



MINUTES – October 21, 2025

ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS ACQUISITION PANEL (ELAP)

Minutes of the
Environmental Lands Acquisition Panel
Indian River County Administration Complex,
Building A, Commission Chambers
1801 27th Street, Vero Beach, FL
5:30 PM Tuesday, October 21, 2025

9 members/6 for quorum

1. **Call to Order**

Chair Roland DeBlois called the October 21, 2025, meeting of the Environmental Lands Acquisition Panel (ELAP) to order at 5:30 PM.

A full recording of this meeting is available in the office of the Board of County Commissioners.

2. **Roll Call**

Members Present:

Grant Gilmore	Natural Resources Representative
Roland DeBlois	Planning or Engineering Representative
John Orcutt	Real Estate or Finance Representative
Heather Stapleton	Natural Resources Representative
Samantha McGee	District 1 Appointee
Janice Broda	District 2 Appointee
Daniel Bott	District 3 Appointee
Patrick Pitts	District 4 Appointee
James Connaughton	District 5 Appointee
Joseph Earman	Commissioner, BCC Liaison

Members Absent:

Others Present:

Wendy Swindell	Conservation Lands Manager
Beth Powell	Director - Parks, Recreation & Conservation
Kimberly K. Moirano	BCC Recording Secretary
CE Swindell	Public
Chris Hicks	Attorney

Minimum Quorum requirements were met.

3. Approval of Minutes:

No minutes to approve.

4. Discussion Items

- a. Overview and discussion of the ranking process for all nominee properties

At 5:30 p.m. Samantha McGee arrived.

Ms. Wendy Swindell stated that one of the things she first wanted to mention was everybody should have gotten an e-mail that gave you the appraisals and information about the Jungle Trail, Island Club Manor, and the Winter Beach 73rd properties. Those were presented to the Board this morning, just an overview, knowing that we were going to bring the Sale Agreements back in November. Jungle Trail would be brought back on November 4th, and Winter Beach will be the 18th. But like we did at the last meeting, we would like to at least put it out there for the ELAP to give any feedback that staff can take back to the Board in terms of the offers and the agreements.

Mr. DeBlois stated it's good to see the progress moving forward on these properties. We're looking for a formal Motion in support to move these projects forward for the Commission to consider.

Ms. Swindell stated that first we have to complete the due diligence period. As discussed at the last meeting, the Hale project and the Durant's project, those did go for the Board for approval, and now we've entered the 60-day due diligence period where we're doing Phase One, the boundary survey and the title searches. Once those are complete, then those projects, in addition to a very schematic conceptual plan, are brought back to the Board to actually approve the Purchase Agreement. So, we really can't pursue any leveraging funding until we have a commitment for the properties. Once that property is firmly secured, then staff can begin the process of vetting out any possible leveraging of funding.

ON MOTION made by James Connaughton and SECONDED by Heather Stapleton to move the two projects, Jungle Trail Island Club and Winter Beach forward.

The motion PASSED unanimously.

2. Update on the status of Nomination Period 1 projects

Ms. Swindell stated the second topic she wanted to bring up is we are continuously going back to the non-willing sellers from the Nomination Period One properties to continue to determine if there's any change in plan or interest. So, we have had some feedback that there may be, so she will be bringing that back when we have some real detailed information for you. One of the points where we're at with the Tier One easement properties is the Padgett Branch Easement. The Bond consultant has been negotiating back and forth with the owner. We're at a point now where we believe that we really need to flesh out the details of what the Easement language would look like. We have appraisals done but it really seems at this point like that's going to be significantly impacted by what the County's desire is for that property. So, at this point, we're slowing things down a tiny bit to discuss with some outside council development of the easement language. They will certainly bring that language to ELAP for consideration. But one of the things that staff have done in the interim is they have gone and they have been able to map all of the suitable gopher tortoise soils west of 95 and start looking at properties, Padgett included, and also anything adjacent to that. If you recall one of the items that we had discussed was possibly if the owner of that easement wanted to develop a relocation bank for gopher tortoises and that was done with one of the initial easements that the County would reserve the right or hopefully within the easement language have language in there that specifically said Indian River County had the ability to secure "x" percent of the bank for County projects so that we were getting that public benefit. It doesn't look like that's going to be a strong need. Unfortunately, a lot of the western part of the County is not really suitable or if it is, it's probably at a density per acre for tortoises that wouldn't necessarily be realistic. So, while she is not at this point able to completely rule that out, it just doesn't seem as high of a priority as we had originally thought. The other two considerations were that we wanted to have

