

Cape Coral could designate city-owned land for gopher tortoise habitat

[Sarah Jarvis](#)

In Florida, the gopher tortoise is listed as threatened and both the tortoise and its burrow are protected under state law. GINNY BEAGAN/ TCPALM via Wochit, Wochit

Cape Coral environmental activists are pushing for more protections for gopher tortoises in the city, through an ordinance and the designation of a preserve.

Members of the [Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife](#) say a six-acre land parcel the city owns in northwest Cape is the perfect location for the threatened species. The land is zoned for parks and recreation, but there are no immediate plans to construct a park on the site, which is home to trees, tortoises, and other wildlife.

Pascha Donaldson, vice president of the wildlife group, said the land is ideal for a "passive park," with an emphasis on preservation, similar to the Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve in Fort Myers. The property is located at 3701 NW 47th St.

"There are so many gopher tortoises," Donaldson said of the land, which is just west of the [Yucca Pens Preserve](#). "We're hoping the city will make this six acres a designated gopher tortoise habitat."



A sign posted on a six-acre, city-owned property in northwest Cape Coral warns visitors not to disturb gopher tortoises. The city is considering designating the land as a preserve for the tortoises' habitat. *(Photo: Sarah Jarvis/The News-Press)*

More: [Keep an eye out for the Florida gopher tortoise, a threatened species](#)

The group has also approached the lot owners of about 10 vacant lots across NW 47th Street in hopes of including the properties in the preserve, but hasn't yet heard anything back. Donaldson said it would be good to include those properties because they back up to a water source — the Cassandra Canal.

Maureen Buice, a public information specialist with the city, said staff met to discuss a wildlife conservation program.

"The City is considering options for the city-owned properties in the northwest Cape related to maintaining the gopher tortoise habitat," Buice said via email. "Staff will be working with CCFW to discuss these options."

Donaldson is hopeful about the possibility of having a conservation program

in the city.

"I think our council will be receptive to it," Donaldson said. "We do have a council that is environmentally-friendly."

Cheryl Anderson, a board member of the [Cape Coral Wildlife Trust](#), said members of the trust purchased two lots last year just south of Tropicana Parkway that was home to many gopher tortoises. After the city's ongoing Utilities Extension Project came through that area, the number of gopher tortoise burrows on the sites increased from about 25 to 87.



The Cassandra Canal in Cape Coral (*Photo: Sarah Jarvis/The News-Press*)

More: [Sanibel wildlife hospital home to largest gopher tortoise on record in Florida](#)

She said the disturbance from the construction caused the tortoises to migrate to their lots.

"If you provide them with a safe spot, that's where they'll go," Anderson

said. "That's our idea for this area up in the north: As houses are built and construction happens up there, if we can provide them a safe place to be, that's where they'll go."

She said it would also make economic sense to create a designated space for the tortoises.

"It will be in the city's best interest to provide a place for them and keep them in Cape Coral, instead of paying huge mitigation fees to try and relocate them to rural sites," Anderson said.

Gopher tortoise ordinance

Cape Coral City Council will also be discussing a proposal to allow local police and code compliance officers to enforce state protections for gopher tortoises — similar to the burrowing owl ordinance council members unanimously passed in January.

More: [Cape Coral City Council unanimously passes ordinance for burrowing owl protections](#)

Anderson said council will discuss the measure at its regular meeting on June 10.

Gopher tortoises are protected under state law; they must be relocated before any land clearing or development takes place, and property owners must obtain permits from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission before they can move them.



A screenshot of Google Maps shows the six-acre, city-owned property that could become a preserve for gopher tortoises. The property is located off of NW 47th Street. *(Photo: Google Maps)*

Those who kill, harass or destroy gopher tortoises, their eggs or burrows could face up to five years in prison and/or a maximum \$5,000 fine for the third-degree felony.

Donaldson said she is hopeful that the measure will pass, since local construction industry members have been part of the discussions, as they were with the burrowing owl ordinance. She said their cooperation, along with that of city staff, has been instrumental in getting to this point.

Gopher tortoises are found all over Florida. You can access the FWC's user-submitted map of gopher tortoises [here](#).

How to help gopher tortoises

Those who witness a wildlife law violation can contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Wildlife Alert Reward Program at 888-404-FWCC (3922) or online [here](#).

Donaldson said it's common for people to confuse gopher tortoises with

turtles, and to try and save them by placing them in water. But that will immediately kill the tortoises, she said. She said only creatures with webbed feet should go in the water.

Gopher tortoises have rounder shells than turtles, and they have nails to burrow in the ground. Donaldson said those who find tortoises crossing the street should pick them up and place them off the road in the direction they were heading.



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A gopher tortoise feeds on a trail at the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed on Friday morning. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

"If you don't know; don't put them in the water," Donaldson said.

Those interested in donating money or land to the Cape Coral Wildlife Trust can visit capecoralwildlifetrust.org for more information.

Do you think the city should designate this property for gopher tortoise habitat preservation? Reach the reporter Sarah Jarvis at sjarvis@news-press.com or 239-335-0275. Follow Sarah on Twitter [@sarahjarvisnp](https://twitter.com/sarahjarvisnp).



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