

Summary of discussion with Robert Hutchinson, Director of Alachua Conservation Trust, regarding EPD Survey, specific section of land; acquisition and management. Submitted by Joni Ellis

The following questions were discussed in regard to EPD's performance :

1. Effectiveness
2. Duplication of Services
3. Following the Commissions guidance; comp plans, over zealous, etc.
4. Mandates vs funding; how can the department provide services expected by the taxpayers with continually shrinking funding sources?
5. What do think should be the priorities for the Department over the next five years?

### EFFECTIVENESS

Mr. Hutchinson felt that EPD had an attitude of "How can we help you comply?" They offer consultations and advise on how to come into compliance or meet the mandates required of any situation regarding land. He felt they did an exceptional job; that the program is squeaky clean. There is a lot of temptation to participate in favoritism in land acquisition. There have been many examples of corruption in other counties and the state level that have motivated EPD to have clear policy and clean deals regarding clear title and other details of a transaction.

There may be some who feel that the County has paid too much for some land. However, the record would reflect that every deal has been a thrifty purchase for the County with many purchases being bought for less then their true value. In fact, if you were to err on the side of over payment, this would be better. There is an image of honesty on the part of the land sellers. If people feel you are cheating them, they will double the price of the land making more difficult to make purchases in the future.

Land management is being done with fewer people per acre than other agencies and is a very efficient. It is important to have the right number of people per acre to get the job done. There have been some partnership contracts that pooled resources and were very efficient. However, those contracts have run out and due to budget constraints statewide, have not been renewed.

### DUPLICATION OF SERVICES

EPD provides very good customer service, you actually get a person on the phone when you call their office. With the state downsizing due to budget constraints, they no longer have an effective enforcement arm. EPD is tied into the Counties permitting process to provide a quick review and comments on environmental impacts before construction begins on a site. This has proven to work efficiently and effectively. The county can provide better response to local issues. There are times when two sets of permits are required; one from the county and one from the water management district, this may change given the downsizing of the water management districts.

Our county parks department handles basic mowing and maintenance contracts. With fewer employees and money, some parks are being managed by local cities such as High Springs who manages Poe Springs. EPD does more land management such as prescribed fire, trail development and maintenance, removal of exotic plants.

#### FOLLOWING THE COMMISSION GUIDANCE

EPD's land acquisition director, Ramesh Bush, is very meticulous as he works through a layered process. Beginning with a concept, then a deal and then a contract. Each step of the way he presents information to the County Commission so that any purchase is discussed in public at least three times. This provides transparency and clear communication with the public as well as the County Commission.

#### MANDATE vs FUNDING

EPD may need to turn an active volunteer program to achieve some of their goals. Community Service workers are available and Alachua Conservation Trust has found them quite valuable for field work. There are also programs such as Retired Senior Volunteer Program that offer retired professionals with skill sets that may be helpful.

Funding is drying up across the board, all agencies are downsizing their budgets and therefore, their services. It is at this time our County EPD become so vital to maintain the quality of life and land we have come to expect in Alachua County.

Land acquisition will come to a halt after 2012. There are no significant funds planned from State or County for land acquisition. The focus will be on managing what we have, enforcing conservation easements and regulatory enforcement.

#### FIVE YEAR PRIORITIES

Development of an Ecotourism Incubator; showcasing people making a living off the land and doing resource management well. For example, if the county has property that needs laurel oaks removed; contract with someone who wants to remove the chips and sell them to a paper mill or bio-mass plant, or sell mulch. Win-win situations such as this can reduce the cost of having employees out there with costly equipment getting the job done.

Mr. Hutchinson would be happy to review a draft of the final report if this is helpful. He may have helpful comments given his history with this program.