week Opening Reception in April 2023; iii) Community members participating in one of several table exercises during the Hands-On Design Session of the April 2023 Charrette Week; and iv) Community members reviewing the thematic exhibit boards on display at the July 2023 Community Update Presentation.*

*Images credit: Dover, Kohl & Partners.*





Image credit: Dover, Kohl & Partners

And finally in July, the public was invited to attend a Community Update Presentation where presentations by the planning team and exhibit board displays detailed the various components of the project. The plan's 'Green' theme exhibit demonstrated how the use of science-based planning and statewide datasets helped to identify and prioritize proposed conservation lands for The Big Green Network.

## SCIENCE-BASED APPROACH

Lake Wales Envisioned is a model in planning for coherent regional growth, preservation and resilience. Although it is a pro-growth plan, it started not with the real estate development goals but with the green parts—the parks, greenways, conservation areas, and green, tree-lined streets—in keeping with both the City's historic Olmsted planning roots and a 21st Century emphasis on public health and ecology. The primary focus was to assemble an enduring green network of open spaces and conservation lands comprised of high-value natural habitat.

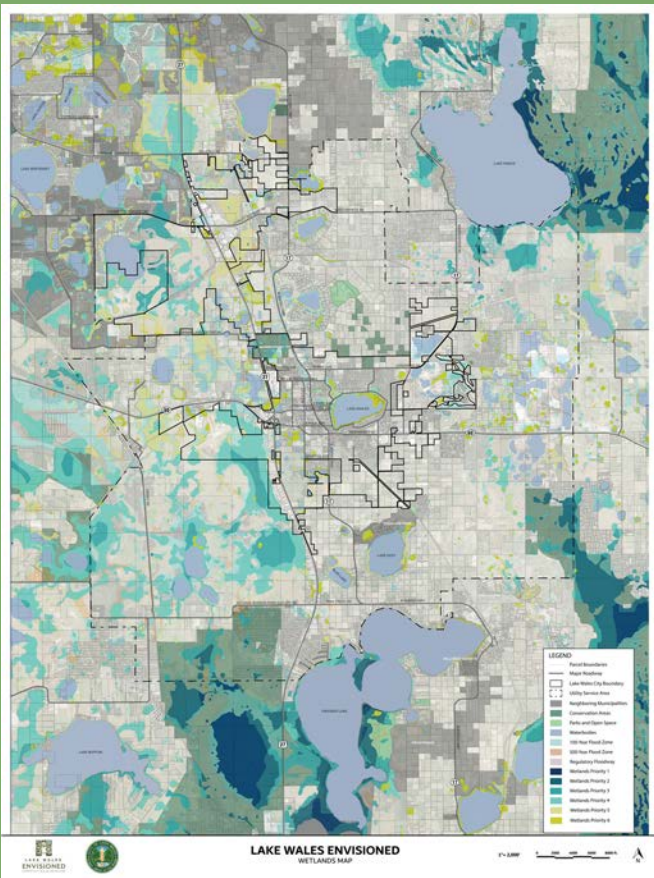
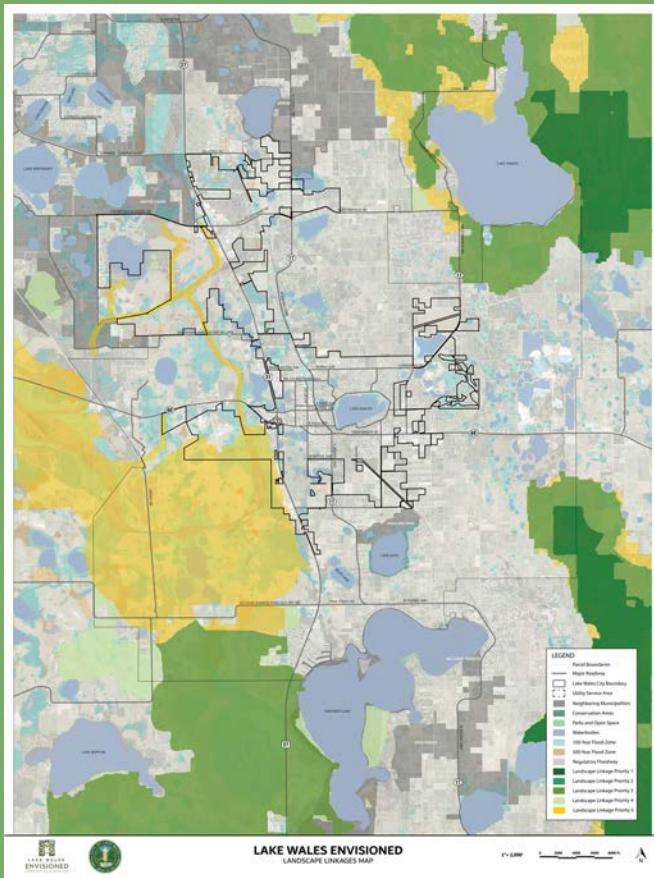
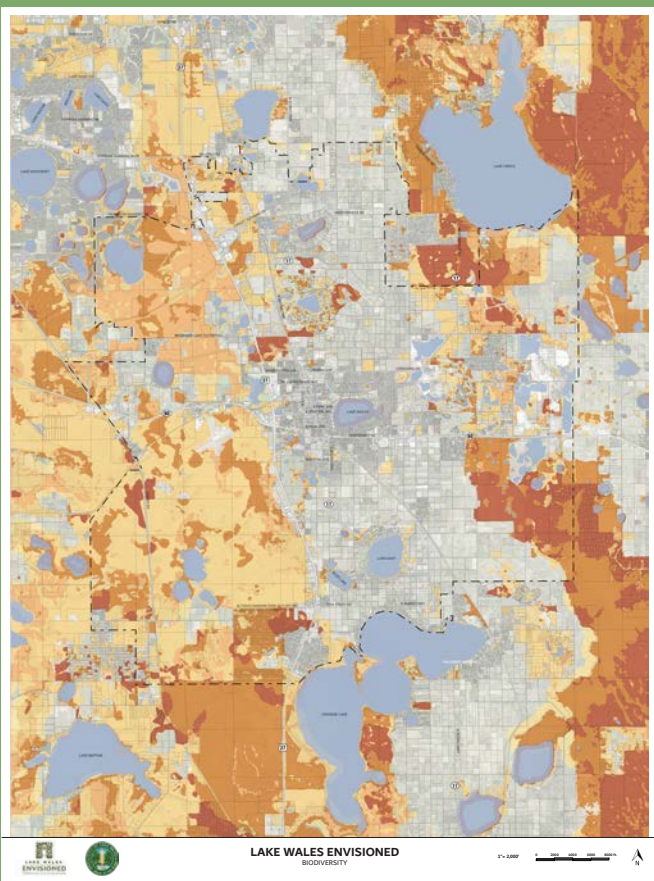
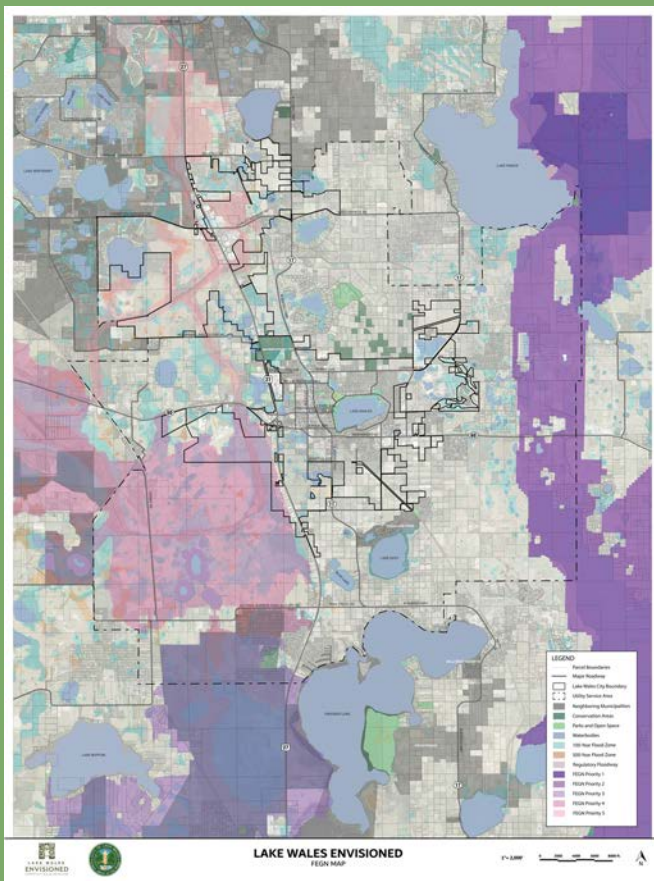
The proposed Big Green Network was derived using a science-based strategy backed by statewide conservation efforts. Vital data used as part of this approach included the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) and several data layers from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), including layers identifying areas with high biological diversity, rare species habitats, landscape linkages, floodplains, and wetlands. Specifically within the study area, the goal was

### TIGER CREEK PRESERVE NATURE HIKE

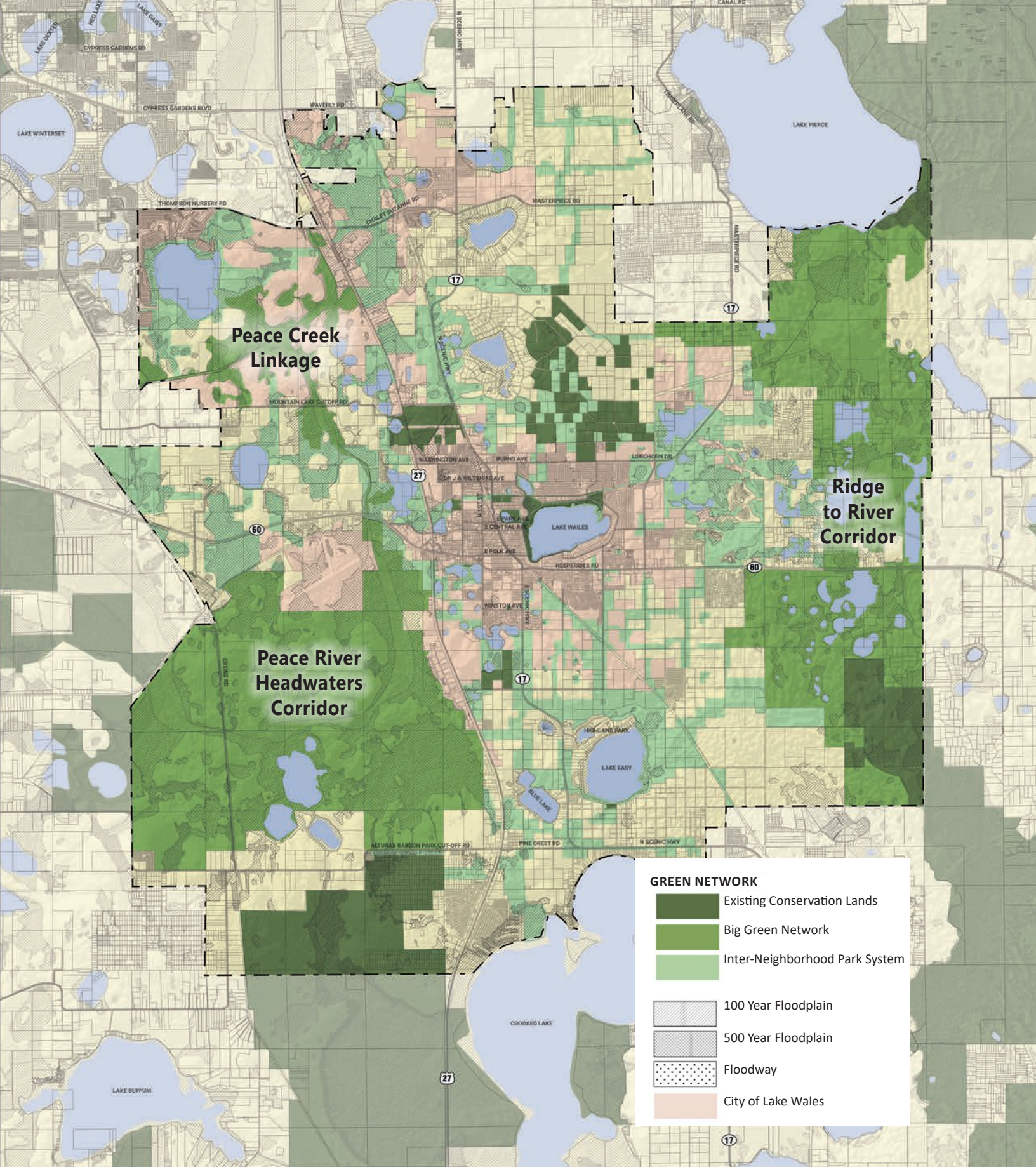
During the charrette, the planning team along with community members and stakeholders toured the Tiger Creek Preserve, learning about the area's ecological significance, rare native species, relict scrub habitats, and opportunities to connect to large-scale conservation lands.

