

1000 Friends of Florida Endorses Manatee County Water Quality and Natural Lands Bonds

Vote Yes, For Bonds

Manatee County's population grew nearly 17% from 2020 to 2025, about twice the statewide rate, and new development keeps pushing into its rural and natural lands. Yet only 14% of land in the county is permanently protected from development, well below the 32% average among Florida counties.

That's why 1000 Friends of Florida urges Manatee County voters to support a measure on the November ballot that would authorize up to \$75 million in bond funding for land protection through the county's Environmental Lands Program.

Protecting natural land protects drinking water sources and the health of the Manatee, Little Manatee, Braden and Myakka rivers. It preserves wildlife habitat, reduces flooding and gives residents more places to hike, paddle, fish and enjoy the outdoors.

Manatee voters created the program in 2020 with 71% of the vote. Since 2023, it has bought more than 300 acres, protected nearly 1,500 more through conservation easements, created two new preserves and expanded four others. The county has stretched those dollars with outside help, including \$11.9 million from Florida Forever toward the Emerson Point Preserve expansion and a \$5 million federal grant toward Crooked River Preserve in Parrish. But the bond money voters approved in 2020 has now been spent or committed.

This past July, the Manatee County Commission voted unanimously to put this land conservation measure on the November ballot. If voters approve the measure:

- The county can issue up to \$75 million in general obligation bonds, repaid within 20 years, to buy land and conservation easements.
- Land protection can continue, and the county is better positioned to win matching funds from federal, state and private sources.
- Property taxes rise by 0.16 mills. For the median homesteaded property, that's about \$34 a year, or about \$2.83 a month.
- The money goes to protecting drinking water sources, water quality, wildlife habitat and natural lands from overdevelopment, and to providing public preserves.
- A citizen advisory committee reviews properties in a public process, with final decisions made by the County Commission.
- Annual public audits are written into the ballot question.

Protected lands in eastern Manatee County, such as Mossy Island Ranch next to Myakka River State Park, connect to the Florida Wildlife Corridor, a statewide network of natural and agricultural land recognized by state lawmakers for its critical importance in sustaining wildlife and protecting water quality. We are proud to join the Trust for Public Land, Suncoast Waterkeeper, Tampa Bay Conservancy, Florida Wildlife Federation and other local partners in supporting this measure.

We urge residents committed to clean water and a healthy, prosperous future for Manatee County to vote Yes, For Bonds.