

On the November ballot: preserving Sarasota's natural environment

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On the Nov. 3 General Election ballot, Sarasota County citizens will decide whether to extend two existing tax and bond referendums to continue the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program and the Neighborhood Parkland Program.

Voters initially approved the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Program in 1999. Its purpose was to acquire and maintain natural lands within the county to protect wildlife habitat, preserve our water sources, improve our water quality, reduce flood risks and conserve sensitive lands for the future.

The program garnered community support across political lines, as evidenced by the fact that a 2005 extension of the program was approved by 80% of Sarasota County voters. The 2005 ballot extended the program through 2029, increased the bond limits and added the Neighborhood Parkland Program, which expands access to natural and cultural resources.

To date, the programs have protected over 132 properties totaling over 42,000 acres. Some properties protected include Snook Haven Campground, Red Bug Slough Preserve, Old Myakka Preserve, Deer Prairie Creek Preserve, and Sleeping Turtles Preserve North.

The November ballot will contain two referendums asking Sarasota County voters to continue funding the Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Neighborhood Parkland Programs for an additional 20 years. The scope and the cost of the programs will remain unchanged.

The first referendum allows the county to continue an up to .25 millage ad valorem tax to acquire and protect natural lands and parklands throughout Sarasota County. (A .25 mil ad valorem tax means you pay a \$0.25 tax for every \$1,000 of your property's taxable value.) This is not a new or increased tax. It's a continuation of an existing tax through 2049.

The second referendum allows the county to use bonds to better facilitate payment for the acquisition and maintenance of properties for preservation. Again, the bond terms are unchanged from the current terms, except for the expiration date. The bonds will be paid by the .25 mil tax and must mature by the end of 2049.

Continuing the programs will ensure the county has the resources needed to acquire lands from property owners who want their natural lands preserved over time. Potential acquisitions are reviewed by a citizens' advisory group, which recommends purchases

to the county commission. Independent audits are also conducted annually to review the program's activities.

The League of Women Voters has a long history of promoting responsible stewardship of Sarasota County's natural resources. We believe the Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Neighborhood Parkland programs prioritize what voters care about most: clean water, flood protection, wildlife, natural areas, parks and open space. We celebrate the programs' universal support and the power of what we, as a community, can do when we work together.

Ann Hardy, Leader

LWVSRQ Natural Resources Action Team