to: 1) connect historic scrub and sandhill habitats with the Kissimmee River corridor, 2) protect water resources and habitat in the headwaters of the Peace River, and 3) protect wetlands and water resources along the Peace Creek canal system. If combined, 17,500 acres of lands around Lake Wales would be protected and connect the area to the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

The Neighborhood Green Network is a patchwork of smaller green spaces that will link with each other, and with walkable streets and trails to connect people, wildlife, and habitat to the Big Green Network. Much of the layout of the Neighborhood Green Network is dependent on the decisions of private property owners, who will locate new open spaces in conjunction with future development. These spaces are drawn where they may logically occur, using a similar science-based approach, including low-lying areas or floodplains, areas with relict scrub habitat, or along the Scenic Highway corridor.



The FEGN and other conservation data helped to inform a science-based process of identifying and prioritizing public and private lands within the Lake Wales Envisioned study area for conservation. Shown above are planning maps based on FEGN priority, biodiversity, landscape linkages, and wetlands datasets that were incorporated as part of the science-based planning approach. Images credit: Dover, Kohl & Partners.



The conceptual green network map as proposed by the Lake Wales Envisioned plan. The network is comprised of existing conservation lands as well as areas identified as priority lands for conservation in the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) and through other conservation data, including priorities for biological diversity, rare species habitats, floodplains, floodways, and wetlands, aquifer recharge, and landscape linkages. The network in totality includes larger swaths of land comprising the Big Green Network and the more local inter-neighborhood network of open spaces.

Image credit: Dover, Kohl & Partners.

# IMPACTING CHANGE & PLAN PROGRESS

The Lake Wales Envisioned report concludes with a section on Implementation. In an effort to organize the recommendations from the plan and translate them into action, the section includes a table organized by plan theme with a list of necessary actions. Each action is further defined by the timeframe of when it should be pursued (i.e., intermediate years 1 to 3, mid-term years 4 to 6, or long-term years 7 or later) and the responsible party or partners that should be involved in the task. In creating the implementation matrix, City officials and staff have a clear roadmap to guide actions and also monitor progress over time.

The series of events beginning with the Kick-Off Event and Symposium, through the week-long charrette, final presentation and documentary, and many others in between, helped to initiate and sustain public engagement and support for the project. Throughout the plan's development, the project garnered extensive support among the public, key stakeholders, and other relevant groups and agencies. Notably, advocates from organizations related to conservation and growth management; the work and legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted and The Olmsted Brothers Firm; and media associations in support of traditional town building; submitted guest editorials to the local Lake Wales News publication expressing their support.

Since being adopted by the City of Lake Wales in October 2023, Polk County has moved forward with trying to acquire key properties identified by the plan. In one case, Edwin Friedlander, a lifelong Lake Wales resident who attended a portion of the Charrette, offered his 649-acre ranch for acquisition. In late November 2024, he reached an agreement with the County, secured through funds made available from the Environmental Lands Program (ELP). Initially passed through a voter referendum in 1994, the property tax-funded ELP was successfully renewed by voters in 2022. The acquisition contributed a large portion of land to the earlier mentioned Ridge to River Corridor. Edwin's contribution was a major step forward towards establishing the proposed "Big Green Network" and a potential motivator for neighboring landowners.

*The overarching objective for what has now been termed the Big Green Network, is to protect large swaths of high-value, natural lands...this is a big-picture scenario that we think the City can drive, that's important locally, regionally, and even to the state, in terms of protecting big scale conservation lands.*

- Dr. Jay Exum, Principal Ecologist  
Exum Associates, Inc.

Learn more at:  
[lakewalesenvisioned.com](http://lakewalesenvisioned.com)

This is a positive step forward, yet development pressures remain high throughout the region. As a result, the need for city leaders, county officials, and state agencies to communicate, collaborate, and act with urgency, and implement the recommendations of the plan remain critical.

## PROJECT AWARDS

**2024 Award of Excellence  
(Best Practices)**

American Planning Association  
(APA) Florida Chapter

**2024 Outstanding  
Study / Plan**

Florida Planning & Zoning  
Association (FPZA)

**2024 Communicator Award  
Documentary Film**

The Academy of Interactive and  
Visual Arts (AIVA)

# CASE STUDY

## PARKS, RECREATION, AND OPEN SPACE MASTER PLAN (PROSMP)

Nassau County, FL

CONSULTANT TEAM  
Barth Associates



Photo of Nassau Crossing Park in Yulee, Florida, a Community Park which opened in late 2022. The park includes preserved areas and space for active recreation.

Image credit: [nassaucountyfl.com](http://nassaucountyfl.com)

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Many other counties are nearing build-out, and struggling to undo the effects of years of poor planning and decision-making resulting in suburban sprawl, congested roads, poor water quality, degraded habitat, flooding, chronic disease, and other growth-related issues. Nassau County, however, has committed to managing growth and creating sustainable economic development in a way that maintains and improves the quality of life and unique character of the communities by utilizing its strengths – the people, the abundance of unspoiled natural resources, and its strategic location as the ‘Eastern Gateway to Florida.’ - Nassau County PROSMP (2021)

Nassau County’s PROSMP represents a forward-thinking, community-driven strategy aimed at enhancing the county’s recreational assets while preserving its natural resources and promoting sustainable growth. The plan introduces an innovative and data-informed framework to guide park development, recreational programming, and the conservation of open spaces over the next two decades. It reflects a holistic vision that balances the county’s rapid growth with the need to maintain quality of life and protect its ecological character.

The plan also distinguishes itself by integrating conservation and sustainability principles. It prioritizes the protection of environmentally sensitive lands, enhancing connections to the Florida Wildlife Corridor, and promoting eco-tourism opportunities. Strategies such as nature-based recreation, preservation of native habitats, and the incorporation of green infrastructure demonstrate the county’s commitment to balancing recreation with environmental stewardship.

Overall, the PROSMP serves as a model for blending community-driven planning, data-informed decision-making, and environmental conservation, encouraging Nassau County’s recreational network to grow in harmony with its people and landscape for years to come.

|               |             |
|---------------|-------------|
| Project Type  | Master Plan |
| Project Scale | County-Wide |
| Project Year  | 2018 - 2020 |
| Year Adopted  | 2021        |

“As one of the few remaining largely-undeveloped counties in Florida, Nassau County has the unique opportunity to control its own destiny.”

- Barth Associates  
Nassau County PROSMP (2021)

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VISIONING

A hallmark of the PROSMP was its emphasis on community engagement, which included a series of public workshops, an online survey and statistically-representative mail survey, a Recreation Advisory Committee Meeting, as well as several interviews and focus group meetings. The county gathered input from a broad range of residents, ensuring that the master plan would reflect the needs and aspirations of the community as a region.

Two public workshops were held during the month of January 2020. Following a brief presentation, attendees of the workshop participated in four needs assessment exercises. The first exercise was focused on spending priorities and required participants to allocate a budget of 10 coins to their top priority preferences. Additional exercises included placing a dot next to facilities and amenities as well as programs that were important and either currently inadequate or not currently available. A final “dot” exercise focused on community benefits with options categorized as either economic, environmental, or social benefits. Following the event, attendees had an opportunity to list any other comments through feedback forms. The Recreation Advisory Committee participated in the same exercises and findings from the group member responses were compared and analyzed against those from the public workshops.

During the same month, a series of focus group meetings and stakeholder interviews took place over a three-day period. Attendees ranged from recreation providers and special interest groups to local government officials, business owners, and developers.

The project also conducted a random sampling and statistically-valid mail survey, which returned a total of 431 responses. Residents who received the survey had the option of completing the survey online or returning by mail using an included postage-paid return envelope. Additionally, a separate online survey captured 560 responses

This participatory process informed key recommendations, including the development of signature parks, expanded trail networks, and multi-purpose recreational facilities that cater to both residents and visitors. Looking outside of the feedback provided from these events and surveys, the PROSMP also includes a review of several background materials, studies, and reports, including a detailed review and summary of resident feedback that was compiled as part of a 2013 survey on County-wide recreation that was administered by Growth Management Staff and the Northeast Florida Regional Council and local stakeholders.



*Photos from one of the two Public Workshops showing attendees participating in the workshop exercises and engaging with the planning team.*

*Images source: Nassau County PROSMP (2021)*

# DATA-BASED APPROACH

Recognizing that County residents ranked Natural Areas and Nature Parks as the #3 priority in the mail survey, the County established a vision to preserve and protect 25 - 30% of its total land area through conservation “for wildlife habitat, scenic beauty, tourism, water quality, floodplain management, rural character, and resource-based recreation.” Interestingly, the PROSMP noted that only 7% of the lands in Nassau County were protected for conservation based on 2020 data from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, a far stretch from the statewide average of 27% for County lands.

In response to this, the PROSMP developed a Conservation Habitat Network (CHN) that was derived from “the location of jurisdictional wetlands; Special Flood Hazard Area/100yr floodplain (V and A zones); FNAI Rare Species Habitat; public and private conservation lands; local, State, and National parks; and critical upland areas necessary to provide connectivity and create functional ecological corridors.” The CHN, depicted on the next page, will help to guide the creation of an interconnected natural areas system that plays a vital role in floodplain management and supporting ecological functionality. The report section concludes by noting the need for the Comprehensive Plan and Land Development Code to be updated to include protections of the CHN and to proactively address floodplain management.

The PROSMP also directly references the County’s Comprehensive Plan and specifically the goals of the Conservation element, noting: “Many policies in this element are intended to safeguard natural communities and ecological systems through Land Development Code regulations intended to cluster growth or prohibit development in sensitive areas. “Green infrastructure” is to be preserved and expanded through the creation and protection of a network of waterways, wetlands, woodlands, wildlife habitats, greenways, and other natural areas that benefit the environment and economy as well as provide recreational opportunities.” In response to this, the plan encourages the County to acquire and manage lands that provide ecosystem connections.

