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By Christopher Curry - Staff writer

Opening conservation lands to the public Is a long process with little funding



Kevin Ratkus, an environmental specialist with Alachua County, walks across a bridge in the Mill Creek Preserve on Dec. 15, 2010.

On about 1,200 acres north of the city of Alachua along County Road 236, the public has access from sunrise to sunset, 365 days a year, to more than three miles of trails weaving through the Mill Creek Preserve. Toward the south end of the county, the sprawling, roughly 5,500-acre Barr Hammock and Levy Prairie properties also are open to the public — if the county is contacted in advance to set up an appointment.

For the better part of a decade, Alachua County has used a mix of tax monies from two voter referendums and outside funding to amass nearly 20,000 acres of protected conservation property — including these lands. To date, about \$91.3 million has been put toward those purchases. The county's share has been a combined \$33.6 million from the 2000 Alachua County Forever and 2008 Wild Spaces & Public Places referendums. Other sources, including water management districts and grants from federal and state governments and nonprofit environmental groups, have provided the majority of the money — about \$57.7 million.

While there were substantial, dedicated sources of funding to purchase of the properties, the resources available to manage these properties and ready them for public access are far more limited. That has made the process of opening them for public use a years-long process that is nowhere near finished. Of the 19,744 acres purchased since 2002, 41 percent currently have trail systems open to the public on a daily basis, either as a county-owned preserve or part of a state-

owned preservation area. Another 20 percent of the land is currently open on an appointment basis.

County Environmental Protection Department Director Chris Bird said the primary goals of the conservation plan were always the protection of environmentally sensitive wetlands, aquifer recharge areas and wildlife habitat. The program and the referendums that funded it also stated that the acquisition of the lands would open up natural areas to the public for "resource-based recreation."

At this point in time, Bird said, that is very much a work in progress. "They're still in the developmental mode, a lot of them, as far as access," he said. "We knew it would be very incremental to provide access because it costs more to provide access."

With Alachua County Forever's roughly \$60,000 annual budget for land management activities other than prescribed burns and a full-time staff of eight, program manager Ramesh Buch said the expectation from the beginning was that opening lands for public access would be a lengthy process phased in over years. "Stewardship and public access was always going to come second," Buch said. Given the small budget and staff, Buch said he believed opening up 41 percent of the land to public access on a daily basis was a significant accomplishment.

At the same time, the focus now will turn toward more public access as the county spends down its voter-approved money for conservation purchases — about \$4.5 million remains — and since state money for those acquisitions has been slashed. Bird said with all the other areas of government that require monies from the county general fund, Alachua County Forever is not likely to see any additional boost in the money received from that source.

County Commissioner Susan Baird said providing funding for public access is not something that interests her. "I do not care about it at all," she said. Baird has, as recently as December, voted to approve conservation purchases along with the other board members. She also has voted with other commissioners to place the lands on a protected registry, meaning they cannot be sold or have their land use changed without approval in voter referendum. Voters required the creation of that registry but did not mandate the lands that would be on it. Still, Baird has remained a critic of the program and said she was "annoyed with myself" for her December vote.

She said she believes the program takes property that could generate revenue off the tax rolls or pays too much for undevelopable wetlands. She said she does not feel residents make much use of the Alachua County Forever properties that are open to the public and that recreation monies instead should go toward Kanapaha Park or Jonesville Park.

On the Alachua County Forever website, the argument that the program removes too much land from the tax rolls is placed under the category of "myths and legends." Because most of the land carried agricultural exemptions, the total taxable value at the time of purchase was approximately \$7.8 million, according to the county. By comparison, the countywide taxable value this year is almost \$11.7 billion.

Some of the larger county-managed lands that are open daily include the approximately 1,200-acre Mill Creek Preserve north of the city of Alachua; the approximately 640-acre Phifer Flatwoods; and the 114-acre Paynes Prairie Sweetwater Preserve. Other large tracts are open to the public as part of state preserves — such as the St. Johns River Water Management District's Newnan's Lake Conservation Area and Lochloosa Wildlife Conservation Area.

Buch said partnerships that have water management districts and organizations such as the nonprofit Alachua Conservation Trust managing county-owned lands are one way to open them to the public with little county funding. The program has a strong volunteer base, he said, and relies on minor offenders sentenced to community service hours for much of the labor put into developing trail systems. Talks are ongoing with the nonprofit Florida Trail Association, a statewide organization with headquarters in Gainesville, on a pact that would have that group leading tours through conservation properties — including those currently open only through appointment.

Dennis Miranda, executive director of the Florida Trail Association, said that since the recession, many local governments do not have the resources or "political will" to invest in infrastructure on conservation properties. The proposed Discover Alachua Forever initiative, he said, would be one way to allow public access and use.

The county also has an untapped \$2 million from the 2000 referendum set aside for site improvements, Buch said. That money will go toward improvements at the Barr Hammock-Levy Prairie property, the largest county-owned tract, and its Turkey Creek preserve, he said.

Alachua Conservation Trust Executive Director Robert Hutchinson, a former county commissioner and driving force behind the establishment of the land conservation program, said seeing through the program will take a multi-generational commitment. "We were all about saying this generation's job was to acquire and protect the land, and it might be the next generation's job to maintain and manage it," he said.