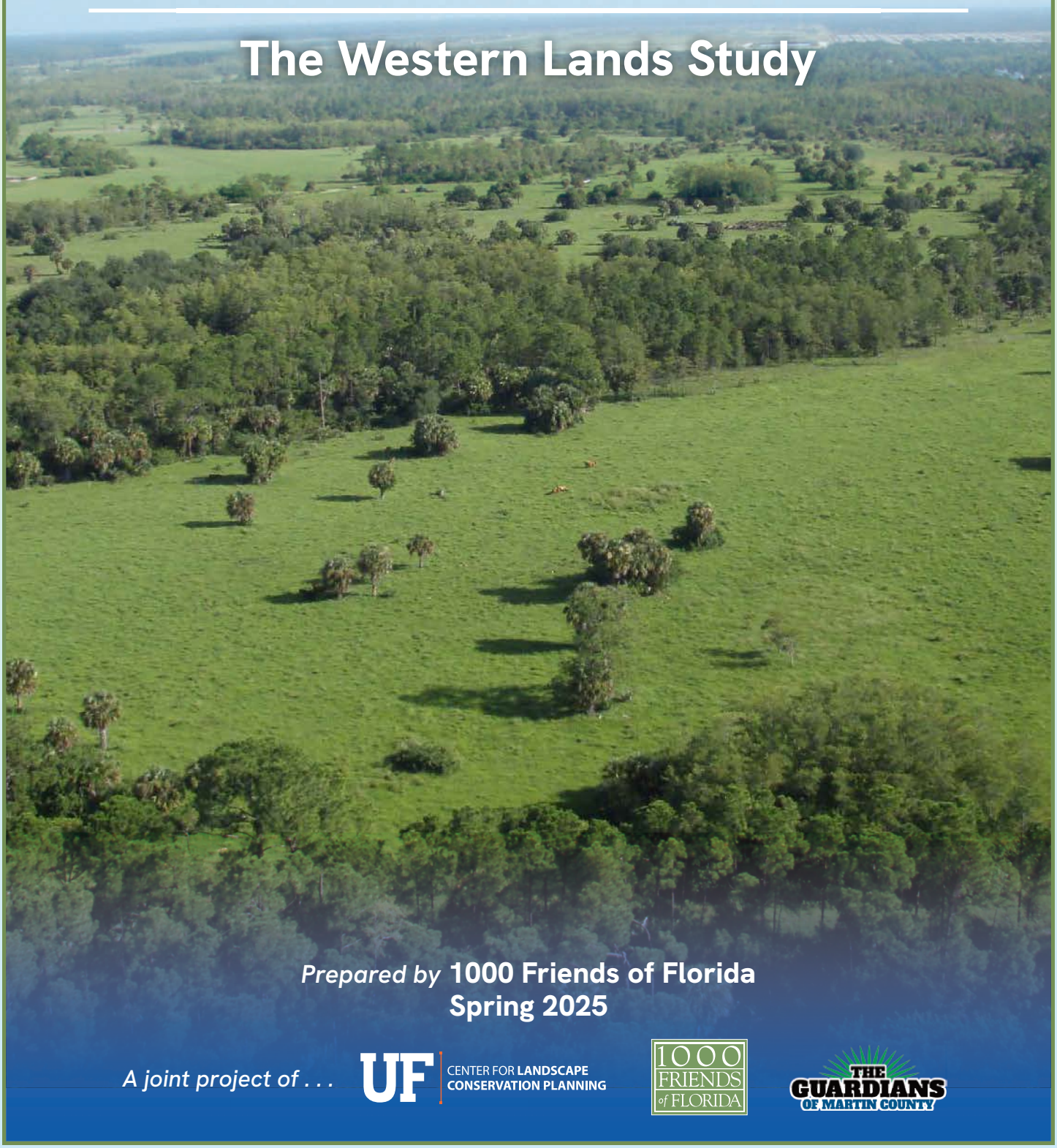
MARTIN 2040

The Western Lands Study



Prepared by **1000 Friends of Florida**
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A joint project of . . .