One of the defining features of the plan is its equity-focused and data-centric approach. The plan utilizes geographic information systems (GIS) mapping and spatial analysis to assess existing park accessibility, identify service gaps, and prioritize under-served areas. This ensures that new park investments are strategically located to promote equitable access for all residents. Additionally, the plan incorporates Level of Service (LOS) analyses helping to evaluate the capacity of park facilities and recreational programs to keep pace with the county’s growing and diversifying population.

Additionally, the PROSMP evaluated public spaces based on Barth Associates High-Performance Public Spaces (HPPS) Criteria. This was defined as “any publicly accessible space that generates economic, environmental, and social sustainability

*The Nassau County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan (PROSMP) represents a fundamental shift in how public and private recreation demands are addressed from a county-wide perspective.*

- Sabrina Robertson  
Public Information Office  
Nassau County Manager’s Office

benefits for their local community.” Public spaces were evaluated on a scale from 1 to 5 (i.e., 1 - does not meet criteria to 5 - achieves criteria) and the environmental component specifically was analyzed using the criteria shown below. Of particular significance, existing public spaces were evaluated and scored based on critical land conservation considerations such as ecological and natural habitats linkages, support for biological diversity, groundwater recharge quality, energy and resource efficiencies, and environmental awareness and education within the community. The resulting scores for each performance evaluation criteria for each park/facility are illustrated in the image on page 25.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CRITERIA

- The space uses energy, water, and material resources efficiently;
- The space improves water quality of both surface and ground water;
- The space serves as a net carbon sink;
- The space enhances, preserves, promotes, or contributes to biological diversity;
- Hardscape materials were selected based on longevity of service, social/ cultural/ historical sustainability, regional availability, low carbon footprint and/or other related criteria;
- The space provides opportunities to enhance environmental awareness and knowledge; and
- The space serves as an interconnected node within larger scale ecological corridors and natural habitat.

*Environmental criteria used to evaluate parks and recreation spaces throughout Nassau County based on Barth Associates High-Performance Public Spaces (HPPS) assessment method.*

*Image source: Nassau County PROSMP (2021)*

Natural Drainage Systems was one of several environmental datasets that were analyzed as part of the Nassau County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan. The map right highlights wetlands and water bodies in the context of existing and proposed or undeveloped County/City Parks and Facilities, Conservation Parcels, and State Parks.

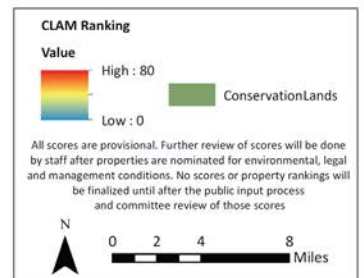
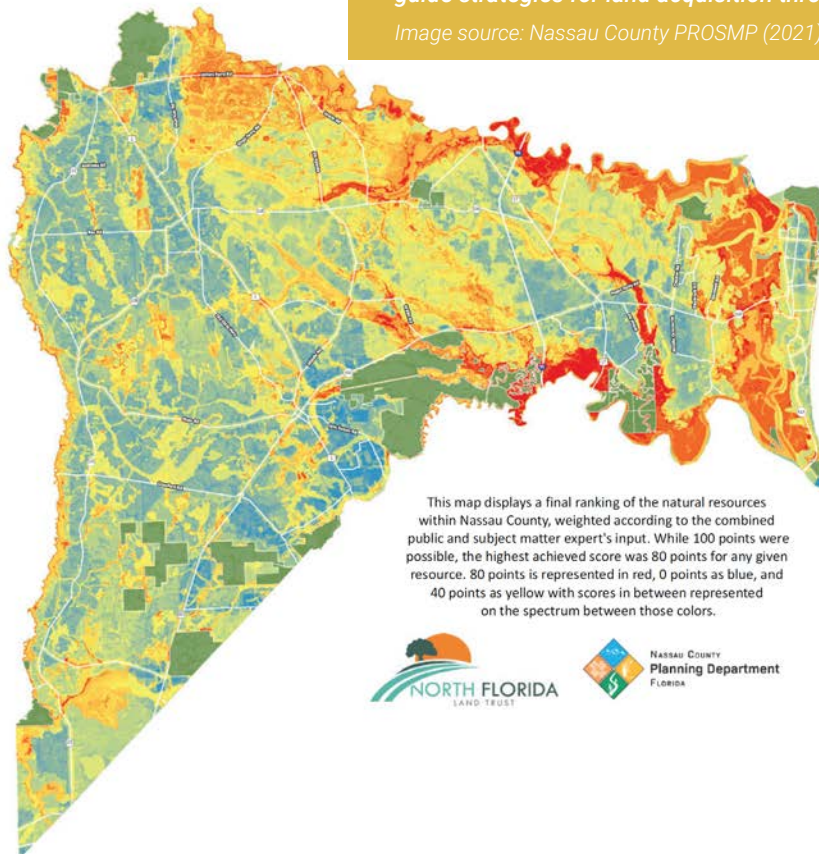
Image source: Nassau County PROSMP (2021)



The Conservation Habitat Network (CHN) map was derived from a series of environmentally-based datasets creating a range of Conservation Land Acquisition and Management (CLAM) rankings that serve to prioritize and guide strategies for land acquisition throughout the County.

Image source: Nassau County PROSMP (2021)

### Nassau County CLAM Ranking



| Does Not Meet Criteria   | 1.0-1.9 | 2.0-2.9 | 3.0-3.9 | 4.0-4.9 | 5.0 | Meets Criteria |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----|----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>TOTAL SYSTEM AVERAGES</b>   | 1.8     | 2.7     | 1.8     | 3.0     | 1.3 | 2.6            | 1.4 | 2.4 | 3.7 | 1.5 | 2.4 | 2.0 | 3.1 | 1.4 | 2.3 | 1.8 | 2.8 | 1.6 | 2.6 | 1.5 | 2.3 | 1.2 | 2.1 | 1.6 | 3.2 | 1.4 | 2.3 | 1.7 | 2.2 | 1.5 | 2.5 | 1.7 | 2.2 | 1.5 | 3.0 | 1.6 | 2.6 |     |     |
| <b>Economic Criteria</b>   | 1.6     | 2.2     | 1.7     | 3.1     | 1.1 | 2.3            | 1.3 | 2.1 | 1.8 | 3.0 | 1.2 | 1.6 | 1.8 | 2.4 | 1.4 | 2.0 | 1.6 | 2.2 | 1.2 | 1.8 | 1.3 | 2.2 | 1.0 | 1.4 | 1.4 | 2.7 | 1.4 | 2.0 | 1.7 | 1.7 | 1.3 | 1.9 | 1.7 | 1.7 | 1.1 | 2.8 | 1.4 | 2.2 |     |
| The space creates and facilitates revenue-generating opportunities for the public and/or private sectors   | 1       | 3       | 1       | 3       | 1   | 3              | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 4   | 1.2 | 2.5 |     |
| The space creates meaningful and desirable employment  | 1       | 1       | 1       | 3       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1.0 | 1.5 |     |
| The space indirectly creates or sustains good, living-wage jobs  | 1       | 1       | 1       | 3       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1.0 | 1.6 |     |     |
| The space sustains or increases property values  | 3       | 4       | 3       | 4       | 2   | 3              | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 2.3 | 3.1 |     |
| The space catalyzes infill development and/or the reuse of obsolete or under-used buildings or spaces  | 1       | 1       | 2       | 4       | 1   | 1              | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1.1 | 1.3 |     |
| The space attracts new residents   | 2       | 3       | 3       | 4       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1.8 | 2.9 |     |
| The space attracts new businesses  | 2       | 3       | 2       | 3       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1.3 | 2.1 |
| The space generates increased business and tax revenues  | 1       | 2       | 1       | 3       | 1   | 3              | 1   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1.0 | 2.0 |     |
| The space optimizes operations and maintenance costs (compared to other similar spaces)  | 2       | 2       | 1       | 1       | 1   | 3              | 2   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 2.1 | 2.7 |     |
| <b>Environmental Criteria</b>  | 1.7     | 2.7     | 1.0     | 2.0     | 1.1 | 2.6            | 1.4 | 2.7 | 2.9 | 4.0 | 1.6 | 2.7 | 2.1 | 3.4 | 1.3 | 2.6 | 1.3 | 2.9 | 1.3 | 2.3 | 1.3 | 2.4 | 1.3 | 2.4 | 1.3 | 3.4 | 1.3 | 2.3 | 1.7 | 2.4 | 1.1 | 2.7 | 1.7 | 2.4 | 1.3 | 2.9 | 1.5 | 2.7 |     |
| The space uses energy, water, and material resources efficiently   | 3       | 3       | 1       | 1       | 2   | 3              | 3   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 2.6 | 3.0 |
| The space improves water quality of both surface and ground water  | 2       | 3       | 1       | 1       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1.4 | 2.4 |
| The space serves as a net carbon sink  | 2       | 3       | 1       | 2       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1.5 | 2.6 |
| The space enhances, preserves, promotes, or contributes to biological diversity  | 2       | 4       | 1       | 3       | 1   | 3              | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1.4 | 2.7 |     |
| Hardscape materials were selected based on longevity of service, social/cultural/historical sustainability, regional availability, low carbon footprint and /or related criteria | 1       | 2       | 1       | 1       | 1   | 3              | 1   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 4   | 1.2 | 2.6 |     |
| The space provides opportunities to enhance environmental awareness and knowledge  | 1       | 3       | 1       | 4       | 1   | 3              | 2   | 4   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 4   | 1   | 4   | 1   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1.2 | 3.4 |     |
| The space serves as an interconnected node within larger scale ecological corridors and natural habitat  | 1       | 1       | 1       | 2       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 5   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 1.2 | 2.3 |     |
| <b>Social Criteria</b>   | 2.0     | 3.2     | 2.6     | 3.8     | 1.6 | 3.0            | 1.4 | 2.4 | 2.6 | 4.0 | 1.8 | 2.8 | 2.0 | 3.4 | 1.6 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 3.4 | 1.8 | 2.2 | 1.4 | 2.4 | 2.0 | 3.6 | 1.6 | 2.6 | 1.6 | 2.6 | 1.8 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 3.0 | 1.8 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 3.2 | 2.0 | 3.0 |     |
| The space improves the neighborhood  | 3       | 4       | 3       | 4       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 1   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 1.9 | 2.7 |     |
| The space improves social and physical mobility through multi-modal connectivity - auto, transit, bike, pedestrian   | 1       | 1       | 3       | 4       | 1   | 2              | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1.2 | 1.7 |     |
| The space encourages the health and fitness of residents and visitors  | 1       | 3       | 3       | 4       | 1   | 3              | 1   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 1.9 | 3.4 |     |
| The space provides relief from urban congestion and stressors such as social confrontation, noise pollution, and air pollution   | 3       | 4       | 3       | 4       | 3   | 4              | 3   | 4   | 5   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2.9 | 3.9 |
| The space provides places for formal and informal social gathering, art, performances, and community or civic events   | 2       | 4       | 1       | 3       | 2   | 4              | 1   | 4   | 2   | 5   | 2   | 4   | 2   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 5   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 5   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 1.8 | 3.3 |     |

*Final results from the High-Performance Public Spaces evaluation of Nassau County's parks and recreation facilities with criteria organized by economic, environmental, and social context. Each facility was scored based on existing conditions as well as future opportunity or potential. The table demonstrates the extensive list of criteria and depth of study that was employed in the assessment of each site or facility.*

*Image source: Nassau County PROSMP (2021)*

# IMPACTING CHANGE & PLAN PROGRESS

As part of its report, the PROSMP recognizes current initiatives that support the principles of the plan. In the case of conservation lands, the report highlights a partnership between Nassau County, Trust for Public Land (TPL), and North Florida Land Trust, that together were in the final stages of putting together a land acquisition program. Benefits of such a program would include an abundance of land for passive recreation, including multi-use paths and nature trails, camping, access to rivers for launching canoes and kayaks, horseback riding trails, hunting, picnicking, social gatherings, and more.

