



1000 Friends Endorsement for Orange County Rural Boundary Charter Amendment

Florida's leading nonprofit advocate of planning for fiscally and environmentally sustainable communities, 1000 Friends of Florida, urges general election voters in Orange County to preserve rural and agricultural lands in the county by voting for Charter Amendment #9, Establishing Rural Boundary and Rural Area, on their November 5th ballot.

This amendment was placed on the ballot through a unanimous vote in July from Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings and five county commissioners. If approved by voters, it would require a majority-plus-one vote from commissioners to convert rural lands in the county to urban uses. This requirement would establish a higher level of scrutiny and set a higher standard of support for the conversion of natural and agricultural land to development.

Contrary to what some opponents have argued, this amendment would not stop growth and development in Orange County. Proposals that could earn the required majority plus one could proceed. Moreover, it would not apply to areas in the county where growth is planned. It would not infringe on vested property rights.

This amendment is consistent with provisions in 1000 Friends' Model Property Rights Element and our Citizen Planning Bill of Rights. In both, we called for super-majority approval of comprehensive plan amendments, major development approvals and rezonings. We based this recommendation on the principle that significant and permanent land-use changes deserve a higher level of scrutiny and approval from local leaders, who are elected to be stewards of their communities' land and sense of place.

Across Florida, communities have successfully implemented similar policies to add a layer of protection to agricultural and environmentally sensitive properties. While preserving those properties, these policies also encourage growth in urban areas with the public services in place to accommodate it. Seminole County voters enshrined a Rural Boundary in their County Charter in 2004, and county leaders have vigorously defended that area ever since.

If Orange County does not alter its current development pattern, it stands to lose more than 56,000 acres of undeveloped land by 2040, much of it to urban sprawl, to absorb its projected population increase of almost 500,000 more residents, according to a recent study by 1000 Friends and the University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning. This land lost includes almost 29,000 acres of agricultural land. By 2070, the same study shows Orange County could lose more than 120,000 acres of undeveloped land, including more than 71,000 acres of agricultural land — almost 90% of current farmland in the county — as the county's population nearly doubles from 1.4 million to 2.7 million.

However, by utilizing planning tools such as this charter amendment, and taking additional active steps to permanently protect high-priority agricultural and natural lands from development, such as fee simple acquisitions or conservation easements, the acreage lost

could be significantly reduced while still providing sufficient opportunities for economic and population growth in urban-designated areas of the county. In short, Orange County could accommodate the exact same projected population increase in coming decades yet save tens of thousands of natural and agricultural acres with better planning and conservation — all to the benefit of the county's environment, economy and the quality of life of its residents.

1000 Friends' strong support for Orange County's Charter Amendment is based on our decades of promoting conservation and responsible growth throughout Florida. Directing growth away from rural areas and toward existing urban areas saves taxpayer dollars. The cost of building and maintaining infrastructure is reduced, traffic is less congested, and water pollution and other impacts associated with urban sprawl are avoided. Also, reducing the impacts of development in rural areas preserves the ecosystem services associated with undeveloped land, including aquifer recharge, flood control, natural water purification, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, outdoor recreation and more. When the preserved land is agricultural, food security, farming jobs and a rural way of life valued by many of Florida's citizens is sustained.

This smarter approach to growth not only reduces the impact of development on vulnerable lands, waters and wildlife; it also cushions the blow to taxpayers, who don't get stuck with the bill for stretching public services to distant areas.

With so much at stake — the future of Orange County's environment, economy and quality of life — 1000 Friends of Florida urges general election voters to vote YES on Charter Amendment #9, Establishing Rural Boundary and Rural Area, on their November 5th ballot.