



December 13, 2019

Orange County Mayor Demings, Commissioners Bonilla, Gomez-Cordero, Moore, Siplin, Uribe, and Vanderlay

Vote NO on removing Split Oak Forest's legal protections

Purchased with Public Funds — for environmental value and recreation:

- The Split Oak Forest Wildlife and Environmental Area was purchased in 1994 at a cost of \$6.4 million by Orange & Osceola Counties and the Florida Communities Trust (a state grant-matching program to help community parks, part of the Florida Forever program). **This is taxpayer's money. It is public land.**
- Surplus Property reviews have not revealed justification for any portion of Split Oak Forest to be declared surplus. **Any justification provided by parties wishing to trade land has not been independently vetted or approved by any government agency or peer-reviewed study.**
- Orange County signed several legal documents promising to maintain Split Oak Forest as conservation land in perpetuity, that is, forever.

Well-managed by FWC 25 years — especially prescribed burning:

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has been managing the 1700-acre property since 1994 — removing invasive plants, conducting prescribed burns and assisting in the relocation of protected Gopher Tortoises. The entire site is under a Perpetual Conservation Easement managed by FWC.
- Prescribed burning is an integral tool to maintain Split Oak Forest. FWC recommended as recently as 2009 that smoke-sensitive development be located at least 1000 feet from the Split Oak Forest boundary. An expressway through any part of Split Oak Forest would end prescribed burning opportunities over much of the property and would be incompatible with management for Gopher Tortoises and other imperiled animals and plants. The offered land is being described as 'a buffer' yet provides less than 5000' feet of buffer for Split Oak Forest's eastern boundary, does nothing to buffer Split Oak's western boundary, and adds almost 8000' of roadway — the exact opposite of a buffer, within the boundary of Split Oak Forest. **To describe this land as a buffer is misleading at best.**

Animals, Plants, and Mitigation

- Some of most important Regional Wildlife Corridors in the state cross this area, including for movement of Florida panthers, bobcats, and deer from the Everglades. SPLIT OAK FOREST is part of the Great Florida Birding Trail and also part of an Audubon Important Bird area, providing a home to

increasingly rare birds like Northern Bobwhite (quail), Bachman's Sparrow and Brownheaded Nuthatches.

- Split Oak Forest has one of three known populations of endemic and threatened Florida Scrub-Jays in Orange/Osceola Counties in its SE corner and seen in other areas of the property in the past. Due to the prescribed burning, the property's entire uplands are excellent habitat for Scrub-Jays and could be a recipient site for relocation. Proposed routes would destroy active nesting/feeding habitat of these jays.
- Split Oak Forest is a Gopher Tortoise (Florida threatened species) Mitigation Bank. In 2009 and as recently as 2016 over 100 Gopher Tortoises have been laboriously relocated to Split Oak Forest from other areas where construction destroyed their homes.
- Split Oak Forest was used as a wetlands mitigation bank – it was protected and restored to give the developers the right to destroy habitat and endangered species elsewhere, including portions of the Orange County Convention Center.
- Split Oak Forest is next to Back to Nature Wildlife Refuge, Orange County Green PLACE properties and other conservation lands.

Watersheds

- The Lake Hart Basin where Split Oak Forest is located is the northernmost part of the Everglades watershed.
- Parts of Split Oak Forest flow northward into the Econlockhatchee River watershed, which goes north into the St. Johns River. The land that's being offered as a buffer The Econ Headwaters and Upper Econ Mosaic were previously listed on the Florida Forever list for conservation purchase but **was pulled off the list when Deseret decided to develop the land.**
- If a road and commercial development are allowed in the area, pollutants will flow in both directions, and hydrology of these unique ecosystems will be changed.

Recreational Value

- Split Oak Forest is increasingly used for recreational purposes, including trail running, horseback riding, hiking and wildlife watching. It is a unique public outdoor recreation resource in a rapidly developing area. It augments the recreational opportunities of adjacent Moss Park.

Charter Revision

- A Split Oak Committee of the 2020 Charter Review Commission, chaired by James Auffant, is pursuing a Proposed Protection Amendment to be decided by the citizens of Orange County. Any decision on a Resolution should be held till voters have their say.

Friends of Split Oak Forest opposes any road through Split Oak Forest Wildlife and Environmental Area.

Sincerely,

Valerie Anderson
President, Friends of Split Oak Forest

Dave Wegman
Vice President, Friends of Split Oak Forest

Gretchen Robinson,
Communications Secretary, Friends of Split Oak Forest

**“We the People”
NOT
“We the Corporation”**

**VOTE NO
UNIVERSAL/COMCAST
\$\$ 1/2 BILLION \$\$
SWEETHEART DEAL**

**VOTE NO
DESTRUCTION OF OUR
SPLIT OAK FOREST
FOLLOW THE LAW!!!**