



MINUTES – February 16, 2026

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, February 17, 2026

9 members/6 for quorum

1. Call to Order

Chair Roland DeBlois called the February 17, 2026, 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
Heather Stapleton	Natural Resources Representative
Janice Broda	District 2 Appointee
Patrick Pitts	District 4 Appointee
John Orcutt	Real Estate or Finance Representative
Daniel Bott	District 3 Appointee
Samantha McGee	District 1 Appointee

Members Absent:

James Connaughton	District 5 Appointee
Joseph Earman	Commissioner, BCC Liaison

Others Present:

Wendy Swindell	Conservation Lands Manager
Beth Powell	Director - Parks, Recreation & Conservation
Max Sherman	BCC Recording Secretary
Chris Hicks	Attorney
Rose West	Indian River Land Trust
Ken Grudens	Indian River Land Trust

3. Approval of Minutes:

The approval of the minutes from the previous meeting has been delayed until the following meeting.

4. Discussion Items

Staff presented the Period 4 nominated properties and provided an overview of each parcel. Staff explained that property owners had been contacted to determine whether they were willing sellers and that limited responses had been received. The committee reviewed each nomination to determine whether it met the minimum criteria required to move forward in the conservation lands evaluation process.

Indian River Farms Company (9.41 acres)

Staff reported that the property appears largely disturbed and is not adjacent to public conservation lands. Desktop review did not identify qualifying habitat or listed species.

***ON MOTION made by Daniel Bott and SECONDED by Heather Stapleton moved that this property does not meet the minimum criteria.
The motion PASSED unanimously.***

Holiday Village Property (approximately 8 acres)

Staff described the parcel as a previously developed RV/mobile home site that has been cleared and is surrounded by residential development. Members discussed potential uses such as environmental education; however, staff clarified that the conservation lands program is governed by the voter-approved Environmental Lands bond resolution, which focuses on habitat conservation rather than park development.

***ON MOTION made by Janice Broda and SECONDED by Daniel Bott moved that this property does not meet the minimum criteria.
The motion PASSED unanimously.***

Elkham Waterway Parcel

Staff reported that the property is located along the South Prong Slough system, which connects to the County's Blueway network. The owner indicated a willingness to discuss a potential acquisition, although they may wish to retain their residence.

***ON MOTION made by Heather Stapleton and SECONDED by Samantha McGee moved that this property does meet the minimum criteria.
The motion PASSED unanimously.***

Elkham Waterway Graves Property (68.69 acres)

Staff described the parcel as primarily citrus with mapped wetland features and adjacency to conservation lands

including Land Trust property and the South Prong Preserve.

***ON MOTION made by Heather Stapleton and SECONDED by Samantha McGee moved that this property does meet the minimum criteria.
The motion PASSED unanimously.***

Elkham Waterway In-Site Parcel (9.76 acres)

Staff noted the parcel is slightly under five acres of mapped habitat but may qualify due to its contiguity with larger off-site habitat areas.

***ON MOTION made by Daniel Bott and SECONDED by Heather Stapleton moved that this property does meet the minimum criteria.
The motion PASSED unanimously.***

58th Avenue Property (35.5 acres)

Staff reported the parcel is largely dominated by Brazilian pepper and does not appear to meet criteria related to native habitat, rare species presence, or designated Blueway/Greenway connectivity. Members discussed the ecological importance of nearby canals and headwaters but noted the program criteria focus on designated natural corridors.

***ON MOTION made by Daniel Bott and SECONDED by Patrick Pitts moved that this property does meet the minimum criteria.
The motion PASSED unanimously.***

Parcel Adjacent to North Sebastian Conservation Area (4.89 acres)

Staff noted that although the parcel is slightly under five acres, it is contiguous with the North Sebastian Conservation Area.

Motion: Direct staff to investigate the adjacent southeastern parcel to determine whether acquisition of both parcels could improve connectivity and access.

Vote: Motion carried.

***ON MOTION made by Patrick Pitts and SECONDED by Heather Stapleton moved to investigate the adjacent southeastern parcel to determine whether acquisition of both parcels could improve connectivity and access
The motion PASSED unanimously.***

2. Update on the status of Nomination Period 1 through 3 projects

Five properties have completed the due diligence process and are proceeding toward closing.

Jungle Trail Island Club Manor

- Anticipated closing prior to March 4.
- Survey identified a minor boundary overlap, which will be resolved through a boundary agreement.

- Staff will report the issue to the Board as part of the due diligence update.

Palm Bay Durance and Hail Grove Parcels

- Survey identified an 18-foot by approximately 300-foot boundary gap.
- The issue was presented to the Board of County Commissioners.
- The Board unanimously voted to proceed with the purchase.
- Tentative closing date: February 26.

Gifford Property (south of Gifford Dock)

- Due diligence completed.
- Target closing date: February 25.

Winter Beach 73rd Parcel

- Boundary issues were identified.
- Staff requested an extension of the due diligence period while the issue is resolved.
- No closing date has been set.

Staff also reported that St. Johns staff successfully contacted the owner of a remaining portion of the 73rd parcel, who indicated potential interest in selling.

Period 2 and 3 Projects

Staff reported that the County has received one set of appraisals for Tier I parcels and is awaiting the second set, expected later in the week. Negotiations will begin once both appraisals are received.

Staff also reported that the Conservation Fund RFP was canceled after negotiations did not result in an agreement. The County is evaluating other options moving forward.

3. Update on the Status and Discussion on the Three Tier II Easement Properties (Fort Drum, Covey Ranch, Kanner Farms) as Fee Simple Purchases

Staff reported that discussions with Tier I easement property owners are ongoing. **Padgett Ranch**, the highest-ranked easement property, is currently the only owner actively discussing potential acquisition terms. Staff conducted a site visit and noted the property is well managed and supports wildlife habitat.

Staff reiterated that the **Board of County Commissioners has directed staff to focus on Tier I properties first**, with Tier II properties to be considered once Tier I opportunities are exhausted.

Public Presentation

Rose West, Land Acquisition Manager with the **Indian River Land Trust**, presented information regarding a **Florida Department of Transportation wildlife crossing located along State Road 60** near the **Fort Drum property**. She noted that the crossing is the only designated wildlife crossing within the county and serves as an important corridor for wildlife movement.

Ms. West also announced that the Land Trust is willing to **contribute up to 20% of the purchase price, not to exceed**

\$300,000, toward the acquisition of a conservation easement on the Fort Drum property. Committee members discussed the new information and whether it warranted consideration outside of the normal ranking process under provisions for **emergency acquisitions**.

ON MOTION made by Daniel Bott and SECONDED by Patrick Pitts moved to declare the Fort Drum easement property an emergency acquisition opportunity based on the new information regarding the wildlife crossing and the Land Trust's offer to provide cost-share funding.

The motion PASSED unanimously.

The committee directed that the information and recommendation be forwarded to the Board of County Commissioners for consideration.

5. **Public Comment:**

None.

6. **Next Meeting:**

The next scheduled meeting of ELAP is on March 17, 2026, at 5:30 PM in Building B, Room B1-501.

7. **Adjournment:** Chair Roland DeBlois adjourned the meeting at 6:53 PM.

submitted,

Max Sherman

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