UF CENTER FOR LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION PLANNING

1000 FRIENDS of FLORIDA

THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY

Background

In 2023, the University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning and 1000 Friends of Florida released *Florida's Rising Seas: Mapping Our Future*. This included the GIS-based studies, *Sea Level 2040* and 2070, focusing on depicting the intersection between population growth, sea level rise, and development patterns in Florida. Subsequently, the Guardians of Martin County, a non-profit organization "dedicated to helping shape a positive future for Martin County," contracted with the University of Florida and 1000 Friends of Florida to conduct a 2040 analysis using additional local data, and focus on potential impacts of development on the western portion of the county.

This effort is a GIS-based analysis focusing on the intersection between population growth, development patterns, and sea level rise in Florida. The 2040 study includes a baseline and two future scenarios. The Sprawl Scenario assumes that current patterns of development continue, and all high priority but currently unprotected natural lands are open for development. The Conservation Scenario assumes that priority natural lands will not be developed, and that future development will be more compact.

Findings

Based on data provided by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida, the population of Martin County is expected to increase by about 11% between now and 2040, from 162,847 in 2023 to 181,300 in 2040. By 2070, the county's population is expected to increase by an additional 14 % to 206,432 people (Table 1). Under the current development scenario, the 2040 population would lead to an increase of just under 6,000 acres of additional developed land over the next 15 years. Sea level rise is expected to result in inundation of 2,567 acres or 0.61% of the total land area of the county, with most of the inundation occurring in areas that are already protected through public ownership or conservation easements. (Table 2)

The projected population growth and – to a lesser extent, sea level rise - could result in a significant change in Martin County's landscape over the next few decades. However, the studies demonstrate that with certain planning tools in place, there is a potential for Martin County to ensure long-term preservation of its significant inventory of environmentally sensitive and working farm lands which could otherwise be susceptible to sprawl over the long term, if not appropriately protected. By directing development to absorb population growth to urban areas with the infrastructure to support it, with only modest increases in overall density that would not significantly alter the character of communities, the county could largely preserve its treasured western lands.

Conclusions

- Martin County can fully absorb its projected population growth by 2040 within its existing urban services districts with a modest 30% increase in development density.
- The overwhelming majority of land outside Martin County's existing urban services districts has been identified as environmentally valuable and a priority for preservation under local, state and federal programs.

Population

As of the 2020 Census, Martin County's population was 158,658. The median age was 46 years, slightly higher than the state average of 43.

Economics

The median household income in Martin County in 2020 was $77,894, whereas the median household income in FL was $73,311.

The employment rate in Martin County, meaning the labor participation rate of adults aged 16-64, in 2020 was 49.0% compared with about 52% throughout the state.

Education

Martin County residents are more likely to hold a bachelor's degree than in other areas of the state: 41.6% compared to 35% statewide.

Housing

About 78% of Martin County residents own their homes, compared with an average of 68% in other counties across the state.

As recorded in the 2020 Census, there were 81,371 housing units and just over 69,000 of those were occupied, predominantly by married couples and families.

Diversity

Martin County is predominantly white, with roughly 11% of the population being minority population (African American or Hispanic).

Leading Economic Sectors

Sales and Management Occupations are the leading employment types for Martin residents.

TABLE 1. POPULATION PROJECTIONS 2040 AND 2070

	2023 Population Baseline	BEBR (2023) Population Projection	Total Population Change	Percent Population Change
2040	162,847	181,300	18,453	11%
2070	162,847	206,432	43,585	27%

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Opportunities to Protect Rural Areas

According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, the amount of land in agricultural production in Martin County increased by 10% between 2017 and 2022, but there was a decrease in the market value of agricultural goods. Although production costs decreased, so did net farm income, the latter by about 39%. Most farms in the county are less than 50 acres in size, which might present a challenge when considering the potential for protecting large swaths of land unless multiple tracts are combined or there is coordination among adjacent owners.

In 2019, approximately 167,338 acres, or 40% of the county's land, was said to be in agricultural production other than timber and 134,387 acres, or 31.55%, were natural areas or timber. However, the majority of agricultural and natural lands in Martin County are not protected through conservation easements or fee-simple holdings, meaning they are susceptible to potential development if they are no longer farmed or acquired for protection.