In an effort to initiate county action, the PROSMP lays out an organized set of policy update recommendations to the County's Comprehensive Plan, pointing to existing policy language, the specific sections where the language lives, and laying out recommended text revisions. The plan also encourages the County to integrate the vision into all elements of the Comprehensive Plan to "generate the most resiliency and sustainability benefits." An example: "the County's parks and open spaces can be used to treat stormwater, runoff and improve water quality; preserve significant wetlands and habitat; mitigate flooding; improve adjacent property values; preserve historical character; and catalyze economic development."

In addition to outlining high-level goals and estimated costs for a Phase 1 over the first 10 years, the report also provides action items for each along with a scope outline, resources or parties needed, and an overarching priority for each goal.

## 2. ACQUIRE LAND FOR NEW REGIONAL PARKS

### Initial Actions:

- Assign County project manager; and
- Prepare project charter and plan (scope and schedule) for approval.

### Outline Scope:

1. Refine parameters for new park sites, e.g. with or without recreation and aquatic centers (Parks Master Plan).
2. Refine conceptual plan to illustrate locations of sites (Parks Master Plan).
3. Estimate costs of land acquisition (Parks Master Plan).
4. Secure the money to buy the land, develop a master plan for the proposed site and to develop phase one construction of the approved master plan when finished.
5. Determine Phase One, 5-Year Budget.
6. Prioritize locations.
7. Identify candidate sites in collaboration with the Conservation and Land Acquisition Management Program.

8. Contact land owners re: interest, willingness to sell or donate.
9. Conduct due diligence, feasibility studies on top priority sites.
10. Negotiate and close purchase of sites.
11. Allow low-cost public access, such as trails.
12. Hold ribbon-cuttings.

### Resources:

- Project manager;
- Director of Parks and Recreation;
- Landscape architect, engineer, ecologist, geotechnical, etc.;
- Land acquisition specialist, e.g. land trust or real estate agent; and
- Land acquisition funding.

**PHASE ONE PRIORITY: Acquire 3-5 Sites within the Next 5 Years**

*The second of seven action items excerpted from the report's Action Plan, recommending the acquisition of land for new regional parks in the County. The action item details initial actions to be undertaken, an outlined scope, and resources that could apply as well as a phase one priority that includes a measurable goal from which to evaluate performance.*

*Image source: Nassau County PROSMP (2021)*

Following the project's completion, the Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan was adopted by the Board of County Commissioners on January 25, 2021. The following year, the plan received an Award of Excellence from the Florida Chapter of the American Planning Association on the basis of its innovation, superior quality, and transferability to other communities.

Consistent with the PROSMP, Nassau County has made several improvements to parks, including the installation of playgrounds at Bryceville and Hilliard Parks and shade structures at Yulee Ballpark, Callahan, and Hilliard. Additionally, the County has opened or broken ground on several new parks, including Nassau Crossing in Yulee, a 15-acre park that opened in October 2022 as well as Westside Regional Park, a first-in-class, 107-acre regional park that recently began construction and is projected to be completed in April of 2026.

## PROJECT AWARDS

**2022 Award of Excellence  
(Best Practices)**

American Planning Association (APA)  
Florida Chapter

[Learn more at nassaucountyfl.com](https://www.nassaucountyfl.com)

# CASE STUDY

## NORTH OKALOOSA COUNTY PLANNING STUDY

Okaloosa County, FL

### CONSULTANT TEAM

Inspire Placemaking Collective  
Hale Innovation

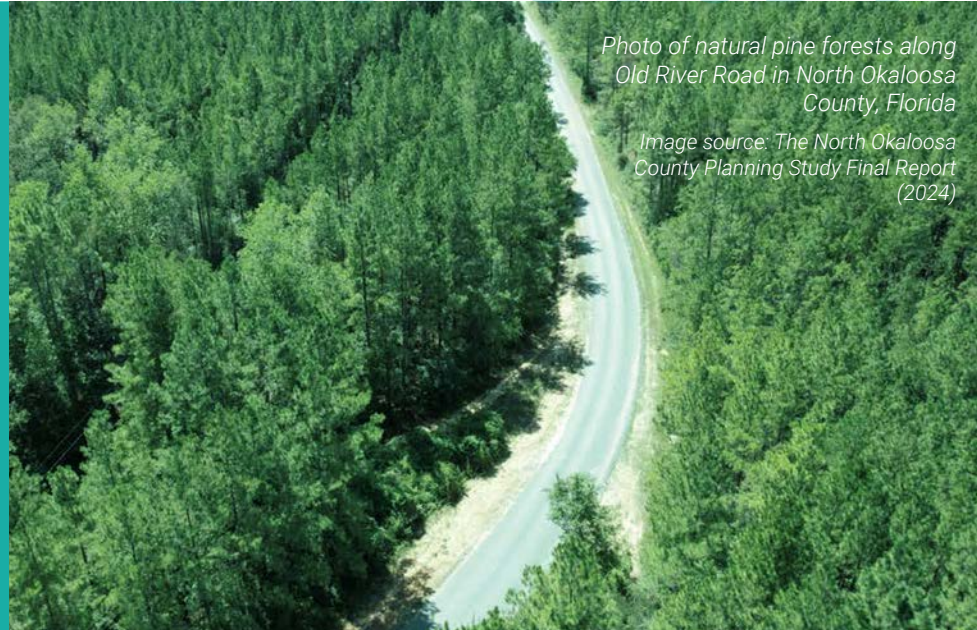


Photo of natural pine forests along Old River Road in North Okaloosa County, Florida

Image source: The North Okaloosa County Planning Study Final Report (2024)

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As Florida continues to experience significant growth, all counties feel the impact to some degree, including some of the more rural portions of the state. A core value of the Okaloosa County government is the “continual improvement of infrastructure; health, safety, and wellbeing of the citizens; preservation of natural resources; responsible economic development; leadership; and stewardship.” In an effort to ensure this value was being met, the County conducted the North Okaloosa County Planning Study in 2024 to examine growth impacts throughout the area and develop a long-term vision that balances the community’s desired character, infrastructure needs, environmental stewardship, and economic opportunity.

Public participation is at the heart of the projects, ensuring that the study reflects the values and aspirations of North Okaloosa County’s residents. Community workshops, stakeholder meetings, and online surveys provided opportunities for meaningful input. And feedback from engagement emphasizes the need for responsible development, better connectivity, and preservation of the county’s small-town charm. By incorporating public insights, the study fosters a shared vision for a sustainable future.

Additionally, recognizing the importance of North Okaloosa County’s natural assets, the study prioritizes land conservation efforts. Key strategies include protecting agricultural lands, conserving wetlands and forests, and promoting sustainable land-use practices. These measures help safeguard water quality, wildlife habitats, and recreational spaces, ensuring that future growth enhances rather than threatens the county’s ecological integrity.

In light of sprawling development trends impacting community character and straining infrastructure, plan recommendations include a tiered approach to managing growth within the context of the area’s constraints and opportunities, a revised Urban Development Boundary, and phasing out of conditional density allowances in agricultural and rural land-use areas.

**Project Type** Vision Plan

**Project Scale** Sub-County

**Project Year** 2024

**Completed** 2024

*“The idea...is to stay ahead of and guide growth that may be coming to Okaloosa County so that we can preserve the aspects of our quality of life that we really appreciate here, for example farming or just simply the rural character of our communities”*

- Former Commissioner Nathan Boyles /  
2025 Republican Nominee for Florida  
House District 3

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VISIONING

The North Okaloosa Planning Study implemented a robust community engagement approach to gather public input. Started in March 2024, the process included a series of town-hall meetings, online engagement tools, and other communication channels to ensure broad community participation.

More specifically, a total of 12 public meetings would be held with two town-hall meetings coordinated within just the first two weeks of the project. With an area population estimated to be just over 40,000 in 2023, the town halls demonstrated impressive attendance numbers with roughly 500 attendees participating, providing over 1,000 comments and marking up approximately 60 table maps as part of the workshop exercises.

The effort was also centralized on an interactive project website that included a project timeline, a portal with project information and documents, and several ways of capturing community feedback, including an interactive map, a survey feature, and idea wall. After just one month of the study commencing, over 3,500 comments had been submitted, and over 4,500 visitors (3,180 unique visitors) had gone to the website.

In addition to promoting and recapping events on the project website, local news outlets, including *Get The Coast* and *Holt Enterprise News* helped to make the community aware of upcoming events, provided summaries from past events, and ensured the community remained informed on the plan's progress through posted articles and social-media posts. Events and project updates were also disseminated on social media and on at least one occasion, a town hall was live streamed on the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners Facebook page, helping to increase accessibility for those unable to attend in person.

As part of the community visioning process, residents expressed a strong desire for agricultural and rural preservation, with roughly 28% of feedback organized around the theme. Key findings included the prioritization of rural character and agriculture, encouragement of equestrian farming, and support for agricultural growth, farmers markets, and local food supply. An additional 14% of community responses were concentrated around conservation priorities, including habitat conservation, prevention of clear cutting for development, wetlands preservation, and support for aquifer conservation and waterway management.

*Photos taken from several town-hall meetings, highlighting the impressive attendance and strong community desire to learn about and contribute feedback and insights to the North Okaloosa County Planning Study.*

*Images source: The North Okaloosa County Planning Study Final Report (2024)*



**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

You're invited to attend a Town Hall meeting kicking off the North Okaloosa Plan Study.

**THE AGENDA WILL INCLUDE:**

- An overview of the planning process
- Opportunity for residents to share their thoughts and help establish community priorities
- Additional ways to share ideas with the County and project team



**ATTEND A TOWN HALL!**

|   |    |  |
|---|----|--|
| <b>Monday, March 25, 2024</b><br>6:01PM – 9:00PM<br>Baker Recreation Community Center<br>5503 Hwy 4, Baker, Florida 32331 | OR | <b>Wednesday, March 27, 2024</b><br>6:01PM – 9:00PM<br>Crestview Community Center<br>1446 Commerce Dr, Crestview, FL 32539 |
|---|----|--|

**WE HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!**

**YOU CAME. WE LISTENED.**

Attend one of the upcoming **Progress Town Halls** to learn about the public priorities shared at the Kick-Off Community Events in March.

|  |    |   |
|--|----|---|
| <b>Monday, May 6, 2024</b><br>6:01PM – 8:00PM<br>Crestview Community Center<br>1446 Commerce Dr, Crestview, FL 32539 | OR | <b>Tuesday, May 7, 2024</b><br>6:01PM – 8:00PM<br>Baker School<br>1389 14th St, Baker, FL 32301 |
|--|----|---|

Following the Progress Town Halls, join us for a presentation exploring the following:

**How can we preserve Rural Land in North Okaloosa County?**

**Thursday, May 9, 2024**  
 6:01PM – 8:00PM  
 Crestview Community Center  
 1446 Commerce Dr, Crestview, FL 32539




**TOWN HALL #9**

**Join us for the Final Report Review**

We have actively engaged with the community, analyzed relevant data, and conducted thorough assessments. We are now eager to share and discuss our proposed solutions. Your input has been invaluable in this process and we look forward to further dialogue.

