

2013 STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS
“Lake County: Real Florida. Real Close.”
Narrated by County Commission Chairman Leslie Campione

Introduction

To us, Lake County is simply home. But to acquaint others, Lake County may be best described as “Real Florida.” Why is Lake County “Real Florida”? Naturally, the lakes, rivers, forests, oak tree hammocks, prairies and rolling vistas come to mind... But it is also the citizens of Lake County – from entrepreneurs to volunteers - from artists to athletes - from young families to retirees. A cross-section of Florida’s best people are here - ready to roll up their sleeves and get involved in their community.

Initially, what may surprise visitors most when traveling to our County, is that we are “Real Close” – centered amongst the major cities of Florida – Miami and Jacksonville – and even closer to Orlando and Tampa. We’re just down the road from the beaches, major sporting events and theme parks. We have our own state-of-the-art medical facilities, and are within easy driving distance to renowned research hospitals.

We are “Real Florida. Real Close”...and that’s exactly what an upcoming Economic Development initiative will do when introducing Lake County to tourists and prospective business owners alike.

Lake County staff under the direction of manager David Heath has been working hard this year -- Always striving to improve the quality of life here for our residents and businesses. Today, it is now my pleasure to share with you, some of the Board of County Commissioner’s most notable accomplishments.

Public Safety

Keeping our residents safe is the number one responsibility of County government. Here are a few highlights of this year’s accomplishments in the area of public safety.

Lake County and the municipalities, together, are working to quicken fire and rescue response in all jurisdictions. A more centralized communications system and new tracking devices will mean the closest units to the emergency are automatically summoned, saving lives and property, while managing personnel and equipment more efficiently.

Also in an effort to speed response and lower insurance costs for homeowners, Lake County was able to purchase needed fire rescue equipment this year, thanks to a \$237,000 federal grant.

The County provides overall coordination for major emergencies. By law, the County must activate its Emergency Operations Center within an hour’s notice of a significant emergency. In 2013, the opening of the new Emergency Communications and Operations Center and an upgraded central utility plant made this a reality. In addition to having a secure building for emergency operations, the co-location of the 9-1-1 dispatchers for fire rescue, medical and law enforcement is saving money and creating a more effective means of dispatching emergency calls. Additionally, the facility houses critical computer equipment for multiple government agencies...protecting vital operations in the event of any disaster. The center was funded through a combination of Homeland Security grants and state funds.

There are more than 1,400 lakes in the County... and our mosquito and aquatic plant abatement program is critical to the health and safety of those lakes and our residents. This year, 1,200 acres of water was treated for nuisance aquatic plants; and over 260,000 acres were treated for mosquitos.

To protect our groundwater, Lake County's Household Hazardous Waste program held 26 outreach events throughout the year, safely removing 66 tons of potential environmental contaminants from the waste stream.

For pedestrian safety, sidewalk repairs were completed in 12 neighborhoods and on two collector roads. As part of the county's ADA sidewalk reconstruction program, 2,200 linear feet of sidewalk and 100 ramps were reconstructed. Using federally-funded Community Development Block Grant funds, the County successfully partnered with the City of Tavares on the installation of ADA accessible ramps throughout the city.

Lake County Animal Services has been pro-actively promoting safety for its residents and animal population. Residents are now able to register their pets and obtain licenses online, adoption fees have been reduced, and enhancements to the shelter allow for better quarantine of sick animals.

A Spay/Neuter Rebate Program was also implemented, which refunds pet-owners up to \$50 per animal for spaying or neutering their pets. Additional policies are currently under consideration to responsibly, and compassionately, address animal needs while protecting our citizens.

The county is required by law to administer probation for offenders, creating opportunities for successful rehabilitation. Under a new state directive, more attention is given to root problems of those involved in criminal activity. In 2013, more than 100 residents received counseling and behavior health services in lieu of incarceration.

Infrastructure

Lake County completed several major transportation and infrastructure improvements in 2013. A \$405,000 grant from the Florida Department of Transportation made possible the completion of intersection improvements at County Road 565A and Silver Eagle, including a traffic signal to ease congestion during peak school hours. A sidewalk connection was also added from South Lake High School to County Road 565A.