increased public access so one of the easement language tasks is going to be how we can put in place, not just a location for access, but also what type of access and how frequent the access. Staff have been discussing, looking at the geometry of these sites. Is there a corridor that we could develop that would be a corridor that we could maintain and designate so that the public would be able to use that either for a specified period of time or maybe it would be staff driven events. We're not sure about that just yet, but finding a more meaningful opportunity for the public to see these properties is important, at least from the direction we got from the Board. So that would be one part of the language and then the other part of the language would be looking at those landscapes and identifying instead of taking that baseline snapshot in time and saying keep it this way forever, working with the landowners to develop some restoration opportunities to bring some of the habitat up to where it really should be in order to take that snapshot because from the period when the first bonds were done until now, the level of invasive species invasion has just become huge. So, it is a much more critical element that we look at right now and having that commitment that here's the baseline that we're working with, even if it means that the County has to work with those landowners to look for opportunities for funding such as FWC funds a lot of our properties for invasive species management. She didn't even know if they would do that on this type of property, but we feel it's very important for if it is going to be preserved as part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor to have that wildlife benefit be there in perpetuity. So those two things are going to be talked about with an attorney to try and develop that language and go back to the owner and see where that falls out. If it's going to affect the appraisal that we have significantly, then we need to address that now. So just wanted to kind of update the ELAP on that. Just to let you know, we're getting ready to do our ranking, but she did want to mention that at the last couple meetings, she has talked about the conservation fund's interest in what they're calling the Crosby Track, and we call the 12300 Archie Carr Track. They have completed an appraisal of that property, and they've actually made an offer to that landowner. So, whether or not they take that offer, she had no input into that except they're just keeping us in that loop because they do want us as a project partner. We haven't really figured out if that can happen or how that would happen, but they're keeping us in the loop on all the progress on that because they have a set amount of monies that they've gotten from this Deep Water Horizon Mitigation Fund and they would like to leverage that too to maximize what their opportunities are. So, she wanted to mention that to you, so she thought that was interesting. She attended the beaches and shores meeting yesterday and she had a lot of feedback on from both their committee as well as the people that attended that meeting that they wanted to let the ELAP know that they are very interested and supportive of any beachfront properties. But in general, she knew that during the first two nomination periods, there were a significant number of lots that were purchased either with state funds or jointly that were set aside as part of the refuge. City of Sebastian passed a resolution recently in support of the Environmental Land Bond, the ELAP and the process that we're doing. All of these materials will be added to the hub just for reference.

We have one more property that we have a signed Agreement on. It's the Osprey Estates parcel on 45th Street. Once that public notice is issued, we'll be doing the same process, and we'll be sending you out a copy of the appraisals and the sales agreement on that one as well. We'll discuss that at the next meeting to get your thoughts and feedback for the Board. Given the timing on that, probably the soonest that would go to the Board for actual action would be December 9th, but we will likely take it to the Board, the last meeting in November to at least present it for discussion and questions for the Board. One of the things that they have done tonight before we get into the actual hearing part is they took all of the scores and they put the Period 2 and Period 3 scoring and one table on one side of the paper and on the other side they have set that into a separate table including the nomination period 1 properties.

Ms. Beth Powell stated one thing that they wanted to talk to the Board about today, but one of the things moving forward for this next nomination period would be whether or not you would like to give direction for staff to look specifically at two different areas for nominations or bringing some information back to the ELAP that may not otherwise get considered. The first would be on the coastal properties. She has mentioned at least at three different Beach and Shores meetings that we have a lot of coastal parcels, particularly on the beach that are in the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge or elsewhere where we have high density nesting sea turtles. We also have coastal erosion and other things that that habitat is really critical to protect. The last time she talked to Quintin Bergman who works on our coastal team, they talked about the fact that he knew of parcels that would benefit from acquisition and would significantly assist coastal management and particularly the sea turtle nesting. On the same end, but on a different habitat type would be looking at any of our scrub jay parcels that are located within the City of Sebastian that could potentially augment the protection measures that have been there for over 20 years as part of our habitat conservation plan. We have 14,000 quarter acre lots that are permitted under the Scrub Jay Habitat Conservation Plan. Those lots will be released at any given time under the HCP and the ITP that we have currently with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We have five years left on that plan and one thing that has not been done yet is really a snapshot or an analysis of where we are today, 20 years after that plan was approved. So, there may be small parcels that could have some significant benefit to the scrub jays that they're managing on protected land that would otherwise be lost. The landscape has changed over time, perhaps some

