

**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
March 2, 2026**

Present were:

Mason Gravley, Chairman
Kate Horne, Vice-Chairman (entered during meeting)
Mike Burton
Robert Brown
Eric DiSilvestro
Kyle Fisher
Alyssa Gay
Richard Larsen
Ruth Lawler
Jonathan Lynch (entered during meeting)
Charles Richards (entered during meeting)
Scott Tussing

Absent were:

Scott Childress
Merrie Lynn Parker
Brian Searcy

There are two vacant seats.

Also present was:

Bryan Parnell, Deputy County Administrator
Charlie Hunsicker, Natural Resources Director
Kara Koenig, Environmental Lands Program Section Manager
Kendall Carson, Environmental Lands Program Coordinator
Vicki Tessmer, Board Records Supervisor, Clerk of the Circuit Court

Chairman Gravley called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m.


AGENDA

EL20260302DOC001

1. **WELCOME**

Chairman Gravley welcomed all to the meeting.

2. **MINUTES**

 A motion was made by Member Tussing, seconded by Member Brown, and carried 9-0, with Members Childress, Horne, Lynch, Parker, Richards, and Searcy absent, to approve the minutes of January 5, 2026.


3. **STAFF REPORTS**

 \ Kara Koenig, Environmental Lands Division Manager, introduced herself.

Members shared memories of Commissioner Carol Ann Felts.

Ms. Koenig used a slide presentation to provide updates regarding the Board of County Commissioners (Board) proposing to name the Crane Park addition after Commissioner Felts, The Trust for Public Lands is beginning research for the proposed referendum on the November ballot, and the Board is researching a millage cut.

(Enter Members Lynch, Horne, and Richards during the presentation)


 Charlie Hunsicker noted the Clerk’s Inspector General Office will begin an audit regarding the environmental lands budget. The next step for the referendum is to have a dialogue with each member of the Board, to see if they want to go forward with a referendum. The Board is very deliberate in their desire to lower the millage. EL20260302DOC002

4. **CITIZEN COMMENTS**

 Members of the public introduced themselves.


There being no citizen comment, Chairman Gravley closed citizen comment.

5. **COMMITTEE MEMBER APPOINTMENTS**

 Ms. Koenig announced the Board will appoint one member to ELMAC at the March 3, 2026, meeting for outdoor sports set. There are more seats that will be appointed in July. Any changes to the makeup membership would require an amended ordinance.

6. **ARBOR DAY 2026**

Kendall Carson, Environmental Lands Program Coordinator, noted two locations in District 1, Hidden Harbor Park, and Ola Mae Sims Park were chosen for plantings, and appropriate species will be selected for each location. Arbor Day Festivities will take place on April 24, 2026.

 Ingrid McClellan, Keep Manatee Beautiful, explained the process of completing the application for Tree City USA recertification, and the Arbor Day festivities are part of the qualifications for Tree City USA. EL20260302DOC002


7. **CONSERVATION ACQUISITION CANDIDATE PROPERTIES**


Pope Ranch


Ms. Koenig and Mr. Hunsicker reviewed the location of the property, adjacent to the Cannon property acquired last year by Public Works, the property will be accessed through the Cannon property, and these lands will be used to improve water quality in the area to the Manatee River. The acquisition would be fee-simple and is 112.5 acres.

Rebecca Pope, property owner noted they will retain the remaining property and will continue to keep the property in their family.

Daniel Pope, property owner, noted they would consider putting the property into a conservation easement, but it would depend on the family.

 Mr. Hunsicker thanked the Pope’s for considering selling the property to the County, and the County will do all they can to help the family. There are a number of ways to protect the land.

 A motion was made by Member Burton and seconded by Member Horne, to direct staff to proceed with due diligence in anticipation of a purchase contract review and approval by the Board of County Commissioners for the Pope Ranch property.

 Discussion ensued that this property meets all the criteria of acquisition, the future plans for the property, publicly accessible stormwater park, protecting Gamble Creek, interconnectivity, and Gamble Creek is a conveyance system that needs to be maintained.


The motion carried 12-0, with Members Childress, Parker, and Searcy absent,


Little Manatee River Connector 1 and 2

Ms. Koenig continued the slides to address the Little Manatee River Connector 1 (152 acres) and 2 (40 acres), reviewing the location, this is improved pasture, and lines up with other conservation properties including Moody Branch.


