

**MANATEE COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS MANAGEMENT AND ACQUISITION
ADVISORY COMMITTEE (ELMAC)
REGULAR MEETING
COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER, 5TH FLOOR, MANATEE ROOM
1112 Manatee Avenue West
Bradenton, Florida
January 5, 2026**

Present were:

Mason Gravley, Chairman
Mike Burton
Robert Brown
Eric DiSilvestro
Alyssa Gay (entered during meeting)
Richard Larsen
Ruth Lawler
Merrie Lynn Parker
Charles "Rick" Richards
Scott Tussing

Absent were:

Kate Horne, Vice-Chairman
Scott Childress
Kyle Fisher
Jonathan Lynch
Brian Searcy

There are two vacant seats.

Also present were:

Commissioner Carol Ann Felts
Bryan Parnell, Deputy County Administrator
Charlie Hunsicker, Natural Resources Director
Kendall Carson, Environmental Lands Program Coordinator
Mike Elswick, Resource Management Division Manager
Vicki Tessmer, Board Records Supervisor, Clerk of the Circuit Court

Chairman Gravley called the meeting to order at 6:06 p.m.

AGENDA

EL20260105DOC001


1. Chairman Gravley welcomed everyone.
2. **MINUTES**
A motion was made by Member DiSilvestro, seconded by Member Burton, and carried 9-0, with Members Childress, Fisher, Gay, Horne, Lynch, and Searcy absent, to approve the minutes of November 3, 2025.
7. **CITIZEN/GUEST COMMENTS**
Jennifer Hoffman, Keep Manatee Beautiful Director, requested to be the Keep Manatee Beautiful representative for ELMAC, rather than Richard Larsen.


3. **STAFF REPORTS**

Florida Department of Environmental Protection Grant Opportunity at Emerson Expansion for Recreational Development

Charlie Hunsicker, Natural Resources Director, announced the County Commission Chairman Tal Siddique will present the State of The Chair tomorrow at 9:00 a.m., and the Board of County Commissioners meeting will convene at 10:00 a.m. He continued to review slides to address Kara Koenig will take over the role of Environmental Planning Section Manager, GO (General Obligation) Bond discussion regarding the possibility of extending the Environmental Lands dedicated millage, and the Trust for Public Lands has volunteered to do the polling again for the County regarding the referendum, Bond Council will be involved, including the ability to purchase easements with Environmental Land millage, ready to set aside \$1.5 million for an easement at Thundercloud Ranch, and partnering with the State for the rest of the funding. The prior language in the referendum did not allow the purchase of easements, and include the word easement when performing voter research.

(Enter Member Gay during presentation)


 Discussion ensued regarding easements are acquisitions, more advantageous to pursue large properties that complete wildlife corridors that fit within the larger landscape creating larger blocks of wildlife habitat, staff will do everything they can to find the funding for Mossy Island Ranch and Thundercloud Ranch, an education component will be needed to assist the voters when making a decision, The Trust for Public Lands is an expert at getting the ballot measures passed, when an easement is purchased the purchaser is buying the development rights on that property.

 Kendall Carson, Environmental Lands Program Coordinator, encouraged Members to educate citizens on the possible referendum when they are out in public and to advocate.

Discussion continued regarding proper wording for the referendum, and not lose momentum, there could be repercussions if the millage is used to purchase easements, and the Clerk has the final word as to using the funds to purchase easements.


Bryan Parnell, Deputy County Administrator, explained the budget is in place, and there would be a need to find the funding elsewhere if Environmental Lands millage is not used, but other projects may need to be delayed to use General Funds for purchases.


Mr. Hunsicker asked for the Board to support seeking alternative funding sources that may be available to carry out partnerships with Thundercloud Ranch and Mossy Island Ranch under the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program under the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

 Mr. Parnell suggested advising the Board of County Commissioners that they have been advised by Bond Counsel and the Clerk, that easements cannot be purchased with the Environmental Lands millage. The Board has been supportive of Advisory Board briefings.


A motion was made by Member Burton and seconded by Member Tussing, to ask for the Board of County Commissioners to support seeking alternative funding sources that may be available to carry out partnerships with Thundercloud Ranch and Mossy Island Ranch

under the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program (RFLPP) under the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.


