



## **1000 Friends of Florida endorses Osceola County's land conservation ballot measure**

Florida's leading nonprofit advocate of planning for fiscally and environmentally sustainable communities, 1000 Friends of Florida, urges general election voters in Osceola County to approve funding to protect land for water quality, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation by voting YES FOR BONDS on their November 5<sup>th</sup> ballot.

Osceola County Commissioners voted this summer to place a referendum on the November ballot that would extend the County's Environmental Lands Conservation Program, known as SAVE (Save and Value Environment). Approval from at least 50% of Osceola voters would authorize the County to issue \$70 million in bonds to acquire and manage ecologically important lands.

If at least 50% of Osceola voters approve the ballot measure, the bonds would be retired through an existing property tax levy of 0.25 mills, or 25 cents per every \$1,000 in property value. Taxes would not be increased. The owner of a house assessed at \$400,000 would continue paying \$100 a year, or \$8.33 a month, to finance the ongoing purchase and protection of ecologically important lands. All spending in the program would be fully and publicly disclosed.

Last authorized by a resounding two-thirds of County voters in 2004, SAVE has acquired more than 3,300 acres in the County to protect water resources, preserve wildlife habitats, provide public green spaces and support passive, resource-based recreation. But funding for the program is set to expire next year.

Environmental conservation areas in Osceola County acquired through SAVE include the Camp Lonesome Conservation Area, Cherokee Point Conservation Area, Lake Lizzie Conservation Area, Lake Runnymede Conservation Area, Shingle Creek Regional Park, Brownie Wise Park and Twin Oaks Conservation Area. A Land Conservation Advisory Board, whose nine citizen members are appointed based on their expertise in conservation, land acquisition and management, ecotourism, environmental education and other relevant issues, recommends properties for protection to County Commissioners.

Recognizing the multiple benefits of preserving natural lands, counties throughout Florida have created or renewed their own local land conservation programs. In the last two election cycles, at least eight counties have established or extended local land conservation programs. Osceola County's election results from 2014, when almost 79 percent 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. A modest local investment can leverage as much or more from those other programs, making a county program a buy-one-get-one-free deal, or better, for taxpayers.

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 earmarked to preserve land within the Florida Wildlife Corridor, the 18-million-acre network of

connected natural and agricultural lands whose protection is critical not only for endangered and threatened species, but also for water quality and resilience to storms and sea level rise. Osceola County includes nearly 674,000 acres in the Florida Wildlife Corridor, and almost two-thirds — roughly 442,000 acres — are currently unprotected. This makes preserving those lands an urgent priority for the County, but also a huge opportunity given State leaders' interest in contributing to that goal.

While Florida is growing fast, Osceola County is growing even faster. Its population topped 437,000 residents in 2023, a 62 percent jump since 2010. This population surge raises development pressure in the County. It heightens the risk that environmentally sensitive land, and the many benefits it contributes to the County's quality of life, will be lost forever if it is not protected.

1000 Friends' strong support for Osceola 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 Osceola County voters to make a smart, timely investment in their water quality, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation by voting YES FOR BONDS on their November 5<sup>th</sup> ballot.