



P.O. Box 759, Eustis Florida 32727

17 December 2024

VIA EMAIL TO: Lake County Board of County Commissioners

Ms. Leslie Campione, Chair, District 4	leslie.campione@lakecountyfl.gov
Mr. Sean Parks, Vice Chair, District 2	sean.parks@lakecountyfl.gov
Mr. Anthony Sabatini, District 1	anthony.sabatini@lakecountyfl.gov
Mr. Kirby Smith, District 3	kirby.smith@lakecountyfl.gov
Mr. Timothy Morris, District 5	timothy.morris@lakecountyfl.gov

RE: Removal of lands from Rural Protection Areas

Dear Ms. Campione and County Commissioners:

The Lake County Conservation Council, Inc. (LCCC) is a not-for-profit organization whose mission includes promoting the preservation and protection of the natural resources of Lake County and encouraging responsible growth management.

At the November 5, 2024 meeting of the Lake County Board of County Commissioners (BCC), the County's Planning and Zoning Department (P&Z) was directed to work on criteria related to removing parcels from the county's Rural Protection Areas (RPAs).

Lake County citizens are alarmed by the rapid conversion of rural lands into high density residential and commercial areas. For the last year, LCCC has been gathering signatures at public events on a "Petition to Put the Protection Back in Lake County's Rural Protection Areas." Approximately 1,500 Lake County residents have signed the petition so far. It's also important to note that over 72% of Lake County voters recently voted in favor of the Land Conservation Bond Referendum. To protect our rural lands, we are even willing to tax ourselves!

As you know, in 2010, the Lake County Board of County Commissioners created three RPAs - Wekiva-Ocala, Emerald Marsh, and Yalaha-Lake Apopka. All three areas are shrinking because of high-density development. When we cut down trees and convert vegetation to rooftops, sidewalks, and streets, we increase air temperature, raise the risk of flooding, interfere with the return of filtered water back into our aquifer, and increase the flow of pollutants into our rivers and lakes. Salt water intrusion is already affecting some wells in Lake County. Warnings are frequently issued that there is too much bacteria in our lakes for safe swimming. All of us are very aware of the flooding that occurred during Hurricane Milton. With population growth and warming temperatures, protecting our RPAs is more important than ever. Once we remove those protections, we lose our woodlands, wetlands, and farmlands forever.

On numerous occasions, LCCC members have heard Lake County Commissioners voice the sentiments found in Lake County's Comprehensive Land Use Plan related to our rural areas, especially the desire to not have Lake County resemble the metro Orlando area. In addition to the important ecological services

provided by our rural lands, and as described in the Comprehensive Plan, we strongly support and believe:

Rural lands and rural lifestyles are intrinsic, inalienable parts of the character, history, culture, and quality of life within Lake County. The preservation of rural land, coupled with sustainable agriculture and forestry, contributes to the conservation of natural resources. Rural areas also offer opportunities for recreation and ecotourism that enrich the experience of both residents and visitors. Lake County shall recognize the preservation of four core rural areas, described herein as Rural Protection Areas, as a fundamental component of its growth management plan. Together with the statutorily recognized Wekiva River Protection Area and Green Swamp Area of Critical State Concern, it shall be the express intent of Lake County, through the designation of these Rural Protection Areas, to define a long-term vision for the future that maintains the integrity of rural land within Lake County through the planning horizon and beyond.
2010 Lake County Comprehensive Plan.

This long-term vision to maintain the integrity of RPAs is already rapidly being eroded through annexations by municipalities. The thought that our county government may be contemplating the removal of RPA protections from county lands is very disturbing. Now more than ever, the BCC and P&Z should step up and honor the fundamental components of the county's growth management plan.

Specifically, in addition to upholding existing Comp Plan Goals, Objectives and Policies and Land Development Regulations related to RPAs, the BCC and P&Z should continue to advocate for meaningful changes to annexation law that will allow the county to take back control of development patterns in RPAs. At the very least, changes to annexation law should require cities to acknowledge County Comp Plan Goals, Policies and Objectives and incorporate County RPA Land Development criteria during the annexation, rezoning, and development processes. An even better solution would be for the Lake County BCC to prohibit the annexation of RPAs into cities by modifying the boundaries of the Interlocal Service Boundary Agreements (ISBAs). We understand this would involve working with the cities. It should be acknowledged that RPA lands should never have been included in any ISBA. ISBAs circumvent all growth management plans for our rural areas. RPAs have no place within cities, which are urban. Rural lands and rural lifestyles should be respected and protected from incompatible land uses just as residential and commercial uses are protected from incompatible uses.

We respectfully urge the BCC to suspend immediately all efforts to remove county land from RPA protections and to continue its efforts to persuade our municipalities to honor RPA protections.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important topic.

Sincerely yours,

Jane Hepting, President
Lake County Conservation Council, Inc.

cc:

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