



1000 Friends of Florida Endorses Protect Clay County for the November 2024 Ballot

Florida's leading nonprofit advocate of planning for fiscally and environmentally sustainable communities, 1000 Friends of Florida, urges general election voters in Clay County to increase funding to protect local water quality, wildlife habitat, and working forests and farms by voting YES FOR BONDS on their November 5th ballot.

Clay County Commissioners voted unanimously in July to put the Protect Clay County measure on the November ballot. It would authorize Clay County to issue general obligation bonds worth up to \$45 million to establish a local land conservation program. Lands would be chosen to protect water quality in rivers, lakes, creeks and drinking water sources; conserve wildlife habitat, natural areas and working forests and farms; reduce flooding; and expand outdoor recreation.

Whenever possible, these locally raised funds would be combined with matching state, federal and private funds to purchase and manage environmentally sensitive land from willing sellers that is at risk of development, or to buy development rights from willing sellers for working farms and forests or other land, which would remain on the tax rolls in private ownership and management. Both approaches respect landowners and property rights.

If at least 50% of Clay voters approve the ballot measure, the bonds would be retired through an additional property tax of a maximum of 0.2 mills, or 20 cents per every \$1,000 in property value. At this rate, the average homeowner in the county would pay \$33 more a year over the 20 year life of the bonds, or \$2.75 a month. A citizen oversight committee for the program would be created, all expenditures would be publicly disclosed, and annual audits would be conducted to ensure a transparent and accountable process.

Recognizing the multiple benefits of preserving natural lands, counties throughout Florida, including several of Clay's neighbors, have created their own local land conservation programs. Volusia County's program dates from 2000, and was last reauthorized in 2020 with the support of 72% of voters. Alachua County's program also dates from 2000, and was reauthorized by voters in 2008, 2016 and 2022. Nassau County voters authorized their own program in 2022.

According to the Clay County Land Conservation Blueprint for Success created this year for the county by North Florida Land Trust, Clay County lags comparable counties in total land in conservation and lands acquired by the county for conservation. Yet Clay County's election results from 2014, when more than two-thirds of its voters supported passage of an amendment to the Florida Constitution dedicating state funds for water and land conservation, is a clear sign of strong local support for that purpose.

Local land conservation programs give counties a leg up on the competition when seeking matching funds from private, federal or state land conservation programs, including Florida Forever and the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program. In recent years, Florida lawmakers have allocated more than \$2 billion to land conservation, creating a huge source of matching funds for local governments with their own programs. Much of that funding has been targeted toward preserving the Florida Wildlife Corridor, a network of high-value environmental land critical to the survival of 131 imperiled animal species. The

Corridor includes more than 58,000 acres of land in Clay County, enhancing the opportunity for the county to qualify for matching state funding for land conservation.

While Florida is growing fast, Clay County is growing even faster. Between July of 2020 and 2023, Clay grew by 13,488 residents, or 6.2%, compared to 4.7% in the state as a whole. This population increase raises development pressure in Clay. It heightens the risk that environmentally sensitive land, and the many benefits it contributes to the county's high quality of life, will be lost forever if it is not protected.

1000 Friends' strong support for Clay County's ballot measure is based on our decades of promoting conservation and responsible growth throughout Florida. When critical natural lands are protected from development, more growth is directed toward already developed areas with the infrastructure to support it. This smarter approach 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.

We urge Clay County voters to make a smart, timely investment in their water quality, wildlife habitat, and working forests and farms by voting YES FOR BONDS on their November 5th ballot.