

1000 Friends of Florida Endorses
Santa Rosa County Half-Cent Sales Tax Renewal
Vote Yes

Santa Rosa County is on track to add nearly 50,000 residents by 2040 and nearly 120,000 by 2070, a 59% jump. It has already lost nearly 50,000 acres of forest in just two decades. Without a plan to protect its most important natural and agricultural lands, more of the farms and forests that define the county will give way to development, and its rivers and bays will pay the price in polluted runoff.

That's why 1000 Friends of Florida urges Santa Rosa County voters to support a measure on the November ballot that would continue the county's existing half-cent sales tax for five more years. The renewal adds new purposes to the tax: protecting drinking water and water quality, and preserving natural areas, farmland and wildlife habitat from overdevelopment.

In 2024, we worked with the University of Florida's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning to map two futures for Santa Rosa and Escambia counties: one following current development patterns, and one that grows more compactly and protects high-priority natural and agricultural lands. The more sustainable path would keep about half of Santa Rosa in protected natural forest and timberland by 2040, compared with just over a third under current trends, while reducing pollution flowing into local waters.

Santa Rosa has already shown what's possible. The county has protected 429 acres buffering Naval Air Station Whiting Field with the Trust for Public Land and the U.S. Navy, along with 545 acres near Navarre and waterfront land at Soundside in Gulf Breeze.

This past April, the Santa Rosa County Commission approved the ballot language for the November election. If voters approve the measure:

- The existing half-cent sales tax continues for five years, beginning Jan. 1, 2027. It is not a new tax.
- The tax, which raises about \$16 million a year, can fund roads; protect of drinking water sources and water quality in rivers, bays and creeks; preserve natural areas, farmland and wildlife habitat; purchase fire and sheriff's equipment, and support parks.
- The Trust for Public Land estimates a half-cent sales tax costs the median household about \$97 a year, or about \$8 a month. Visitors who shop in the county pay it, too.
- Independent annual audits and full public disclosure of all spending are written into the ballot question.

Our 2040/2070 project findings recommended that local governments "establish locally financed land conservation programs to leverage federal, state and private funds." This measure is a step in that direction, but it does not set aside a specific share for conservation. If voters approve it, we will urge the County Commission to dedicate a meaningful share to protecting water, natural areas and farmland, with strong safeguards such as citizen oversight and purchases only from willing sellers.

We urge residents committed to clean water, working farms and a healthy, prosperous future for Santa Rosa County to vote Yes.