



## **Pine Flatwood Protection Repealed**

On January 12, 2015, the County Commission repealed an important protection for pine flatwoods, unanimously favoring developers over the natural environment.

Previously, in meeting any open space requirement, a developer was required to preserve all pine flatwoods until the required open space is met (often 30% of the site), after certain other valuable habitats are protected.

The new measure narrows that very severely, to preserve only those pine flatwoods that (1) are within a required buffer for a watercourse or wetland or (2) are within a wildlife corridor or (3) increase the ecological value and management abilities of preserved or publicly owned environmentally sensitive lands.

The first category is effectively protected anyway, by the buffer regulations. And now, the County Commission may adopt any "alternative open space plan" proposed by a developer instead of the very limited protection offered by the other two categories. It just gets worse and worse.

Other pine flatwoods are now be totally up to the developer whether or not to preserve, to mow down, or to keep in part if the developer wants to do so to "achieve site design goals" including but not limited to "social, recreational and civic values and other market-based

factors.”

County staff comments in a memo that they will "encourage" developers to preserve pine flatwoods and other naturally vegetated areas that they will no longer will be required to preserve. Wow, big deal.

The weakened requirement applies throughout the entire Urban Service Area and in a part of south County designated the Future Urban Service Area. Large swaths of pine flatwoods will be left without current protections, particularly in the south County, such as the bottom half of the Fox Creek habitat north of Laurel Road, east along Jacaranda Boulevard between Venice Avenue and Center Road, and very largely, in the Englewood area including on the Thomas Ranch. Destruction of pine flatwoods will also be newly allowed in portions of the north County, including the area west of US 41 north of Sarasota Square Mall, near Pelican Cove. Some of the pine flatwoods that will no longer have protection provide important amenities to neighborhoods, such as Desoto Acres and The Groves.

This is the culmination of a long-time push by big developers to remove pine flatwoods from the protected habitat they must preserve when meeting the County's open space requirements. Developers want this because pine flatwoods are by far the protected habitat that developers most frequently encounter in their developments, and as such is the one they most frequently want to destroy to make way for other development features, such as the lawns and other "pervious surfaces" that can count as open space.

This will do great harm, as pine flatwoods provide important habitat for many wildlife species. Even in urban areas where they do that to a lesser extent, they provide all of the aesthetic and functional benefits that trees have for the human environment.

County staff says that removing present pine flatwood protections is now a good idea because of "the overall success of conserving the habitat in the county". That's like saying a community that has had success in combatting crime should legalize crime.

Rather than admitting that they are removing existing pine flatwood protections, County staff says that the amendment "would strategically conserve pine flatwoods rather than use a one-size fits all approach." In fact, what the amendment has done is remove the comprehensive requirement that developers preserve pine flatwoods first (together with other protected habitat) in fulfilling the County's open space requirements, and allow its destruction except in those very limited instances in which the proposed ordinance says it must be preserved.

The Bible teaches us that while mankind has been given dominion over the earth, we must be good stewards of the natural environment which has been placed under our control.

It is just good stewardship to require that native habitat be preserved first by a developer when meeting the County's open space requirement -- not just habitat rarely encountered but also the habitat that can be expected to be actually found on a site, such as pine flatwoods.

To add further injury and insult, in February, the County Commission, again unanimously, rezoned a portion of the Pinelands Reserve conservation lands into a shooting range, ignoring the protests of environmentalists who objected to the clearing of pine flatwoods and the littering of the lands with toxic lead shot which will endanger wildlife and the water supply

It is unfortunate that our County Commissioners have done the bidding of their developer patrons and others at the expense of our natural environment.