# IV. Environmental Lands

In 2002 the Lake County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) created an Environmental Land Management and Acquisition Study Committee charged with exploring the feasibility of creating an ongoing program for the acquisition and management of environmental lands in Lake County. The BCC accepted and approved the report of the ELMASC in April of 2003. The report called for the creation of a Public Land Acquisition Advisory Council, which would be charged with the development of rules and guidelines to guide the acquisition of public lands, including environmental and recreational properties, to review the facts concerning possible land acquisitions and to advise the BCC regarding specific acquisitions.

The Public Land Acquisition Advisory Council (PLAAC) was created by Ordinance 2003-48 in May of 2003 for the purpose of recommending to the BCC policies to guide the acquisition and management of public lands, both environmental and recreational, and to advise the BCC in the implementation of the land acquisition tasks prescribed by the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. This Council was asked to report to the BCC by April 27, 2004, its recommendations concerning specific types of lands for purchase, recreational opportunities appropriate for those lands, and general guidelines for appropriate management of acquired lands.

### *1.0 Public Lands Inventory*

This section is an inventory of public lands acquired for the purpose of conserving environmentally sensitive lands for conservation and resource-based recreation. The following table lists the environmental lands located in Lake County.

**Lake County Environmental Lands**

| Property | Ownership | Acreage |
|---|---|---|
| Ocala National Forest* | US Forest Service | 85,000 |
| Green Swamp Area of Critical State Concern | State | 21,217 |
| Wekiva River Protection Area* | State | 19,000 |
| Lake Griffin State Recreation Area | State | 475 |
| Lake Louisa State Park | State | 4,450 |
| Haines Creek Park | Lake County | 36 |
| Marsh Park | Lake County | 35 |
| PEAR Park | Lake County | 238 |
| Chris Ford Environmental Park | Lake County | 25 |
| Pine Forest Park | Lake County | 48 |
| Lake Jem Park | Lake County | 11 |
| Emeralda Marsh Conservation Area | SJRWMD | 7,089 |
| Lake Norris Conservation Area | SJRWMD | 2,352 |
| Lake Apopka Restoration Area | SJRWMD | 20,068 |
| Crooked River Preserve | LCWA | 63.6 |
| Dead River | LCWA | 34.9 |
| Double Run Preserve | LCWA | 348.8 |
| Fern Prairie Preserve | LCWA | 587.4 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Flat Island Preserve | LCWA | 2,303.7 |
| Flowing Waters Preserve | LCWA | 205.9 |
| Hidden Waters Preserve | LCWA | 90.8 |
| Lake Griffin | LCWA | 270.1 |
| Lake Norris | LCWA | 629.7 |
| Oklawaha Picnic Ground | LCWA | 31.1 |
| Palatlakaha Marsh | LCWA | 28.8 |
| Sawgrass Island Preserve | LCWA | 1,136.7 |
| Scrub Point Preserve | LCWA | 88.9 |
| E.C. Tanner Preserve | LCWA | 39 |
| Wolf Branch Sink Preserve | LCWA | 154.6 |
| | Total | 166,058 |

*Acreage in Lake County

### 1.1 Federal Lands

The *Ocala National Forest* was established in 1908. The Forest Service administers 383,573 acres, 85,000 of which are located in northern Lake County. In addition to the forested lands, which include large stands of longleaf and sand pine, the Forest contains some of Florida's most beautiful and productive springs. An estimated two million people use the Forest each year for outdoor recreation activities at numerous recreation sites located in the forest. Resource-based activities include hunting, fishing, hiking, picnicking, camping, canoeing, birding, and nature study.

### 1.2 State Lands

*Lake Griffin State Recreation Area,* near Fruitland Park, is a 475-acre site, acquired by the State of Florida in 1946 with funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Relatively small by state park standards, the park provides opportunities for camping, fishing, picnicking, boating, canoeing, and nature study. In FY 2001/02, the park accommodated 23,579 visitors.

*Lake Louisa State Park,* on the south shore of Lake Louisa in southeast Lake County, was acquired with LATF funds beginning in 1972. The 4,450-acre park has not yet been fully developed, but 37,000 people visited it in FY 2001/02. Recreational uses include equestrian trails, swimming, picnicking, canoeing, and fishing. Camping will be added soon.

*The Green Swamp Area of Critical State Concern* is located in southern Lake and northern Polk Counties. It is a critical hydrological resource and the headwaters of four important rivers—the Withlacoochee, the Ocklawaha, the Hillsborough, and the Peace. The last two rivers are the primary tributaries of two of Florida's most important estuaries, Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor. The Green Swamp is also a major recharge area for the Florida Aquifer. The Green Swamp has been a Florida Forever (Conservation And Recreation Lands, aka CARL) project since 1992, encompassing an area of 147,111 acres. So far, 21,217 acres have been acquired at a cost of $52,779,344. Significant portions of the Green Swamp Area of Critical State Concern lie outside the acquisition area. Portions of the Green Swamp will eventually become a state park and a wildlife management area. Other parts will be dedicated to hunting, hiking, and nature appreciation.