**Monday, October 14, 2024**  
 6:01PM – 8:00PM  
 Crestview Community Center  
 1446 Commerce Drive, Crestview, FL 32536

**RESCHEDULED DUE TO HURRICANE MILTON!**



Following the Progress Town Halls, join us for a presentation exploring the following:

**HOW CAN WE PRESERVE RURAL LAND IN NORTH OKALOOSA COUNTY?**

**TOWN HALL #5**

**Thursday, May 9, 2024**  
 6:01PM – 8:00PM  
 Crestview Community Center  
 1446 Commerce Dr, Crestview, FL 32539



*Examples of social media and other promotional campaign materials produced by the Consultant Team and used to inform community residents and other stakeholders about the North Okaloosa County Planning Study.*

*Images source: The North Okaloosa County Planning Study Final Report (2024)*

## DATA-BASED APPROACH

*“Baker is an important farmland, with rich soil that should be kept for farming. Our area is agricultural and Okaloosa County should keep this area as such, agricultural and rural to preserve green space...this is horse land, and our children and theirs deserve to be enriched with green spaces to grow, raise or live...if this area is to grow, please grow slowly and only with good infrastructure before growing.”*

- Anonymous Website Comment #3247

In an effort to identify the most suitable areas for future growth, the planning team utilized geographic information systems (GIS) to document development constraints and opportunities. Constraints comprised environmentally-sensitive lands, agricultural lands and particularly Prime Farmlands, and military mission compatibility (i.e., Eglin Air Force Base). Opportunities included existing and planned infrastructure, the County's Urban Development Boundary, and the Shoal River Ranch Gigasite, a 10,500 acre industrial site strategically located to attract economic development and job creation. As part of the process, layers were explored independently but were also superimposed on each other to help identify areas of opportunity and constraint.

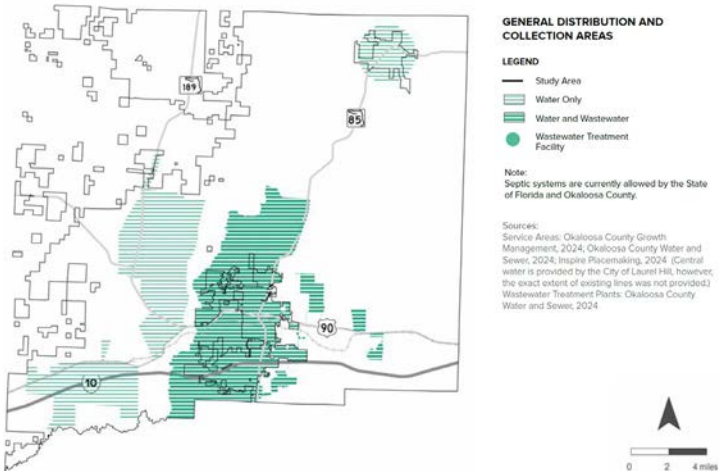
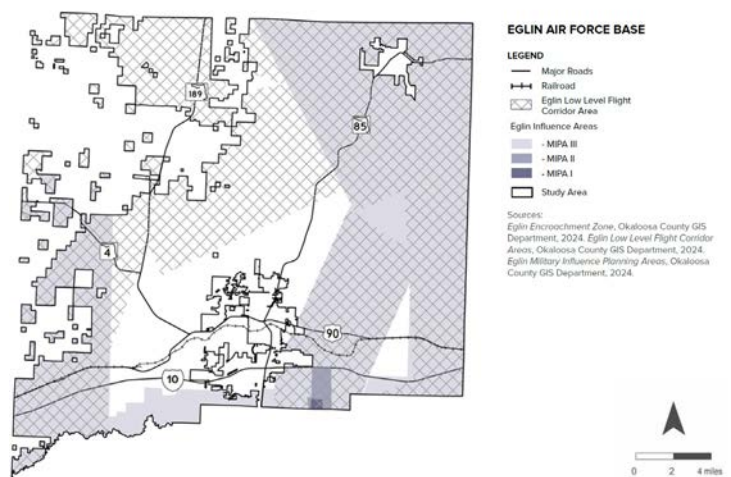
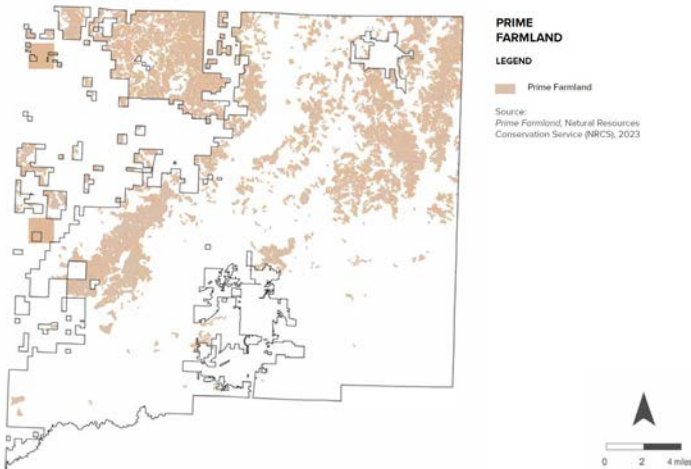
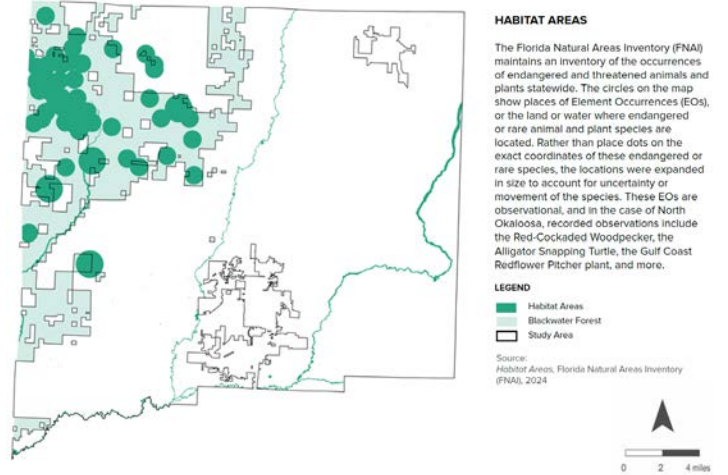
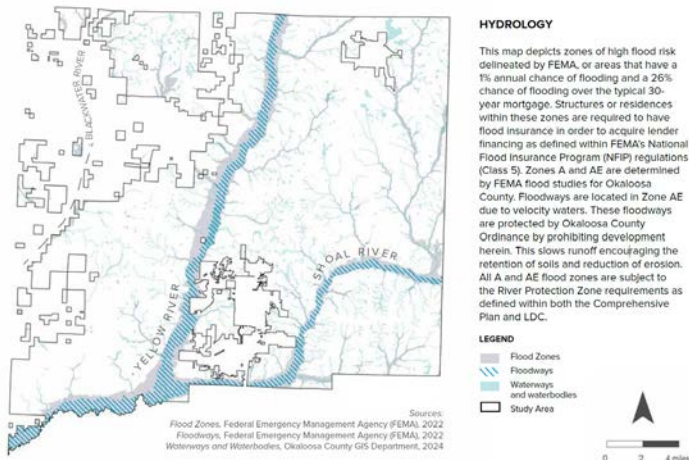
With regards to specific data, the report explored the area's hydrology, examining waterways and water bodies as well as floodways and flood zones delineated by the FEMA National Flood Hazard Layer; as well as wetlands using the National Wetlands Inventory provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and critical habitat areas, using Florida Natural Areas Inventory data. Additional constraint considerations included Prime Farmlands from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) as well as geographic data related to military operations associated with Eglin Air Force Base managed by the County. Geographic data representing the general distribution and collection of water and wastewater as well as the existing Urban Development Boundary were also managed and provided by the County, while the Shoal River Ranch Gigasite data was contributed by the local Economic Development Council.

The data, analysis, and resultant findings ultimately guided the development of a three-tiered map that would “serve as the foundation for modifications to the Urban Development Boundary. The tiers are defined as:

- Tier 1: Areas include existing water and public sewer infrastructure, to which all proposed development must connect. Requests for density or intensity increases are encouraged. Developers may need to pay for connections and/or capacity upgrades as required.
- Tier 2: Includes areas planned for water and public sewer infrastructure. Parcels abutting existing public sewer