Another \$360,000 grant funded construction of turn lanes and paved shoulders, installation of a traffic signal and the inclusion of pedestrian features to State Road 19 and County Road 450E. New traffic signals were also installed at Thomas and Urick streets in Fruitland Park.

Several improvements were made to existing intersections, including the upgraded school speed zone flashers at State Road 44 and Lone Oak Drive, and a new pedestrian crossing and signal at U.S. Highway 441 and Donnelly Street. Funding from a state school safety program allowed for installation of the county's first school zone radar speed flasher system on Bates Avenue in Eustis.

Improvements were completed on South Lakeshore Boulevard and East Revels Road in Howey-in-the-Hills using \$900,000 in transportation impact fees. The project included enhancements to the roadways, swales and sidewalks .

Several stormwater projects were completed also, including the installation of a water quality improvement system for East Crooked Lake in the Eustis Area. A severe erosion problem at the popular sand bottom lake was corrected, enhancing the quality of the water entering this beautiful lake.

While Lake County is not in the water business, a non-compliant private water system in the Umatilla area necessitated County involvement. By using a \$1.2 million Community Development Block Grant, the County was able to facilitate the design and installation of a new water system that allowed County residents to connect to the City of Umatilla's water treatment facility.

Parks

Lake County has continued to meet the expectations from residents for new or improved parks through long-range planning, creative phasing and innovative and efficient maintenance techniques.

In May, the new 34-acre East Lake Community Park adjacent to Sorrento Elementary School opened as the result of a partnership between the County Commission and the School District. The park includes five ball fields, three multi-purpose fields, a parking lot and a path for walking, running and biking. When school is in session, portions of the park are utilized for student's physical education classes.

Over the past year, improvements were made to the Minneola Athletic Complex which serves the city and County residents in South Lake. These included a new staircase, concession stand upgrades and installation of a chairlift to meet ADA compliance. In the Leesburg area, construction of a basketball court and enhancements to tennis and pickle ball courts were recently completed at PEAR Park.

Safety improvements were made to portions of the South Lake Trail, which include new signage, trail markings and ADA modifications. The South Lake Trail and the Hancock Trail Extension now have new kiosks, benches, trash receptacles and bicycle racks.

During 2013, the main parking area at Johns Lake Boat Ramp and the boat launches at Johns Lake and Astatula Boat Ramp were resurfaced and restriped. Enhancements included benches, signage, restrooms at both locations.

Libraries

2013 was a special year, as Florida celebrated its discovery by Ponce De Leon 500 years ago. The Lake County library system participated in the festivities and incorporated the state's "Viva 500" celebration into many library programs and special events. Close to 3,000 participants enjoyed the "Viva Libros" BookFest that featured 40 events and 20 bestselling authors and speakers.

As part of this year's summer reading program, Lake County Libraries organized more than 500 activities with a total of 27,000 attendees.

Lake County Libraries' Ebooks program continues to grow dramatically. Since starting the program in 2011, more than 170,000 have been checked out and monthly circulation has grown by 885 percent.

Social Services

This past year, Lake County has continued to improve housing conditions, facilitate affordable housing, improve bus shelters for public transportation, and assist Lake County Veterans to access VA benefits. During 2013, the County's Veteran Services staff conducted eight thousand client consultations, and assisted in obtaining \$13 million in disability compensation and pension benefits for Lake County veterans.

To support safe housing initiatives, five mobile homes and 13 single family dwellings were either demolished and replaced or rehabilitated. Twelve families were also provided emergency roof repair or replacement. This was accomplished with the help of state and federal programs promoting safe living conditions for income eligible residents. These improvements benefit the homeowners and the surrounding community.

In order to provide assure affordable housing for county residents, Lake County collaborated with Lifestream Behavioral Center, and used Neighborhood Stabilization Funds to acquire and renovate an apartment complex in Leesburg that was in foreclosure. The apartment complex, now managed by LifeStream, helps ensure an enhanced quality of life for its clients.

Volunteerism

Each year, volunteers contribute their time and resources for the betterment of the community. The impact is significant. In 2013, 350 individuals donated 24,000 hours of their time to Lake County's volunteer program, assisting in libraries, with the adult literacy program, teen court, animal services, probation, parks and emergency management.

