



To: Mayor Jerry L. Demings
and
Vice Mayor Michael Scott, District 6
Commissioner Nicole Wilson, District 1
Commissioner Christine Moore, District 2
Commissioner Mayra Uribe, District 3
Commissioner Maribel Gomez-Cordero, District 4

FROM: Commissioner Dr. Kelly Martinez Semrad, District 5

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "KMS", located to the right of the "FROM" line.

DATE: March 3, 2025

SUBJECT: Request for Agenda Item for Update and Discussion of Split Oak Forest

Background:

On Monday, February 17th, the District 5 Office received an inquiry about the survey stakes in Split Oak Forest. These stakes are marking the path for the high-speed tollway that will cut through the forest, a project that has generated considerable controversy and concern. At the time, my office was under the impression that there were seven conditions (three pending as of April 20, 2022) required by the Florida Communities Trust (FCT) board before any transfer of interest in the property could take place. Unfortunately, we did not have an immediate answer to the inquiry.

However, on Wednesday, February 19th, following a Central Florida Expressway Authority (CFX) briefing regarding a separate project in Maitland, I raised the issue of the stakes with CFX representatives. They confirmed that the stakes were indeed marking the path of the proposed road. When I inquired about ongoing litigation and Orange County's opposition to the project, I was told, without equivocation, that *"Split Oak Forest is a done deal. They need nothing from Orange County; substantial money has been spent, and the project is moving forward with certainty."*

This statement contradicts previous information and leaves Orange County in the dark regarding the future of Split Oak Forest. A subsequent legal briefing confirmed that the county had not been informed of the survey stakes, nor was the legal team aware of the imminent progress of this project.

Purpose:

This memo seeks to initiate a conversation and update the public on the fate of Split Oak Forest, as well as to determine if there are any further actions the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) can take to protect this



critical natural resource. The Board needs clarity if Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission (FWC) has assumed ownership and management of the 1,550 acres that was referenced on April 20, 2022.

Split Oak Forest was acquired with taxpayer dollars, maintained through taxpayer funds, and preserved in perpetuity for the people of Orange County. As such, it is imperative that the BCC discuss the potential for saving the forest, ensure full transparency with the public, and protect this investment for future generations.

Proposal:

I am requesting confirmation that FWC has assumed ownership of the 1,550± acres in Orange and Osceola counties promised to offset the impacts of the CFX high-speed tollway. I would like to know if the BCC members who voted in favor of the Osceola Parkway extension feel as though the promises made on December 17, 2019, regarding the donation of 1,550± acres of land for preservation, have been met to their satisfaction. If not, I would ask them to consider rescinding their vote to approve the original project. Additionally, the Board should be advised on the legal feasibility of preventing the Osceola Parkway Extension from going through Split Oak Forest entirely based on the conditions of approval with regards to the preservation lands having not been met. I also request that the BCC receive an update on the outstanding conditions required by FCT before any actions are taken.

The "tri-party" agreement concerning the forest's protection should also be revisited and amended to ensure that other parcels within the forest are safeguarded. The most pressing issue, however, is to determine once and for all whether the statement made by CFX representatives—that Split Oak is a "done deal"—is indeed accurate. This assertion must be addressed publicly, and we must clarify whether the people of Orange County have been bypassed in the decision-making process.

Benefits:

As we know, Orange County is facing a significant infrastructure deficit. The BCC has proposed a sales tax increase to address this shortfall, but voters rejected the initiative in 2022. If the BCC decides to reintroduce the sales tax increase, it is essential that the board rebuild voter trust, particularly in how taxpayer funds are used for infrastructure projects. The events surrounding the Osceola Parkway extension and Split Oak Forest have eroded public trust, and without regaining it, future efforts to fund necessary infrastructure improvements—such as mass transit systems—will be significantly hampered.

Improving infrastructure is vital not only to the local economy but also to sustaining our tourism industry, which generates \$75 billion annually for the local economy. Without improvements in transportation, congestion will continue to escalate, making Orlando a less desirable destination for both tourists and residents. Restoring voter confidence in our infrastructure decisions is paramount if we are to meet the demands of our growing population and economy.

**Conclusion:**

Orange County citizens deserve to know whether the Osceola Parkway extension through Split Oak Forest is a "done deal" or if there is still time to amend the project to protect this valuable natural resource based on failure to satisfy their conditions of approval from December 17, 2019. Even if rescinding the original vote does not halt the project, it will send a signal to our voters that we are willing to act and correct past mistakes. The BCC must also receive clear legal directions on if there are any viable options to protect Split Oak Forest from irreversible destruction.

The people of Orange County have a right to receive closure on this issue. The BCC must acknowledge the concerns raised by the public, especially considering the overwhelming voter support for amending our County Charter to safeguard our environment. We owe our community an apology for the oversight and a renewed commitment to transparency and accountability moving forward.

Actions Requested:

- An update on the status of compliance with the conditions of approval set by BCC and FCT.
- A potential motion to reconsider the original vote on the Osceola Parkway extension if original members determine the conditions of approval have not been met.
- County Attorney review for potential breach of contract due to failure to comply with conditions of approval.
- Review of the "tri-party" agreement for the subject properties.
- A discussion on the future of Split Oak Forest and the additional 1,550± acres, if applicable, and this Board's responsibility to protect it for future generations.

Most Sincerely,

/S/ Dr. Kelly Martinez Semrad
Orange County District 5 Commissioner

Cc: Byron Brooks, County Administrator, Jeffrey Newton, County Attorney, Georgiana Holmes, Deputy County Attorney, Cheryl Gillespie, Supervisor, Agenda Development Office