 Mr. Hunsicker reiterated the State is ready to provide funding for conservation easements, and this is a budget year for them.

 Discussion ensued regarding providing the benefits of the acquisitions of the easements.

The motion carried 10-0, with Members Childress, Fisher, Horne, Lynch, and Searcy absent.


 Ms. Carson continued the slides and reviewed ELMAC seats with terms expiring this year.

Mike Elswick, Division Manager, introduced Molly Duval, Senior Land Coordinator, and together they reviewed the Emerson Point Grant Funding Opportunity for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Recreational Trails Program Grant, to offset costs of bathrooms, pavilion amenities, and parking. There is flexibility as to where the amenities can be located. They will apply for the Grant in February. They are seeking \$450,000 for a 50/50 match. There are also existing Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) projects that could be included. This will be presented at the January 27, 2026, Board of County Commissioners meeting. The grant funding would not be able to be used if the State eventually purchases the property.

 Mr. Hunsicker clarified the State limits the number of grants that can be awarded. EL20260105DOC002

4. **CONSERVATION ACQUISITION CANDIDATE PROPERTIES**

Existing Candidate Property Updates

 Kendall Carson, Environment Lands Program Coordinator, continued the slides to provide updates on the following properties:

- Anson Road Properties - Awaiting final appraisal report;
- Mossy Island Ranch – Being presented to the Board of County Commissioners on 1/27/2026;
- Thundercloud West - Being presented to the Board of County Commissioners on 1/27/2026;
- Sweet Bay Property – Conservation Easement revised, and appraisal to be revised to reflect the Conservation Easement; and
- The Taylor Ranch – Awaiting Memorandum of Understanding for RFLPP.

EL20260105DOC003


5. **TREE ADVISORY COMMITTEE DISCUSSION – CANOPY ROADS**


Member Brown addressed the need for protection of canopy roads in Manatee County and questioned if it would be possible to recommend the Board adopt an ordinance to protect the canopy roads.

Discussion ensued regarding if ELMAC can be involved with regulatory issues, advocate for canopy roads with a message to the Planning Director, ask if there is something being overlooked, and can the Land Development Code be updated to add canopy protection.

Kimberly Hoffman, Keep Manatee Beautiful, noted Keep Manatee Beautiful can advocate for tree protection, since they are a separate entity.

6. **ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS MILLAGE CONSIDERATIONS**

 Member Parker submitted a report and referenced discussion from the November 11, 2025, ELMAC meeting. She added a recommendation to ensure the citizens of Manatee County that the excess millage funds are being spent properly. She reviewed expenditure reports provided by the Clerk’s Office, and questioned if CIP reports are available to view, stressed the importance of tracking spending, and is seeking assurances that the Environmental Lands millage funds are being spent properly.


 Bryan Parnell, Deputy County Administrator, explained Administration will request the audit from the Clerk’s Office, Inspector General. The results of the audit will be shared with ELMAC. Basic maintenance at the preserves and on County properties is needed, and staff tries to balance projects as best they can.

Ms. Parker questioned if there is a possibility of having a sub-committee to assist with oversight responsibilities and insure there is an audit.

Commissioner Felts noted it is important to get the audit results before moving forward with other requests.

EL20260105DOC004

7. **CITIZEN/GUEST COMMENTS**

 Brooke Langston, Big Waters Land Trust, thanked Member Parker for her time, stressed how important it is to protect public land, and noted The Trust for Public Land is an honest and upstanding organization.

8. **PRIORITIZATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOARD**

There were no new recommendations.

9. **NEW BUSINESS AND COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS**

Charlie Hunsicker noted Thundercloud property could sell for \$30 million, and noted easements are the way to go to provide connections.

Commissioner Felts announced there is recognition tomorrow at the Board of County Commissioners meeting regarding prescribed burns (look at agenda).

Mr. Hunsicker noted prescribed burns are allowed during a burn ban.

10. **ADJOURN**

There being no further business, Chairman Gravley adjourned the meeting at 7:45 p.m.

Minutes Approved: _____