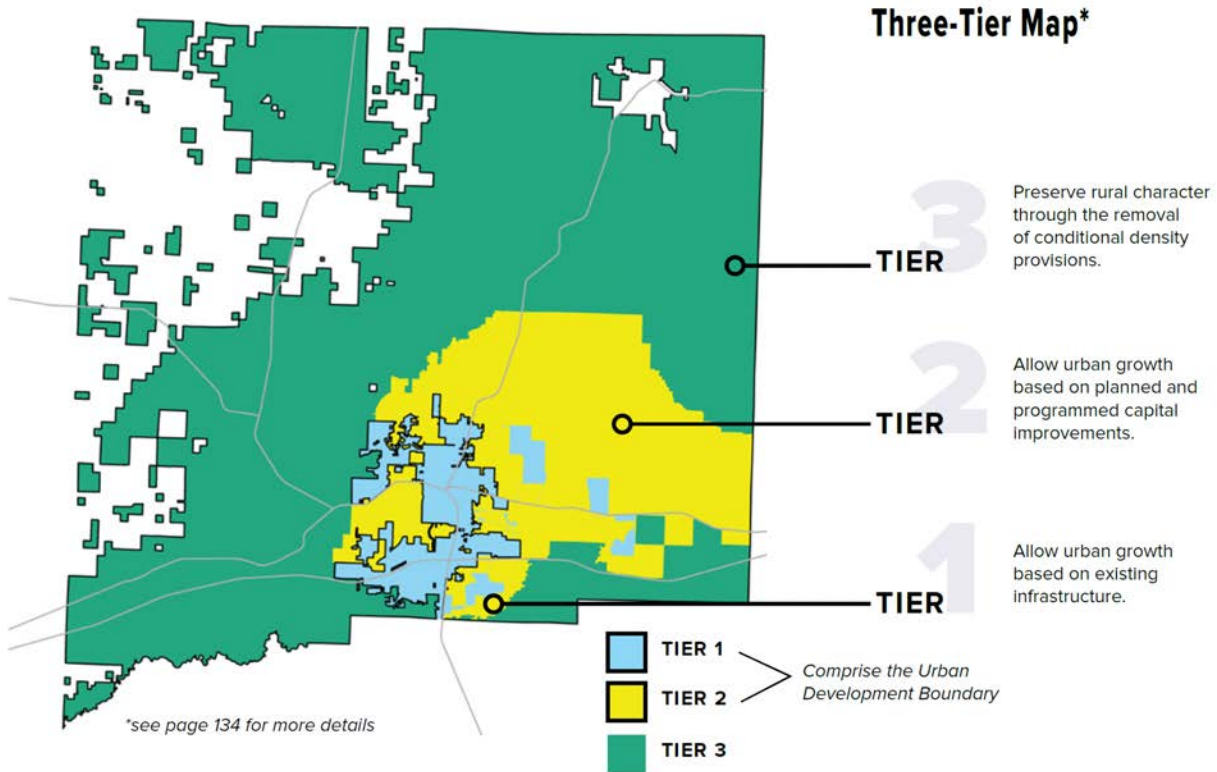
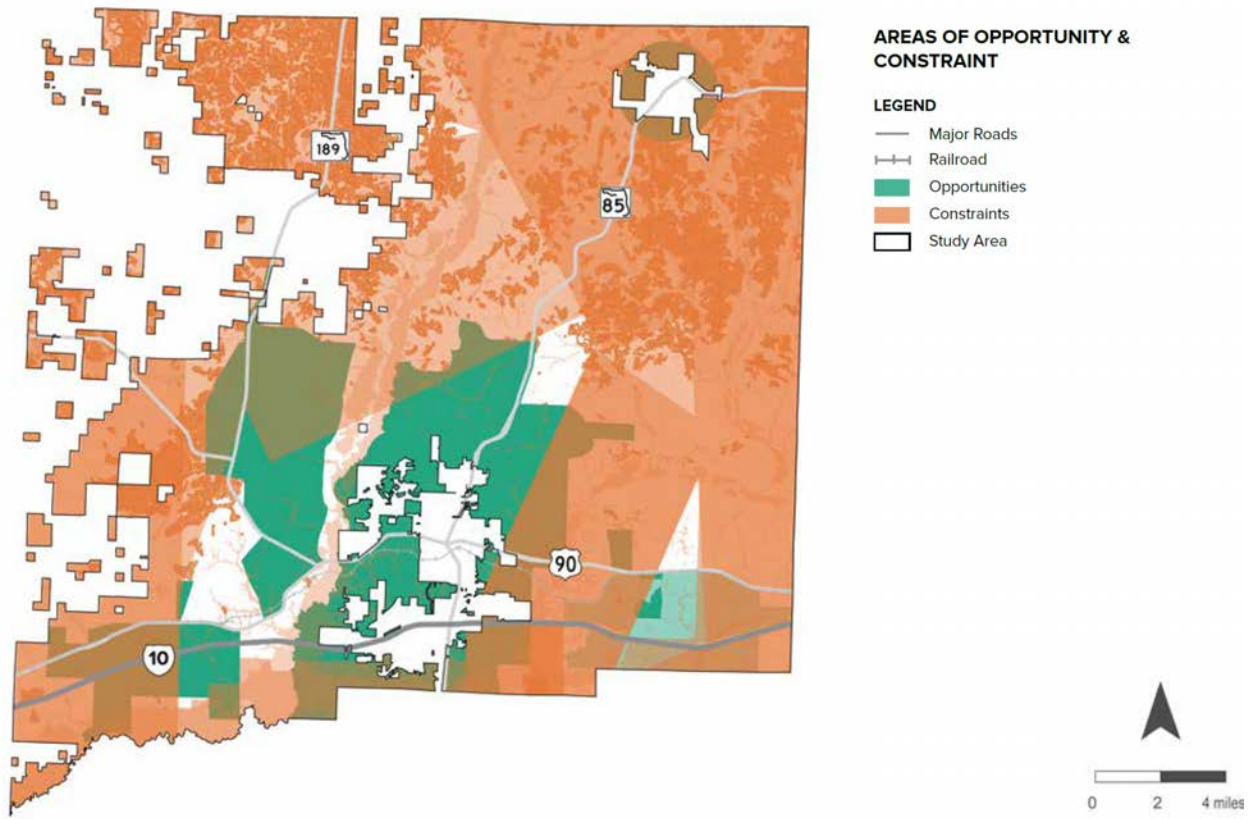
mains must connect to the system. New subdivisions on parcel/s, wholly or in part, located within 3 miles of a wastewater treatment plant must connect or provide dry lines. Development per existing entitlements shall be allowed on septic if public sewer is not available. No increase in density or intensity will be allowed without connection to public sewer at developer’s expense.

- Tier 3: Development on septic, consistent with entitlements at the time of application, is allowed. However, future land-use amendments to increase density or intensity shall not be allowed.



**Selection of geographic information systems (GIS) datasets used by the planning team to analyze areas of development constraint and opportunity.**

Images source: The North Okaloosa County Planning Study Final Report (2024)



*Top: Synthesis map of constraints and opportunities.  
 Bottom: Proposed Three-Tier Map to guide development and conservation efforts throughout the study area.  
 Image source: The North Okaloosa County Planning Study Final Report (2024)*

An example of the study's comprehensive plan review examining the Agriculture and Rural Residential future land use designations and the challenges associated with each. The report proposed remedies to assist in resolving the posed challenges.

Image source: The North Okaloosa County Planning Study Final Report (2024)

|                        | 'Agriculture' Future Land Use Policy Application  | Remedy   |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Agriculture (AG)       | Agriculture, which is intended to be 'rural', not 'urban', is allowed both inside and outside of the Urban Development Boundary (UDB). When certain conditions are met, a 1 DU per 1 Acre residential density is allowed, which is inconsistent with the intended agricultural character of the Future Land Use Category (FLUC). The conditions are easily met by most parcels outside the UDB. There are few additional policies regulating the development of 1DU/AC in agriculture FLUC.   | Effective April 1, 2026, remove conditional density provision of 1 unit per 1 acre in Tier 3.          |
|                        | 'Rural Residential' Future Land Use Policy Application  | Remedy   |
| Rural Residential (RR) | Rural Residential, which is intended to be 'rural', not 'urban', is allowed both inside and outside of the UDB. Current allowable densities within Rural Residential do not support the intended character of this FLUC. When certain conditions are met, a 1 DU per 1 Acre residential density is allowed, which is inconsistent with the intended rural residential character of the FLUC. The conditions are easily met by most parcels outside the UDB. There are few additional policies regulating the development of 1DU/AC in rural residential FLUC. In addition, the Rural Residential FLUC also allows for 2 Dwelling units per 1 acre, again, when fairly easily accessible conditions are met. | Effective April 1, 2026, remove conditional density provision of 1 unit or 2 units per acre in Tier 3. |

## IMPACTING CHANGE & PLAN PROGRESS

In an effort to translate the study's recommendations into action, the final report examined three major areas of the existing comprehensive plan for amendment: 1) densities for agricultural and rural residential land uses, 2) urban sprawl prevention policies/urban development boundary mechanisms, and 3) rural community overlays.

The report outlines a series of actions that should be taken to strengthen or reinforce many of the foundational principles laid out in the comprehensive plan, which was last updated in 2009. A form of implementation table clearly identifies the specific objective or policy from the comprehensive plan, the existing application or challenge/issue not being effectively addressed, and the recommended "remedy" or action that can serve to improve or resolve the issue. Last, the report provides a list of the 'Immediate Action Revisions' that should be made, which are consistent with earlier recommendations.

Completed in October 2024, the plan was presented to the Board of County Commissioners on October 15, 2024, who chose to acknowledge rather than accept the plan with several Commissioners noting concerns over too rapid of a timeline.

A local group of community members have separately initiated a petition in an attempt to have the plan adopted. With 464 verified signatures as of April 2, 2025, the group states: "We petition and request that you, the members of the Board of County Commissioners, as our elected representatives, accept and adopt and implement and abide by the recommendations and Action Plan as set forth in the North Okaloosa County Planning Study Final Report, dated October 1, 2024." The petition page hosted on [change.org](https://change.org) remains open to public comment and organizers continue to post updates, including upcoming Commissioner meetings where members are encouraged to attend and speak up to have the plan adopted.

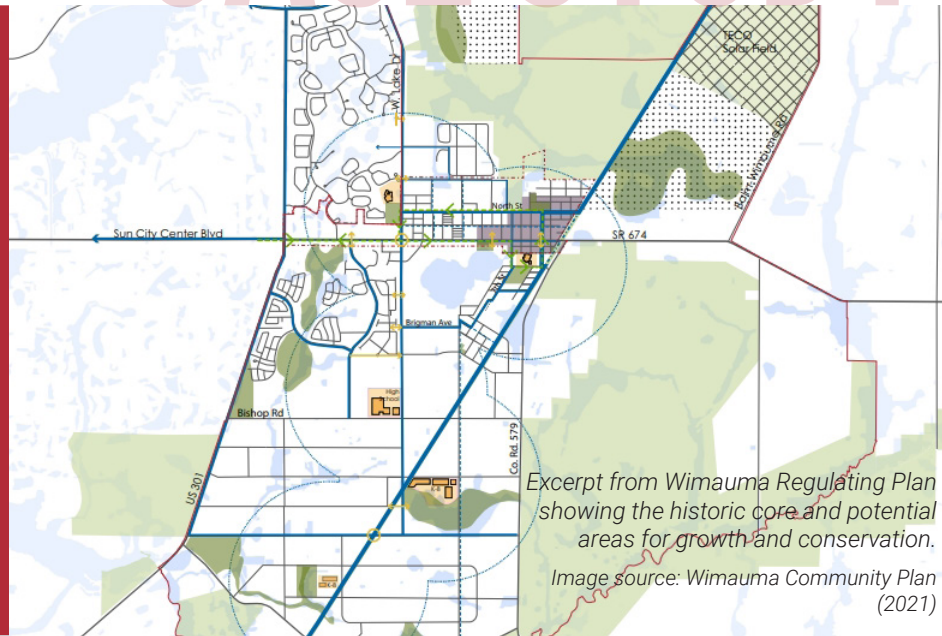
Learn more at [inspire-engagement.com/north-okaloosa-plan](https://inspire-engagement.com/north-okaloosa-plan)

# CASE STUDY

## WIMAUMA COMMUNITY PLAN & DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION ACTION PLAN Hillsborough County, FL

### CONSULTANT TEAM

Florida Center for Community Design + Research  
Urban3, University of South Florida (Downtown Plan)



|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Project Type  | Vision & Action Plan                        |
| Project Scale | Village (25 SQ MI)                          |
| Project Year  | 2019 - 2023                                 |
| Completed     | 2021 (Community Plan)<br>2023 (Action Plan) |

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Wimauma was founded in 1902 along a railroad route in southern Hillsborough County. Today, Wimauma's identity remains that of an agricultural community with a small town center. However, its population doubled between 2007 and 2019 and is projected to continue to grow, prompting the need for a community plan to shape future growth.

In 2007, Hillsborough County worked with residents and community partners to create a Wimauma Community Plan. The plan embraces the priorities of safety, traditional small-town character, clustered housing, preservation of native habitats, recreational opportunities, and developing commercial opportunities. In response to growth pressures and rapidly changing demographics, an extensive plan update process with residents and stakeholders was initiated in 2019. In 2021, the updated plan was adopted and codified within the County's Comprehensive Plan Livable Communities Element and Land Development Code. In 2023, a Downtown Revitalization Action Plan was created to implement the Community Plan.

*One of the things that is strikingly different from other communities is the presence of these nonprofit organizations and the ability of the people involved to come together and create a plan.*

- John Patrick  
Hillsborough County Community and  
Infrastructure Planning Director

The Wimauma Community Plan focuses on health, equity, resilience, and sustainability, celebrating Wimauma's agricultural heritage, rural natural resources, local businesses, and cultural legacy. As Wimauma grows, the community envisions an affordable, walkable community connected by a network of trails with thriving local businesses and farmers markets, that is welcoming to residents and businesses with access to improved well-being, housing, and opportunity. The plan recognizes the value of important natural resources, including Lake Wimauma, Little Manatee River, wetlands, and Environmental Land Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP) lands. Notably, the plan recommends a Wimauma Village Residential-2 Future Land Use Category to allow for future growth beyond the existing village in clustered development that protects at least 40% of land in open space, conservation or agricultural uses, and provides an option for transfer of development rights to receiving zones in the downtown area.