In many communities in Florida, development pressure is decimating natural areas at a rapid pace. However, due to existing policies within the county's comprehensive growth management plan, Martin County has a unique opportunity to plan for growth within, and adjacent to, its existing urban areas, allowing natural and agricultural areas to remain rural. This approach to growth management not only protects agriculture; it has the potential to protect the historic and urban significance of areas such as Jupiter Island, Stuart and Indiantown, reduce commuting time, decrease emergency response time and is less expensive to build and maintain.

If natural and agricultural lands are paved rather than protected, the wide range of valuable environmental and economic benefits they provide will be lost. These benefits, known as ecosystem services, include recharging the underground water supply, reducing nutrient pollution in surface waters from stormwater runoff, mitigating flooding by absorbing stormwater, preserving wildlife habitat, enhancing biodiversity, and sequestering carbon. Beyond the environmental benefits, protecting undeveloped land also provides economic benefits, sustaining agriculture and its economic and lifestyle benefits, and expanding outdoor recreational opportunities for residents and tourists alike.

Forested lands, whether natural or for silviculture, are especially valuable for their benefits to water quality and quantity. They naturally purify water and gradually release it into waterways and the atmosphere. They also reduce erosion and sediment in waterways. Losing forested land means losing those benefits.

Based on project analysis, the mid-term planning horizon (2040) results in 5,540 acres of currently undeveloped land being lost to development under the sprawl scenario. The analysis also shows that prioritizing infill and utilizing land protection tools such as fee simple acquisition and conservation easements could result in an increase of 17,891 acres of natural land and 67,828 acres of agricultural land being protected under the conservation scenario. When combined with currently protected lands, this represents more than 40% the county's total land (Table 2). Under this scenario, only 3,714 acres are converted into new developments.

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TABLE 2. LAND TYPES 2040

	2023	% of Total Acreage	Sprawl 2040	% of Total Acreage	Conservation 2040	% of Total Acreage
Developed	42,756	10.03%	48,296	11.42%	46,470	10.99%
Protected Natural Land	59,356	13.93%	57,439	13.58%	77,247	18.27%
Protected Agriculture	35,705	8.38%	35,705	8.44%	103,533	24.48%
Agriculture	157,626	36.99%	154,024	36.42%	88,450	20.92%
Other*	39,722	9.32%	33,818	8.00%	13,582	3.21%
2019 Open Water	91,023	21.36%	91,023	21.52%	91,023	21.52%
Sea Level Inundation: Protected Lands	0	0.00%	1,917	0.45%	1,955	0.46%
Sea Level Inundation: All Other Land Uses	0	0.00%	650	0.15%	612	0.14%
Total Acreage	426,188	100.00%	422,872	100.00 %	422,872	100.00 %
Total Land Acreage	335,165	78.64%	329,282	77.87%	329,282	77.87%
Total Sea Level Inundation	0	0.00%	2,567	0.61%	2,567	0.61%
Total Open Water including SLR	91,023	21.36%	93,590	21.96%	93,590	21.96%

TABLE 3. DEVELOPMENT DENSITIES

2023 Gross Development Density	3.09 residents per developed acre
Acres Needed to Accommodate 2040 Population	5,972 acres
Additional development at a 30% Higher Gross Development Density (Alternative)	4.02 residents per developed acre
Acres Needed to Accommodate Projected Population under higher development density	4,594 acres