things that were not suitable at the time are now suitable or adjacent to populations of jays that could benefit from those extra quarter acres. So, quarter acre lots have a lot of significant benefit to jays, whether they're traveling through an area or perhaps there are territories there that if we had four or five different lots could expand that area to support more territories or families. One of the things that the staff has not done to date is really have any input into the process. We've been leaning on the public to provide nominations and so we have not opened that up for a staff assessment because the nominations are sort of low and dwindling and maybe not as we had expected. We thought that those are two key areas where staff have specific expertise in those particular habitat types and perhaps, we can lend some recommendations to ELAP or even nominate parcels so that you can consider them. She wouldn't want to start just nominating a bunch of properties. She would rather it be a measured approach because it does cost money once a property is nominated. We go through a due diligence period internally looking at lots of things and so to get it even into the dashboard and into the system is a level of effort. She didn't want to overwhelm this process that we're already going through but she did think now is a good time when we have a slate of properties that it might be helpful for the ELAP and the Board to be thinking about long-term from both the coastal management standpoint but also from our scrub jays standpoint that it might be important for us.

Ms. Powell stated at least for the scrub jay lots, she didn't think the volume is quite what it was and so there's a little bit more opportunity for us to have a strategy toward, you know, maybe they are three or five individual lots, but they're consecutive and adjacent to a conservation area. They support an existing family, then we're targeting 5 versus 80. The lots themselves may be small, but she thought being able to look at what do we have left are these lots, were they identified as potentially occupied or occupied at the time. If they still are, I think that raises the value at least for scrub jays, sea turtles is a little bit differently, but these lots, acquiring them, there may be some different funding opportunities because they're supporting the Habitat Conservation Plan so we may be able to tap into different funds, once they're developed, they'll be gone forever and so we will never be able to get that habitat back. She thought now might be a really good time to think about that, even if it does require a little bit more effort on our part to acquire those properties. There are some big properties, and we've learned a lot about scrub jays over the last 20 years. For instance, we can take tertiary suboptimal habitat, and we can restore it if it has suitable soils. To be really beneficial corridors for movement of jays and what they're really trying to protect is a biological diversity of the species. We do care about the individual birds themselves, but what we really care about is making sure that the state park has a very strong genetic influx of different birds so that there's not as much inbreeding. They know that jays do sort of have this inbreeding and they seem to be fairly resilient with it, but if you have some type of catastrophic event, the more jays that we have adjacent to the community where we know that there's dispersal happening, we've learned that these suburban jays are extremely valuable to the overall subpopulation that it makes up the southern Indian River, northern Indian River County, and southern Brevard County larger populations. We had ten families of jays in 2000 on the protected areas, and we now have a 32 total if you take the net loss of 5 away, we're above our net loss by 16 breeding territories. We have documentation that the jays are traveling to the St. Sebastian River State Park. We have 55 known dispersals which is just what we know about through the banding that we've done. We know that the corridors are working. We know the habitat management is working, and we also know now that we can take this suboptimal habitat, for instance, there's a parcel I think it's already been nominated in the Sebastian Highlands. It's mainly pine flatwoods that property could be optimized for the movement of jays. Now there is always a counterargument to that type of habitat management is that you are managing for a single species. So, for instance you lose the habitat type that might support other more common species and there's always room for debate on whether or not that's our intention. She thought we should be very clear about if we purchase a piece of property like that, is it our intention that it's supporting the HCP or is it our intention that it's to support the actual habitat that's there because there is some room and leverage there to manipulate that a little bit depending on what your goal is. But there are still scrub lots that hold scrub like actual true Xeric Florida Scrub and that's a globally imperiled habitat type. If it's adjacent to a conservation area, she thought those lots, even though they're quarter acre lots, are really important for preserving and protecting. They would not really fall out well in our ranking criteria and I feel differently. You have every opportunity to discuss it at the group. The only hope is that at the end of the meeting that we do end up with a ranked list that's approved that they can move to the Board. As what Mr. DeBlois stated, if that doesn't happen, then we just hunt and figure out the next plan.

There was a lengthy discussion among the Board members.

Mr. Roland DeBlois stated that he has heard a consensus that the panel supports what Ms. Powell has proposed as far as proceeding with the two studies.