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VISIONING

To prepare the Community Plan update, in early March of 2020 a robust public participation process launched. Outreach included a three-and-a-half-day charrette of workshops, stakeholder interviews, surveys and presentations. Focus areas of the workshops and interviews included discussions of affordable housing, connectivity and walkability, access and safety, community form and character, community health, public realm and streetscape improvements, open space conditions, infrastructure to support the community vision, branding and identity for Wimauma, and new development and redevelopment opportunities. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the planning team used creative strategies to continue actively engaging the community. The team not only partnered with trusted community-based organizations but also facilitated more than 20 educational sessions that were delivered in both English and Spanish, allowing them to foster a dialogue with community members about values and opportunities around development pressure and land preservation. Feedback from the workshops and interactive sessions were synthesized into common goals that form the framework of the plan:

1. Enhance Wimauma's public realm and improve infrastructure.
2. Improve educational opportunities at all levels.
3. Revitalize the Wimauma Downtown by implementing the downtown master plan and overlay to enhance the appearance of the district, improve infrastructure, and promote business growth.
4. Provide opportunities for business growth and jobs in the Wimauma community.
5. Encourage affordable housing, diversify the population and income levels, and revitalize neighborhoods.
6. Ensure a balanced transportation system that reflects the community's character and provides for options including walking, bicycling, and transit.
7. Protect and enhance Wimauma's natural environment.
8. Create a safer environment for the Wimauma Community.
9. Establish the Wimauma Village Residential-2 (WVR-2) Future Land Use Category in areas previously classified as Residential Planned-2 (RP-2) inside the boundaries of the Wimauma Village Plan.

After the two-year Wimauma Community Plan process was completed, County staff, with consultants from the University of South Florida and Urban3, collaborated with community-based organizations such as Enterprising Latinas and the Wimauma Community Development Corporation, as well as the greater community to create the Wimauma Downtown Revitalization Action Plan. The Downtown Action Plan confirms and upholds the above goals, and implements the Community Plan.

*Photos from charrette workshops to create the Wimauma Community Plan.*

*Images source: Wimauma Community Plan (2021)*



*“Everybody, from a lawyer to a teacher to a landowner to a farmer to someone who has lived here for four generations, stepped up to get involved.”*

- Holly Jamison  
Wimauma Community Development Corporation  
Board Member (present Chair) and Resident

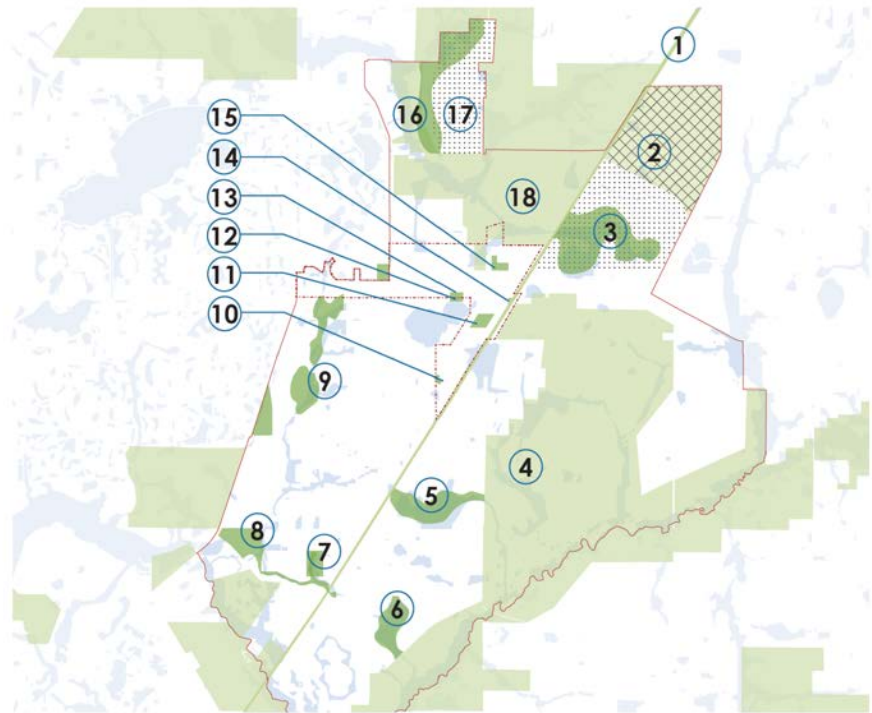
# PLAN AND DATA-BASED APPROACHES

“Protect and enhance Wimauma’s natural environment” is a core community value fostered by the plan. Wimauma’s open farmlands and natural environment are an asset to its residents and to Hillsborough County. This region has significant conservation areas, including ELAPP projects, wetlands, recharge areas, and areas important for ecosystem function, habitat, and open space, all of which are increasingly rare and valuable.

The Little Manatee Nature Preserve represents roughly 7,300 acres of conserved land as part of a cooperation between the County and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. The preserve represents much of the land situated to the south and east of Wimauma in the ELAPP. Additionally, much of Wimauma rests within the Little Manatee River Basin, which is closely monitored by the water district for quality and quantity of water flows. The freshwater flows from the river play an important role for wildlife habitat as well as the larger health of the Bay and Estuary.

The Plan addresses open-space planning recognizing the important role played in ecosystem services, stormwater management, aquifer recharge, carbon sequestration, and habitat protection. Key open-space areas are identified in the map and list below with the goal of restoring watershed quality from previous development and mining activities while minimizing the future impact of development on the surrounding natural lands and associated ecosystem function. The report notes, “While it is unlikely that many of the parcels within WVR-2 will be converted wholly into natural areas, this plan provides incentives and a method for owners and developers to transfer development rights to the urban core and to preserve low-density open space while maintaining the existing agricultural value. Homeowners value the natural surroundings and it is a high priority to protect wildlife corridors from development pressure.”

The Wimauma Village Residential-2 (WVR-2) future land-use designation borders existing development and large-scale conservation areas. It is outside of the urban service boundary but allows landowners to rezone (typically from agricultural to residential) under a set of specific conditions, including provision of infrastructure by the developer. To preserve the rural landscape, the Community Plan requires large areas of new development sites to be reserved for open space, conservation, or agricultural land, preferably at edges which are adjacent to rural land areas. Open space shall constitute no less than 40%



Wimauma Open Space

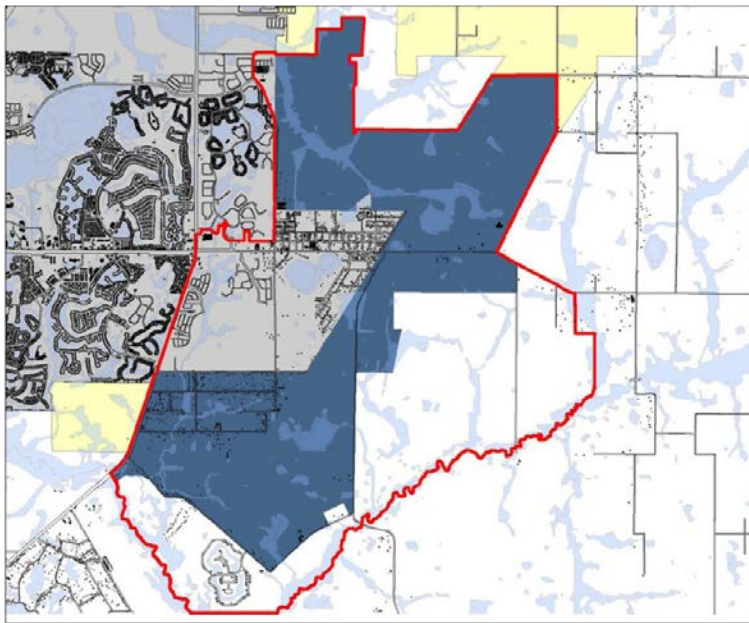
| Open Space                                       | Key Features  |
|--|---|
| 1. Wimauma Greenway Trail                        | Proposed component to Greenways Trail System (1995).  |
| 2. TECO Solar Field                              | While not technically protected land, acreage functions as open/undeveloped.  |
| 3. District 2                                    | Approved for ELAPP purchase. Recommend agricultural cooperative.  |
| 4. Little Manatee River Corridor Nature Preserve | Watershed recharge and protection area.   |
| 5. District 3                                    | Open space set aside, protect integrity of wetlands and forested areas.   |
| 6. District 5                                    | Open space set aside, protect integrity of wetlands and forested areas.   |
| 7. District 4                                    | Open space set aside, protect integrity of wetlands and forested areas.   |
| 8. District 4                                    | Open space set aside, protect integrity of wetlands and forested areas.   |
| 9. Dug Creek                                     | Open space set aside, planned development. Forest Brooke CDD  |
| 10. TITF/Murphy Land Act                         | Managed as conservation land.   |
| 11. Wimauma Park                                 | Open fields, Civic Center, RCMA Early Education Center  |
| 12. Lake Wimauma Point                           | Public access to Lake Wimauma with SR 674 pedestrian crossing.  |
| 13. Paseo  | 2 public right of ways to be captured as a community amenity/gathering space.   |
| 14. TECO Plaza del Sol                           | Adjacent to the greenway, a flood prone parcel with history to be activated as community space and stormwater management. |
| 15. Boys + Girls Club and Senior Center          | Indoor and outdoor facility for neighborhood youth.   |
| 16. Bullfrog Creek Mitigation                    | TDR conservation sending zone.  |
| 17. District 1                                   | Approved for ELAPP purchase. Recommend agricultural cooperative.  |
| 18. ELAPP Bullfrog Creek                         | Watershed and significant ecological conservation area.   |

**Proposed plan for open space as part of the Wimauma Community Plan identifying conservation lands and open space allocations to help protect the integrity of wetlands and forested areas while promoting aquifer recharge, carbon sequestration, and stormwater management.**

Images source: Wimauma Community Plan (2021)

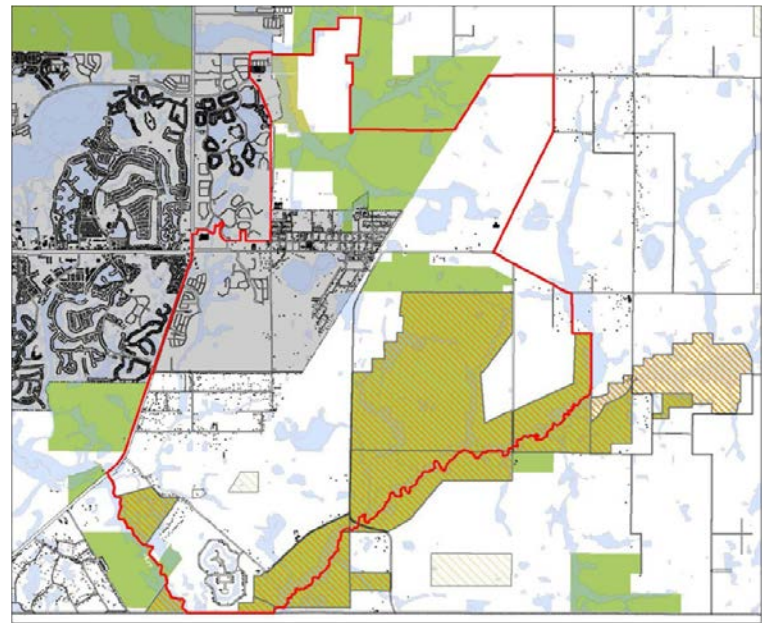
Mapping from the Wimauma Community Plan. At left, the Community Plan Boundary, location of the Urban Service Area, and the WVR-2 future land use area. At right, conservation lands, include County-owned ELAPP and Southwest Florida Water Management District lands.