*The Wekiva River Protection Area* is located in northeast Lake County and in portions of Seminole and Orange Counties. A major CARL project (a state land acquisition program, since replaced by Florida Forever) since 1995, the Wekiva-Ocala Greenway encompasses a project area of 68,904 acres, of which 37,705 have been acquired at a cost of $99,851,554. These acquisitions include 19,000 acres located in Lake County. The area is host to numerous outdoor recreation activities, including off road biking, birding, hiking, and swimming.

### 1.3 St. Johns River Water Management District Lands

*The St. John's River Water Management District* is a very important player in land acquisition and management in Lake County. The District administers the Save Our Rivers program within its jurisdiction and is sometimes designated to manage holdings acquired via other sources. The Water Management District owns and maintains three properties that are open to the public and provide outdoor recreation opportunities.

*Emeralda Marsh Conservation Area* is a 7,089-acre property on an isthmus between Lakes Griffin and Yale, north of Lisbon. Emeralda Marsh offers a wide variety of sporting and recreational activities, including seasonal waterfowl hunting, fishing, canoeing, hiking, and primitive camping. This site is also a popular birding area.

*Lake Norris Conservation Area* is a 2,352-acre property located on the west shore of Lake Norris, north of CR 44. The Boy Scouts of America own the property to the north of the lake, which they manage as a camp. The Conservation Area includes most of Black Water Swamp.

*Lake Apopka Restoration Area* is a 20,068-acre property on the north shore of Lake Apopka. The property is also a popular birding site. Approximately forty percent of the property lies within Lake County; the remainder is in Orange County to the east. Lake Apopka was targeted for clean-up by the Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) Act of 1987. Most of the lands acquired were formerly in agricultural use.

### 1.4 Lake County Lands

Lake County owns several properties that are classified as Conservation. *The Palatlakaha Environmental and Agricultural Reserve* (PEAR Park) is a 264-acre site on a former agricultural experimental station for grapes and melons near Okahumpka. PEAR Park may eventually be expanded by 150 acres or more with help from an FCT grant. This project, which has the potential to be Lake County's first district park, is a venue for hiking, picnicking, and a farmers' market. A 25-acre portion of Chris Ford Industrial Park serves as a Gopher Tortoise relocation habitat. Palatlakaha River Park in Clermont contains protected Scrub Jay habitat. Other Conservation lands managed by the Parks and Recreation Section include the 36-Acre Haines Creek Park (which is predominately a wetland) near Leesburg; the 35-acre Marsh Park (which is also predominately a wetland) in Eustis; the 11-acre Lake Jem Park, which contains wetlands; and the 28-acre Pine Forest Park, which contains scrub jay habitat.

### 1.5 Lake County Water Authority

*The Lake County Water Authority* is an elected body independent of the Lake County Board of County Commissioners. To date, the LCWA has acquired 6,600 acres through purchase or donation. Approximately 71 percent of the LCWA's holdings are wetlands; the remaining 29 percent are uplands. Four tracts are currently open to the public—the Crooked River, Flat Island, Hidden Waters, and Sawgrass Island Preserves. Four other holdings—Scrub Point, Bourlay East and West, the Wolf Branch Sink, and Fern Prairie, are scheduled to open on or before 2005. LCWA lands provide a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities including nature study, canoeing, hiking, and birding.

## *2.0 Land Acquisition and Protection*

In the Fall of 2004 voters approved a 33 million dollar referendum for the purchase of public lands for the protection of drinking water, preservation of natural areas and open spaces, provision of parks and trails, and the protection of the water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams. This section outlines the land acquisition process established by the Public Lands Acquisition Advisory Council.

It is recommended by the PLAAC that land acquisition be broken down into four main categories which will cover the many types of land that have been discussed for this program. An overarching objective of land protections following any of these categories is the positive effect on Lake County's water resources. The four categories are:

- Protection of Water Resources: Lands would be purchased or protected for enhancement of surface water and groundwater quantity as well as quality. Land characteristics of special concern may include those with geologic/hydrologic conditions that would easily enable contamination of vulnerable aquifers that have value as drinking water sources; property that serves as an important groundwater recharge function; property that contains or has direct connections to lakes, creeks, rivers, springs, sinkholes, or wetlands for which conservation of the property will protect or improve surface water quality; and property that serves an important flood management function other than manmade water retention facilities.
- Protection of Natural Communities and Landscapes: Lands would be purchased or protected that contain a diversity of natural communities; property containing natural communities that are rare; ecological quality in the communities present on the property; property that is functionally connected to other natural communities; property adjacent to properties that are in public ownership or have other environmental protections such as conservation easements; property that is large enough to contribute substantially to conservation efforts; property that contains important, Florida-specific geologic features such as caves or springs; and property that is relatively free from internal fragmentation from roads, power lines, and other features that create barriers and edge effects.
- Protection of Plant and Animal Species: Lands would be purchased or protected that serve as documented or potential habitat for rare, threatened, or endangered species or species of special concern; property that serves as documented or potential habitat for species with large home ranges; property that contains plants or animals that are endemic or near-endemic to Florida or Lake County; property that serves as a special wildlife migration or aggregation site for activities such as breeding, roosting, colonial nesting, or over-wintering; property that offers high vegetation quality and species diversity; and property that has low incidence of non-native invasive species.
- Protection of Social/Human Values: Lands would be purchased or protected that are suitable for parks, sportsfields, trails, and recreation lands; property that offers opportunities for compatible user-oriented and/or resource-based outdoor recreation facilities and programs; property suitable for connective trails, greenways, or blueways; land that will protect open space from overdevelopment; property that has historic, archeological, or cultural significance, and property that contributes to urban green space, provides a municipal defining greenbelt, provides scenic vistas, or has other value from an urban and regional planning perspective Active recreation facilities such as golf courses and associated support facilities should not be developed from these funds.

## *3.0 Recreational Uses of Acquired Lands*

In the development of a recommendation for recreational opportunities appropriate for acquired lands the Council used the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan of Florida. This Plan speaks of outdoor recreation as any leisure time activity conducted outdoors. Within the vast range of such a definition lie an almost unlimited number of possible activities. The two primary categories used throughout Florida are user-oriented outdoor recreation and resource-based outdoor recreation.

User-oriented types of outdoor recreation are those, which can be, provided almost anywhere for the convenience of the user. The user-oriented category is much the broader of the two being recommended and covers such activities as tennis, basketball, soccer, baseball, archery, skeet and trap shooting, and playground activities. It may also include much less

strenuous activities as listening to a band concert in the park, watching spectator sports, or visiting a zoo.

Resource-based outdoor recreation differs drastically from user-oriented in that it cannot be provide just anywhere, but rather, it is dependent on some particular element or combination of elements in the natural or cultural environments. It also involves both active and passive types of activities but is generally less formalized and less program oriented. Resource-based activities consist of such things as hunting, fishing, camping, boating, mountain biking, water skiing, surfing, and nature study—all of which require some natural condition that cannot easily be duplicated by man.

Some outdoor recreation activities, of course, can be considered either user-oriented or resource-based, depending on where the opportunity is made available. Good examples are swimming, picnicking, bicycling, and horseback riding.

The Council reviewed recreational opportunities relative to each of the four categories of land use protection objectives. Some recreational uses and land-types are obviously as compatible as others are incompatible. Because of the variability of recreational uses, the Council would recommend that recreational opportunity for land acquired is prioritized in the following order:

- Resource-based,
- Multiple-use, and
- User-oriented.

Considering that each property will likely have unique characteristics, each property will require a Site Management Plan that will outline the proposed recreational activities as well as the level or intensity of site management. Site Management Plans will encompass the entire property and will be based on site-specific features and criteria.

### *4.0 Management of Acquired Lands*

Appropriate management of acquired Public Lands is the final element of the PLAAC recommendation. The Council feels very strong that the referendum funds should be able to purchase land for active recreation facilities and programs but that operating funds should be derived from other sources. The Council recommends that the three functions of parks, trails, and environmental (public) lands fall under the same County Department/Division and managed by the same Director. They also recommend that the Public Lands Section be staffed by professionals trained and experienced in the acquisition, development, and management of multi-use environmental/recreational lands. The specific level of staffing, equipment, supplies, and timing should be determined through the creation of a Lake County Public Lands Management Plan. This Plan should serve to refine the preparation work contained in the recommendations section of this Master Plan, the work of the Environmental Lands Management and Acquisition Study Committee, and the Public Lands Acquisition Advisory Council.

Primary funding for the management of these lands can come from the allowable holdback of non-bonded funds set aside in a trust fund for this specific use. Included in the Plan will be a recommendation for a percentage holdback that will allow for the development of a long-range management budget program. Other than the established percentage of funds held back, no monies from the referendum will be used for park maintenance and operations. Considering existing public lands, current potential acquisitions, current designated funding sources, and potential passage of the bond referendum it would be in the County's best interest to consider the acquisition of a Manager/Supervisor for this specific function by the first of the year.

In providing a recommendation for guidelines for appropriate management of acquired lands the Council reviewed several existing maintenance systems. All are established programs used throughout the country. The Council is recommending the National Recreation and Park Association Park Maintenance Standards Mode System. This system establishes six levels of operational maintenance based on issues such as public usage, funding, community standards, site requirements, and others. The modes range from minimum maintenance of low visitation undeveloped lands up to state of the art maintenance for high quality, high usage diverse landscape. It would be normal that certain properties would move up or down the original site mode level established due to the above factors. The mode level would be established originally, and potentially change over time as a result of the specific properties Site Management Plan.