



MINUTES – March 17, 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, March 17, 2026

9 members/6 for quorum

1. Call to Order

Chair Roland DeBlois called the March 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
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Others Present:

Wendy Swindell	Conservation Lands Manager
Beth Powell	Director - Parks, Recreation & Conservation
Max Sherman	BOCC Recording Secretary
Jennifer Shuler	County Attorney
Rose West	Indian River Land Trust
Joseph Earman	Commissioner, BCC Liaison
Jessica Watson	Conservation Lands
Michael Zito	Deputy Count Administrator
Ashley Lingwood	IRC BOCC

Minimum Quorum requirements were met.

3. Election of Officers

A. Chair.

***ON MOTION made by Janice Broda and SECONDED by John Orcutt moved to elect Roland Deblois as Chairman for the ELAP.
This motion PASSED unanimously.***

B. Vice-Chair.

***ON MOTION made by John Orcutt and SECONDED by Daniel Bott moved to elect Janice Broda as Vice-Chairman for the ELAP.
This motion PASSED unanimously.***

4. Approval of Minutes

A. December 16, 2025 – Regular Meeting

***ON MOTION made by Daniel Bott and SECONDED by Heather Stapleton moved to approve the minutes for the December 16th, 2025 regular meeting.
This motion PASSED unanimously.***

B. February 17, 2025 – Regular Meeting

Corrections were noted for the February 17, 2026 minutes, including:

- a. Samantha McGee should be reflected as present.
- b. Ken Grudens from the IRLT should be shown as present.
- c. A spelling correction was identified for the Elkham Waterway parcel.

***ON MOTION made by Daniel Bott and SECONDED by Heather Stapleton moved to approve the minutes as amended from the February 17th, 2026 regular meeting.
This motion PASSED unanimously.***

5. Discussion Items

1. Presentation and Summary of Nomination Period 4 Properties

Staff presented a summary of the Period 4 nominations. Staff explained that most of the newly nominated parcels were located in the Fellsmere area, were nominated by the same individual, and were generally former citrus grove properties with limited remaining native habitat.

Staff reviewed the parcels collectively and noted that many appeared unlikely to meet the Panel's minimum criteria because they did not contain at least five acres of native habitat, did not clearly connect to qualifying off-site habitat, and did not appear to fall within the designated Greenway or Blueway framework. Seller willingness was also

unknown for most of the parcels.

Discussion focused primarily on the Epic Estates group of parcels and the Maxwell property. Members discussed the possibility that some of the Fellsmere-area properties may historically have been wet prairie or flatwoods prior to citrus conversion, and one member noted potential wildlife use, including caracara activity in the general area. Members also discussed the challenge created by the current connectivity criteria, particularly where a first acquisition in an area may not itself yet be contiguous to other conservation lands.

The Panel discussed whether further outreach should occur before making final determinations on some of the Period 4 parcels. Consensus was reached that the Epic Estates property should remain under consideration until seller willingness could be confirmed, as that tract would significantly affect the value and viability of nearby nominations.

Staff also reported that the owner associated with the North Sebastian Maxwell property had indicated willingness to discuss sale of a portion of the parcel, and the Panel discussed its relationship to the adjacent North Sebastian conservation area.

Direction:

Continue outreach to determine seller willingness for the Epic Estates property and related parcels.

Recognize that the North Sebastian Maxwell property meets the minimum criteria for moving forward in the process.

Continue to hold the adjacent North Sebastian-related parcel in context with the Maxwell property, since its value is tied to connectivity.

No formal motion was taken on the Period 4 group beyond the consensus direction above.

2. Update on the Status and Discussion of Nomination Period 1 through 3 Properties

Staff presented a comprehensive status update table for Nomination Periods 1 through 3. Staff reported that several acquisitions had already closed, including Hale Grove, Jungle Trail, Osprey Acres, and Durrance. Staff noted that Winter Beach 73rd remains delayed due to ongoing boundary survey issues.

Staff further reported that appraisals for Tier 1 properties from Periods 2 and 3 have been completed and negotiations are actively underway. Some properties, including Wabasso Island and Kanner Farms, were described as unsuccessful negotiations due to price differences between appraised value and seller expectations.

Panel members requested that future status tables include purchase prices for closed properties. Staff agreed to add a purchase price column and distribute an updated version.

Staff also provided an overview of program finances, noting that approximately \$12.8 million has been spent to date and that, if all currently negotiated properties were to close, obligations could rise substantially. Staff emphasized the need to preserve some bond funds for restoration and management while also pursuing reimbursement and cost-share opportunities.

Additional discussion addressed the possibility of pausing the active ranking and tiering of new nominations after Period 4 so staff can focus on grant identification, reimbursement opportunities, concept planning, restoration cost planning, and leveraging outside funding sources for properties already acquired or under negotiation. Staff reported that the Board had been supportive of that general direction.

Staff also advised the Panel that the ELAP dashboard may need to be removed from public-facing access due to ADA compliance concerns affecting maps, documents, and digital content. Staff indicated that the Panel and staff would continue to have access, but the public may need to request materials through public records processes if no compliant solution is available by the applicable deadline.

No formal action was taken on this item.

3. Update and Consideration of the Emergency Acquisition Process for Fort Drum 150

Staff presented a follow-up analysis regarding the Fort Drum 150 property after the Panel's prior meeting, at which the property had been advanced as an emergency acquisition opportunity. Staff explained that additional review had been conducted of the emergency acquisition criteria in the ELAP guide, the Land Trust's cost-share letter, and the property's ranking and habitat characteristics.

Staff summarized that the Land Trust's offer of up to 20% reimbursement, not to exceed \$300,000, applied only to the Fort Drum property and did not include a hard deadline. Staff further explained that the emergency acquisition criteria require a compelling circumstance such as an immediate and unforeseen threat or an immediate cost-share opportunity involving critical habitat or natural resources.

Staff stated that, in staff's view, Fort Drum 150 does not meet the threshold for emergency acquisition because:

The property is not under an immediate or unforeseen threat of destruction or damage.

The property does not rise to the level of "critical habitat" as contemplated by the emergency criteria.

The cost-share opportunity, while appreciated, does not require bypassing the normal ranking and acquisition process.

Even with a maximum score for cost-share, the property would remain below Tier 1 priorities.

Discussion followed regarding the distinction between cost-share opportunities and emergency circumstances, the interpretation of "critical habitat," and whether the Panel's prior action should be reconsidered in light of the new analysis. Members also discussed the status of ongoing Tier 1 easement negotiations and the need to preserve funds and staff resources for higher-ranked properties already in progress.

A member stated that Fort Drum remains a valuable property and may still be appropriate for future consideration, but not on an emergency basis at this time.

ON MOTION made by Daniel Bott and SECONDED by Patrick Pitts moved to rescind the prior emergency acquisition declaration for Fort Drum 150 and return the property to the normal acquisition list for future consideration.

This motion PASSED unanimously.

6. **Public Comment**

Public comment was received during the discussion items portion of the meeting, including comments regarding habitat connectivity, canal and fish nursery considerations, and long-term funding and program strategy.

7. **Next Meeting:** April 21st, 2026 at 5:30 p.m.

8. **Adjournment**

Chairman Roland Deblois adjourned the meeting at 6:51 p.m.

submitted,

Max Sherman

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