Images source: Wimauma Community Plan (2021)



 Wimauma

 Community Boundary  WVR-2  
 Urban Service Area  RP-2



 ELAPP (County owned)  Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)  
 Mitigation Conservation Land

*“ We realized early on Wimauma would be hit with major development, and it would happen fast ... To change conditions in the community, we partnered with the Wimauma Community Development Corporation in calling for a new and updated community plan in 2019 that demanded certain and specific improvements in Wimauma’s downtown areas, where the highest concentration of poverty is. The plan sets the foundation [for] an improved quality of life in the community. ”*

- Elizabeth Gutierrez, Founder and CEO  
 Entering Latinas

of the gross site acreage for a planned development, with 30% of the open space being contiguous and the remaining 10% being internally located within planned neighborhoods. Additionally, the plan has a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Element to incentivize the transfer of density from this zone, to move potential development to “receiving” locations such as downtown, and encourage continued use of land for rural and open-space purposes.

The Downtown Action Plan includes an economic analysis by Urban3 of potential revenue generation and costs associated with various future development patterns. Findings indicate that allowing for sprawling development trends will have lower revenues (based on a lower tax base) than expenditures (community and infrastructure needs). To overcome the shortfall, the analysis concludes that a focus on downtown growth would be smarter economically as well as environmentally (see details on the next page).

As illustrated on the next page, a pattern emerges when considering future land-use types and their associated expenses and revenues per acre. Low-density and primarily residential uses are likely to produce low costs and even lower revenue per acre. Revenues rise as development intensity increases. Importantly, at some point in between Suburban High and Urban Low, revenue growth outpaces expenses and creates a surplus budget.

Exhibit 4: Expense and Revenue Per Acre

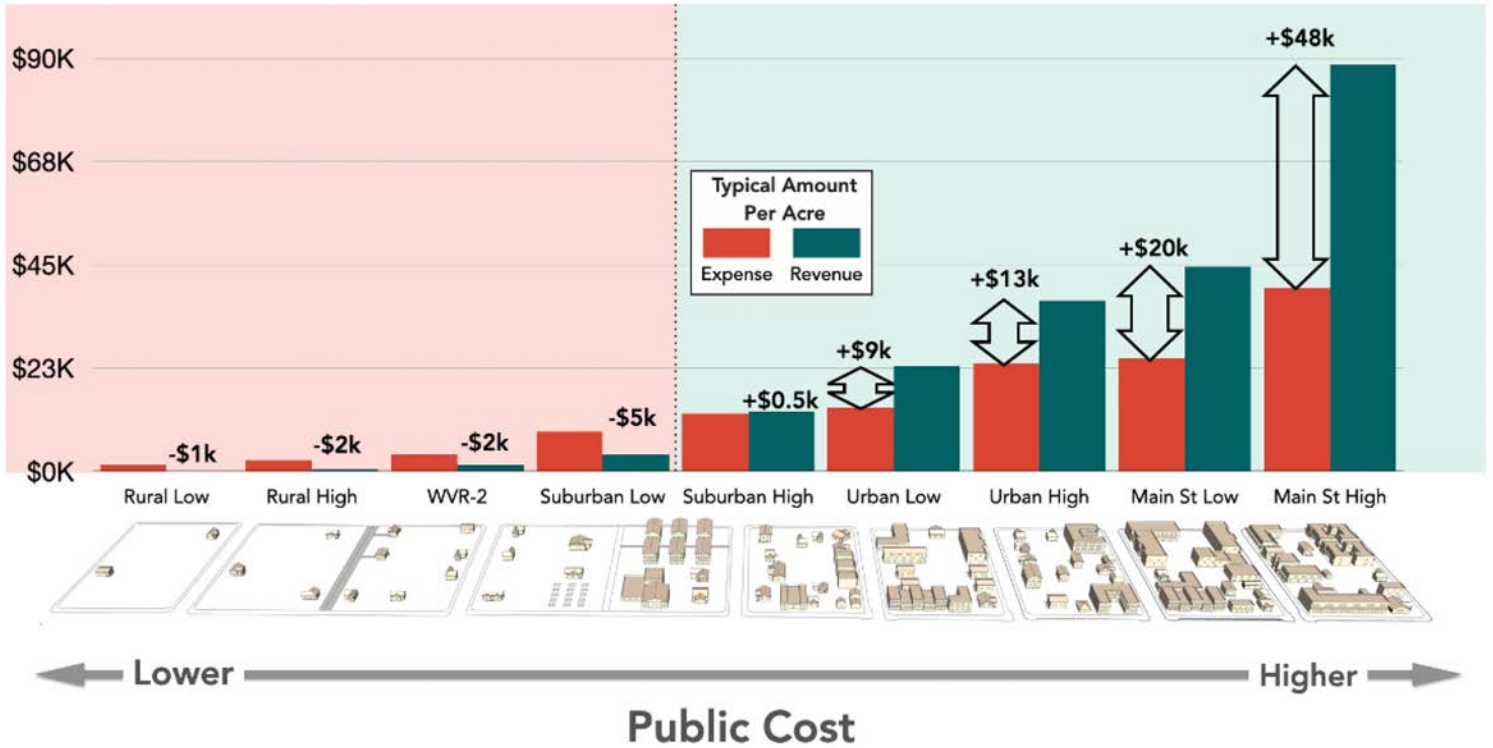
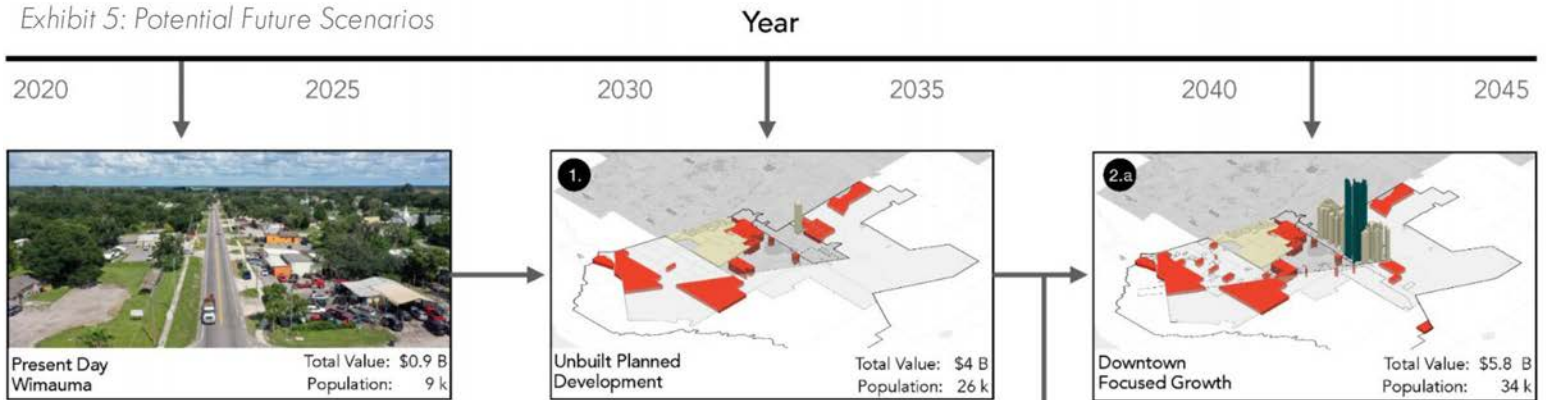


Exhibit 5: Potential Future Scenarios



Using Wimauma's approved Future Land Use map, typical cost and revenue per acre (by land use) were used to predict Wimauma's potential future growth scenarios.

The first scenario modeled all the unbuilt planned development approved for Wimauma. This is expected to increase the Village's total tax base value to \$4 billion, but the service and infrastructure demands generate more costs than revenue for the County.

Wimauma's potential future development paths range from continuing typical suburban low growth in the WVR-2 area to a more focused growth in the downtown core. "Main Street" style development (Urban Low to Main St High in Exhibit 4 above) can generate revenues exceeding costs per acre. Assuming the same population growth to 34,000, a scenario with focused growth in the downtown has the potential to increase Wimauma's value to \$5.8 billion, as shown in Exhibit 5 (2.a.). By utilizing Community Benefits and TDR as adopted in the Community Plan, Downtown Wimauma can achieve net positive contributions to the County's operating budget while maintaining its Main Street character, while concurrently advancing community goals for land conservation and preservation of the natural environment.

Images source: Wimauma Downtown Revitalization Action Plan (2023)

Source: Urban3 Estimates

# IMPACTING CHANGE & PLAN PROGRESS

As mentioned, the updated Wimauma Community Plan plan was adopted in October 2021 and codified within the Livable Communities Element of the County’s Comprehensive Plan and the Land Development Code. Locally, the Wimauma Community Development Corporation (WCDC) together with the Wimauma Community Plan Advisory Committee (WCPAC)(formerly Task Force) help to implement and track the goals of the Community Plan. Comprised of 11 local residents and business leaders, the group supports many of the plan’s objectives, including affordable housing, infrastructure enhancement, and economic development. Additionally, the Committee helps to monitor development projects, coordinate community engagement, and advocate for community benefits as part of future developments. The planning team also developed community ambassadors to serve as a mechanism to build trust within the community, often between several, competing agendas. In 2023, the

Advisory Committee helped in negotiations with Eisenhower Property Group to agree on several community benefits as part of a significant development project. The list included a 14-acre site for the County to develop a new school site, space for civic uses/amenities, development of a public park, and the creation of a multi-use trail that would connect County Road 579 to State Road 674. Community benefits served as a great tool for allowing flexibility for land conservation, small scale agriculture, and buffering sensitive lands.

The Downtown Revitalization Action Plan was created in 2023 as an initiative to implement elements of the Community Plan. Momentum sparked by the Plan has already inspired the County Commission to allocate more than \$100 million in capital projects. FDOT is designing Complete Streets concepts for Wimauma’s main thoroughfare, and Hillsborough County Public School District is constructing new schools. Additionally, the Bethune Park Master Plan was conducted in 2024, which included community workshops, and was unanimously approved in January 2025 by the Board of County Commissioners. The project calls for a new library and community center as well as several other park amenities and enhancements. A temporary library is expected to be completed in Fall 2025 with future construction projects still to be decided. The Wimauma Downtown Revitalization Action Plan was awarded the 2023 APA Florida Project Award for Neighborhood Planning.

Continuing growth pressures will mean that implementation will be an ongoing task; in 2024 the Board of County Commissioners directed planning staff to expand the County’s Urban Service Area as one of the ways to address growth. Such changes will need to be coordinated with continued community engagement and plan goals.

**Help Shape the Future of Bethune Park**

**Bethune Park Master Plan Community Kick-off Meeting**

**Monday, May 13, 6:30 p.m.**  
 Wimauma Elementary  
 5709 Hickman St., Wimauma, FL 33598

Join Hillsborough County community planners to learn about the Bethune Park Master Plan including:

- Project goals
- Timeline and next steps
- How to get involved

For more information contact, Jonah Katz, [KatzJ@HCFL.gov](mailto:KatzJ@HCFL.gov) or (813) 914-4501.

Hillsborough County Florida

**PROJECT AWARDS**

**2023 Award of Excellence (Neighborhood Planning)**  
 American Planning Association (APA)  
 Florida Chapter

Social media post promoting the Bethune Park Master Plan Community Kick-Off Meeting in May 2024.  
 Image source: Facebook: Wimauma CDC

Learn more at [planhillsborough.org/wimauma-village-plan](http://planhillsborough.org/wimauma-village-plan)

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