Ms. Powell stated she thought all scrub is valuable, period. There has been so much land that's been developed

and when it's been developed, everything changes. It's not like any portion of it remains. You have just so many different changes that happen. You have, for instance, blue jays come into urban areas and start, you know, eating out of the feeder, which displaces a Florida scrub jay, for instance. They can't share that same territory. Even adult jays will linger in a developed area until they die basically. We have a scrub JHCP and a viable population now. They say, once you get above 25 families, your susceptibility is 50%. There's a 50% likelihood of extinction. One scrub lot is not in my mind the same as another for many different reasons. One would be proximity to conservation areas, and the other would be proximity to known jay species. When jays leave an area, they will never return. There are about seven families or so that are no longer present and will likely no longer ever return to those areas. Each family requires no less than 12, but typically about 20 acres depending on the habitat that is adjacent to it. They had at one time five families living at Pelican Island Elementary School, which is 12 acres. So, they can, that's not ideal, and it's not typical, but what was happening is as the development was happening, and they were also simultaneously, because at the time that the permits were issued, we started doing land management. There was development occurring, and there was habitat restoration happening and the jays all descended on this little, tiny 12-acre conservation area. That has stabilized so they now support two families at Pelican Island Elementary School. That's not ideal. In these urban areas, they can persist in areas as small as 10 acres. But again, that's not necessarily ideal. They're looking to keep that habitat type optimal at all times. In a normal wildland environment, you have a wildfire come through, it burns everything down to the ground pretty much, pretty catastrophic, but they move into a different area that has now has better suitability. As that burned area grows up, they kind of move around but jays don't typically go more they don't disperse more than two miles so that these little stepping stones these little protected areas managed for the species benefit all the other scrub species but to have those other scrub species you have to have the soils and you have to have the other things.

3. Ranking of Period 2 & 3 projects

There was a lengthy discussion concerning Period 2 & 3 projects ranking information. There was discussion from the public regarding individual properties up for nomination. In the nomination Period 1 they had so many properties that the tiering became very critical because it was the first flush at how much staff can effectively negotiate at any one time. There was more of a need to tier those appropriately so that they could dedicate the resources that they needed to.

Mr. Pitts brought up Hobart Scrub, and he didn't rank it as high as the rest of the panel because he stated that two thirds of that property is really disturbed and he didn't rank it that high because he didn't know if the County had the resources to manage it and restore it like it needs to be done. He wanted to know if there are resources to restore the property. Ms. Powell stated that the intent would be to restore the property to oak scrub because the soils are aligned with that. The bond money can be used for restoration and initial improvements. She felt the positive thing is that given the funding situations are up in the air right now but from our past perspective if we have that seed money for restoration it would compete really well for native habitation restoration grants. So, for instance, back in the day we could have absolutely applied for a U.S. Coastal's grant to support and augment the HCP work because it would compete really well for that. She thought that if that opportunity doesn't exist now, it will likely exist at some point in the future. She thought that it would be wise to set aside a fairly significant amount of the bond proceed towards restoration because it is very difficult but not impossible. We have to think about how we would do that. We have some really good examples of scrub restorations, so we know that it works. It does take a long time, and it takes some resources that are somewhat different. The main cost there is not the plans. We have been learning a lot from Cypress Bend, Halstrom and from Lost Tree and we even own some of the equipment that can be used in different locations. We're getting pretty good at being able to restore these difficult habitat types. It is already supporting a lot of the listed species. It does provide a corridor for Jays. We have Jays at Hawks Nest, Sandridge and Red Stick so they know that even if you don't plant anything it provides a safe corridor for Jays to travel through. It would be better if they could persist there. They have essentially lost the safe passageway for Jays to make it to the South County, North St. Lucie County Jays which they have documented dispersal to and from those locations.

***ON MOTION made by Janice Broda and SECONDED by James Connaughton
to hold off on pursuing Tier 2s until Tier 1s are exhausted.***

The motion PASSED unanimously.

There was further discussion.

ON MOTION made by James Connaughton and SECONDED by Heather Stapelton to move anything under 3,000 points to Tier 3.

The motion PASSED unanimously.

Ms. Swindell stated if we need to have a special meeting to discuss some stuff that might come up in the next few weeks that might be a little bit time sensitive would the ELAP Committee be open to at least considering that. She wasn't sure that we were going to need that. She just threw it out that there may be some things that shouldn't wait until we meet again in November.

4. **Public Comment:**

There was discussion regarding the criteria of the properties.

5. **Next Meeting:**

The next scheduled meeting of ELAP is on November 18, 2025, at 5:30 PM in Building B, Room B1-501.

6. **Adjournment:** Chair Roland DeBlois adjourned the meeting at 7:20 PM.

submitted,

Kimberly K. Moirano

A copy of the full meeting recording is kept on file in the office of the Board of County Commissioners.