The Lake County Literacy Program volunteers contributed 7,400 hours to help 400 participants with basic reading skills, citizenship exams and job skills. The program also collaborated with LakeTech on GED classes; with Goodwill Industries on job search skills; and with New Beginnings to offer afterschool homework help.

Volunteers for the 7th Annual Stuff the Bus food drive collected 4,000 pounds of non-perishable food that was donated to Angels of Mercy, The Salvation Army, and the Lake Cares Food Pantry.

This year, the Lake County Master Gardeners, volunteered 9,100 hours, equal to roughly four fulltime positions. The group helped with plant clinics and maintenance of the Discovery Gardens, and assisted 256 participants at the "First Friday in the Gardens" educational series. Also, Ag Extension agents hosted 1,300 people at 55 educational programs and five community events on nutrition, health and food safety.

Economic Development

This past year, Lake County hosted and supported numerous community events, including the 2nd Annual Wings and Wildflowers festival in October. The three-day festival welcomed thousands of bird lovers and wildflower enthusiasts, winning numerous awards from the Florida Festival and Events Association.

Tourism tax dollars provided funds to help sponsor 70 organizations that hosted tourist-related events. The economic impact of events associated with tourist tax sponsorships doubled to over \$93 million.

Over the past 17 years, Lake County has been proud to be the site for numerous state and national sports championships. The Florida High School Athletic Association has made us home for its Golf and Softball State Championships for a number of years. Each event brings in hundreds of athletes and their families from all over the state, resulting in over half a million dollars in economic impact per event.

A new tourism program to promote Lake County businesses offers incentives and discounts on dining, accommodations and area attractions. More than 50 businesses are already participating in this new DISCOVER LAKE program.

Economic impacts are felt from many sources, in addition to tourism. The Ford Commerce Park in Groveland is one of Lake County's premiere hubs for business and industry. Improved street lighting and landscaping, along with four new monument signs were installed at the park, enhancing the property to attract new tenants.

Utilizing the County's "RAPID" permitting process, Raney Construction was able to expand by purchasing two buildings in the Ford Commerce Park. Raney Construction increased its employment by 30 percent because of the expansion.

Lake County awarded Beacon College with a Business Assistance Grant to offset permitting costs for Beacon Hall, a new administration and classroom building. The expansion included the hiring of 10 new employees.

The County teamed up with the City of Leesburg to attract Rural King, which sells goods for outdoor recreation and farming, and has 65 stores in eight different states. Rural King purchased a vacant building on U.S. Highway 27, and renovation of the building is underway.

Lake County also collaborated with Leesburg to secure \$400,000 from the state's Economic Development Transportation Fund to construct a seaplane ramp at Leesburg's International Airport on Lake Harris. This will facilitate expansion of Wipaire, a manufacturer of seaplane floats. The company plans to construct a 35,000 square-foot facility at the airport.

NeuLife Neurological selected Mount Dora as the site for its new head-trauma rehabilitation center, bringing 54 new jobs to the county. Lake's Business Assistance and High Wage Job Creation Programs awarded \$68,000 in incentives to assist with the start up.

In order to respond to the need for high-tech manufacturing workers, Lake County, Lake Technical Center, Senator Alan Hayes and Representative Larry Metz together secured nearly \$1 million dollars for the Center for Advanced Manufacturing. The grant will renovate an 11,500 square-foot facility at Lake Tech, purchase equipment and set up a training program for manufacturing, machining and welding.

The county, together with Enterprise Florida and the Metro-Orlando Economic Development Commission, has facilitated another company's expansion into Lake County. Soon to be officially announced, the firm is bringing 40 new jobs to Lake County.

The County Commission designated 16,000 acres in southeast Lake County as the "Wellness Way Sector Plan." This area will target health and wellness industries, enabling Lake County to diversify its economy, protect natural resources and strengthen its connectivity in the region.

Close

As you can see, the county made great strides in the past year, enhancing services in so many areas. The Lake County Board of County Commissioners recognizes the importance of promoting business growth and tourism, while safeguarding the quality of life that sets us apart. Our countless amenities and rich heritage underscore what makes this area so remarkable. Our work...our focus...is to ensure a bright future for Lake County. Lake County truly is "Real Florida, Real Close."