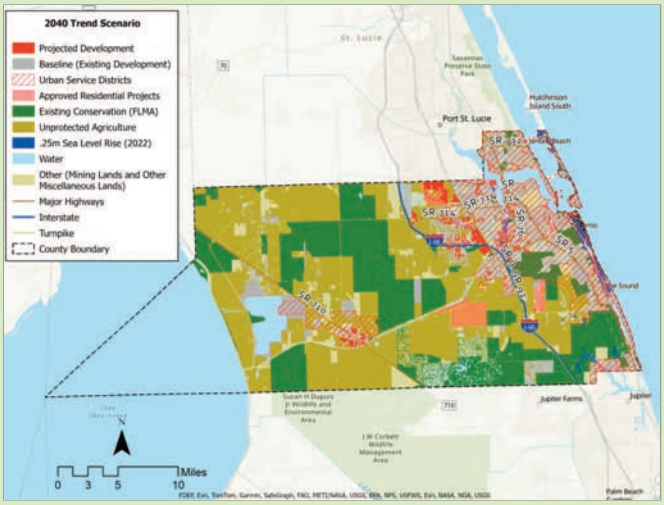
continued

Sea Level Rise

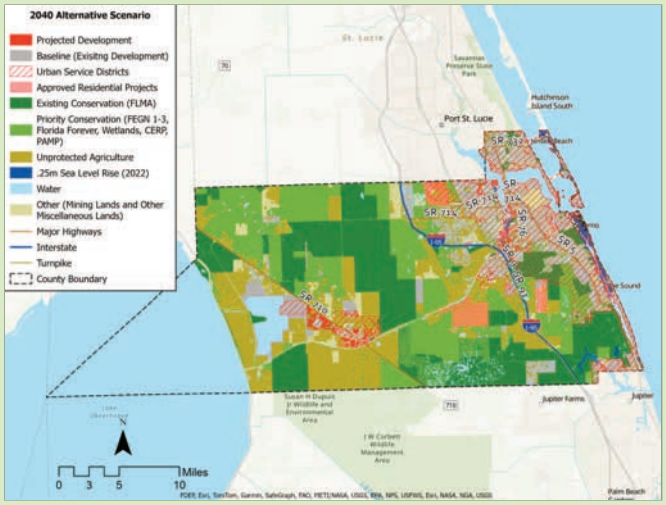
The impact of sea level rise in Martin County is expected to be modest over the planning horizon and mainly observed on lands that are already protected in northeastern coastal areas of the county. By 2040, approximately 0.61% of the county's total land mass is expected to be inundated.

Nevertheless, Martin County's existing coastal communities are at risk for both sea level rise and effects of increasing storm intensities. Understanding the risks and considering enhanced development standards for this area will be essential to protect both the built infrastructure and the natural functions of these areas.

FIGURE 1. (A) SPRAWL AND (B) CONSERVATION SCENARIOS FOR MARTIN COUNTY IN 2040



(A) SPRAWL 2040



(B) CONSERVATION

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Florida's Wildlife Corridor

Florida has become recognized as a leader in land conservation funding. In recent years, state leaders have committed more than $2 billion to land acquisition and management for the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

The Corridor is an 18-million-acre network of connected natural lands that runs from the Everglades to the panhandle, providing habitat for more than 130 imperiled species and recreational opportunities for Floridians and tourists. About one half of the Corridor is already protected through public ownership or conservation easements, but there are about 79,600 acres of undeveloped, unprotected land in Martin County that are identified in the Corridor and potentially eligible to participate in Florida's land conservation programs through fee-simple acquisition or easement. Though some funds are planned to be available in perpetuity, the majority of the $2 billion in allocations are not recurring, creating some urgency for landowners to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in the effort.

Wildlife Viewing and Fishing as Part of Florida and Local Economies

Martin County is uniquely situated to expand its outdoor recreational opportunities while still preserving the character and natural setting that make it special to those who live here. As of 2017, outdoor recreation contributed about $25 billion to Florida's economy, as well as more than 200,000 jobs. Passive opportunities, such as wildlife viewing, contributed more than 20% of those funds.

Recreational boating and fishing as well as equestrian amenities appear to be sectors that could be enhanced to diversify Martin County's economy.

Growing from Within

By embracing policies in response to growth that encourage more compact development in urban areas, rather than low-density, automobile-dependent development in rural areas, leaders in Martin County can provide constituents an array of benefits. Denser neighborhoods oriented toward people rather than cars will attract and support more businesses, creating new opportunities for residents living in municipalities to walk or bike to work, shopping and restaurants, encouraging healthier lifestyles and reducing daily transportation expenses. Lessening dependence on car travel will reduce local air and water pollution. Compact development will generate the revenues to enhance and expand other public services. It will increase the efficiency of those services, and slow their cost increases, helping to keep a lid on local taxes for infrastructure expansion.

