

Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection: Evaluating the Need for a Private Land Trust in Hillsborough County, Florida

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Statement of Issue / Problem

When the Florida Legislature launched an environmental lands acquisition and protection program in the spring of 1963, the state began to increasingly rely on the use of land acquisition techniques in order to minimize the ecological impacts created by accelerating development. Land acquisition is used to protect against land uses that may impair or destroy critical habitats and endanger or threaten species of plants and animals. A review of the current research literature indicates that it is unclear whether regulatory planning and public land acquisition, in the absence of private land acquisition, can meet or exceed the current imperative to protect endangered natural areas.

Statement of Significance of Issue

Environmental and community groups are increasingly concerned that regulatory approaches and public land acquisition programs are being weakened by new, emerging challenges. If this is true, then private land trust organizations may be essential to strengthen insufficient regulatory approaches and to maximize the effectiveness of limited financial resources against soaring real estate prices.

Method of Inquiry

This professional planning project will determine whether a private land trust organization could efficiently and effectively complement existing methods for protecting environmentally sensitive lands. Research will begin with the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), which is an integrated data management system of maps, manual files and a computerized database identifying the status and

distribution of natural communities, including rare and endangered species of plants and animals, throughout the state. Information from the FNAI will be used to track the performance of regulatory approaches including site development regulations and comprehensive planning guidelines. It shall also be used to research the performance of public land acquisition programs including Preservation 2000 and the Hillsborough County Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP). The results of these two methods will be interpreted to determine if and how a private land trust organization(s) can help meet or exceed the current imperative to protect endangered natural areas. If weaknesses are detected in the partnership between regulatory approaches and public land acquisition, thought will be given to the creation of a private land trust organization in Hillsborough County. In the event weaknesses are identified, the necessary steps toward building a strong, local private land trust organization will be also reported.

Expected Outcomes

This professional planning project will become a prototype for private citizens, neighborhood and regional organizations to determine their needs for a private land trust organization and their ability to successfully develop one. Using the professional planning project as a guide, interested individuals and organizations will learn how to examine the ability of regulatory planning and public land acquisition to secure environmentally sensitive lands from development; investigate whether private land trust organizations are a necessary supplement and, in some cases, a superior approach to regulatory planning and public land acquisition; and create a strong, local private land trust organization.