Mr. Hunsicker noted connecting to a State Park is important, and restoration will take time since this is former pasture, with sandy soils ideal for the scrub jay population.


A motion was made by Member Richards and seconded by Member Larson, to direct staff to proceed with due diligence in anticipation of a purchase contract review and approval by the Board of County Commissioners for the Pope Ranch property.

 Discussion ensued regarding connectivity with the northern parcels, and the Hillsborough property to the north is conservation property, there is a nearby solar field, Moody Branch was considered too far out for immediate development pressure, purpose of purchasing property is acquisition, restoration, and maintenance, there is no pressure to immediately restore the property, and could tie into other corridors.

 The motion carried 12-0, with Members Childress, Parker, and Searcy absent.


City of Bradenton Scrub Jay Parcel

 Ms. Koenig and Mr. Hunsicker continued the slides to review the parcel location, the current use of the parcel, and would like to acquire a conservation easement for 550 acres, 30 acres are scrub habitat, Taylor Creek runs through the property and there are hardwoods as well, County would manage the scrub habitat. Wingate Creek State Park has offered to assist with management of the parcel, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service encouraged the County to pursue the easement to bring scrub jays to the property to ensure the genetic viability of the population. The City has the same conservation beliefs, and no longer has a need for the property. There is a shooting range on the property, but would not be part of the conservation easement. Trails could also be added to the parcel.

 Discussion ensued regarding why is the City not donating the easement, get more public uses on conservation lands, Florida Forever Program is only spending funds on Conservation Easements, State funding sources are going down to nothing, appraisals based on conservation funds, the City being more of a partner, the City is working on updating their infrastructure, there is no land for them to conserve except for this parcel, and they need to be more accommodating to the County.


A motion was made by Member Richards and seconded by Member Gay, to direct staff to proceed with due diligence in anticipation of a conservation easement and approval by the Board of County Commissioners for the City of Bradenton parcel. The motion carried 12-0, with Members Childress, Parker, and Searcy absent.

Taylor Grade Road

 Ms. Koenig continued the presentation to review the location, ownership, over 150 acres, two parcels, fee simple acquisition, and the site is within the wildlife corridor, location adjacent to Mosaic property, and a great portion of the site is within the 100-year flood plain.

Discussion ensued regarding around half of the property is within the floodplain, the land not in the floodplain is improved pasture, potential could be residential development, unsure of the future land use, current zoning is one dwelling unit per five acres, and parcel may not be off limits to Mosaic as they look for adjacent parcels.

Ms. Koenig reiterated property criteria, and this parcel is important to the water quality in the Little Manatee River.

 Discussion ensued regarding any land can be used for conservation, and the proximity to the River is important.

A motion was made by Member Richards and seconded by Member DiSilvestro, to direct staff to proceed with due diligence in anticipation of a purchase contract review and approval by the Board of County Commissioners for the Taylor Grade Road property.

Discussion ensued regarding reviewing the criteria, be critical of each opportunity, would need extraordinary circumstances to develop in the flood plain, or approve mining over a River, and always have eyes open and think critically when reviewing properties, and must have floodplains to do any type of restoration.

The motion carried 12-0, with Members Childress, Parker, and Searcy absent.

Existing Candidate Property Updates

Ms. Koenig reviewed the following updates:

- Anson Road Property – Appraisals received and in negotiations with owners;
- Mossy Island Ranch – Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) approved by Board, County to be co-deed holder, and \$500,000 pledge from Manatee County, and working on easement language
- Thundercloud West - MOA approved by the Board, \$1.5 million pledge from the County, and working on easement language;
- Taylor Ranch, awaiting further information from the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program; and
- Sweet Bay Property – Conservation Easement revised, and appraisal to be revised to reflect easement.

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8. **PRIORITIZATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

Motions were made during the presentations.

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

The next meeting will take place at 6:00 p.m., on May 4, 2026, in the Fifth Floor, Manatee Room, Manatee County Administration Building, 1112 Manatee Avenue West, Bradenton.

10. **ADJOURN**

There being no further business, Chairman Gravley adjourned the meeting at 7:42 p.m.

Minutes Approved: _____