Based on the UF analysis, the gross development density in Martin County is about 3 people per acre. Using the U.S. Census estimate of 2.3 people per household, this represents an overall density of 1.3 dwelling units per acre over the developed area within the county. A 30% increase in dwelling unit per acre would relate to a residential density of only 1.7 units per acre - well below the maximum allowance for dwelling units per acre for urban future land-use designations within the County's comprehensive plan. While neighborhood character and existing and future infrastructure limitations must be considered, it's worth noting that a modest increase in overall density in urban areas could relate to significant opportunities to protect lands in Western Martin County.

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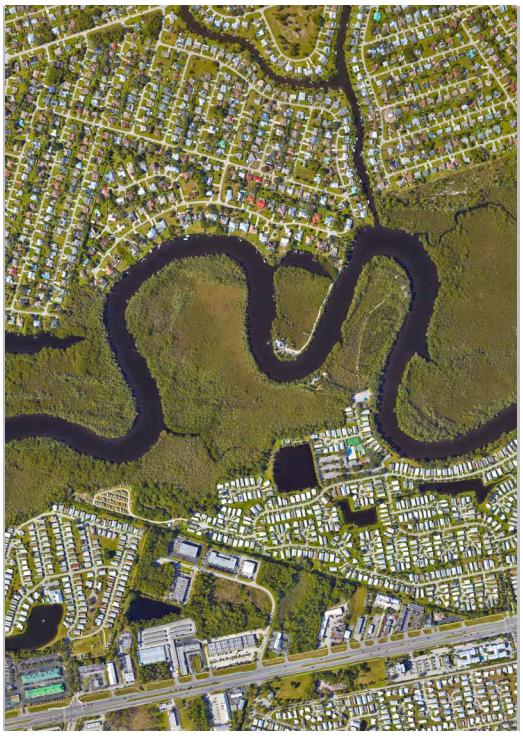
Policy Recommendations

To promote an economically prosperous future for Martin County that capitalizes on its considerable environmental assets while preserving its quality of life, urban centers and rural character, we offer the following policy recommendations:

- Continue to implement locally financed land conservation programs to leverage federal, state and private funds to preserve natural and agricultural lands from development and protect critical lands buffering water bodies. A focused effort should be placed on connecting landowners with land trusts and other organizations to assist in maximizing opportunities to participate in state funded conservation programs.
- Discourage development in areas without adequate water and sewer infrastructure and continue to pursue funding for water and wastewater upgrades in existing town centers in order to keep fees generated from municipal services in the County. Policies that allow for the proliferation of septic systems not only encourage sprawl but have the potential to lead to long-term water quality issues and are more costly in the long run. Septic-to-sewer conversions are increasingly being implemented to counteract the effects of under-treated wastewater in urban and suburban areas across the state. Such projects are costly and often difficult to implement. Being proactive about wastewater collection and treatment reduces costs and protects water quality.
- Develop strategies for adapting land uses and construction standards to anticipate and guard against climate change impacts – including sea level rise, flooding, and stronger storms – a regular consideration in any changes to land development regulations. Land development regulations should reflect best practices related to building in the coastal environment.
- Encourage higher density development in existing urban areas to accommodate increased population and alleviate development pressure in rural areas. This might be done by creating policies that discourage development or redevelopment in urban areas at densities that are more appropriate for properties with lower intensity future land-use designations.
- Critically evaluate the necessity of and policies related to the Rural Lifestyles Future Land Use Designation to ensure that developments remain as promised by requiring perpetual conservation easements over conservation areas.
- Reconsider policies related to Freestanding Urban Services Districts, which represent a license to sprawl. Under the state's Live Local Act, the areas could be developed residentially, and should be evaluated with consideration for those impacts as well as the impact of the industrial uses for which they are intended.



Sources: https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Florida/cp12029.pdf