

Turnbull Creek Land Preservation Committee

February 28 2022

Donna Ahearn, Cathleen Planson, and Chip Weston were present. The committee discussed several different items as it tried to get back up-to-speed; it has been a year since the last meeting.

City Manager Khalid Resheidat represented the City. The bond, approved overwhelmingly by voters in 2018, allows the City to use up to \$15M for the purchase of property to protect the critical Turnbull Creek watershed. \$9.5M was borrowed. Just under \$9M was used to purchase the "Turnbull Trace" property. The city received a grant of \$3.5M to help with that purchase. \$1.2M was paid for the "Sea Star" property adjacent to SR 44 at Webster. Approximately \$2.8M remains from what was borrowed. The City can also borrow up to \$5.5M remaining on the bond. The purchased properties are City parks. Some can be used for recreation.

Donna Ahearn asked for a Corbin Park storm water study update and if the 10+ acre Sea Star property was included in the study.

The recent citywide septic report was discussed as it relates to potential contamination of Turnbull Creek. The Committee asked that Turnbull be considered as part of that study. City Manager Resheidat said that he hoped that the study would encourage an effort to remove existing septic systems and connect to sewer by sharing the cost with grants and property owners.

A discussion took place regarding ownership of the Creek as it relates to the entity that would oversee cleaning up and maintaining the quality of the creek and its water. The State, the County, the City, St Johns Water Management District, and others may have some jurisdiction over the Creek. The Committee asked for a legal opinion on Creek ownership. The City has an initial Maintenance Plan, but the bond funds cannot be used for maintenance. The City is in negotiations with the County now to renew the Interlocal agreement. The Committee asked staff to include Turnbull Creek ownership and maintenance in the new Interlocal Agreement.

The Committee asked for specifics on how the purchased properties will be maintained in perpetuity. The North Florida Land Trust has a new director and real estate staff person. The City is in dialog with the Trust regarding several issues with the Turnbull Creek initiative including negotiating with property owners for more land purchases. At least three properties are still being considered. Several property owners are not interested in selling to the City. Some are also not willing to consider conservation easements.

The Committee suggested that a public relations effort be made to inform the citizens and property owners about the history and significance of the Turnbull canal system and the importance of protecting and improving its ecology. In that regard, the Committee asked that the portion of the Creek that runs through SR 44 be cleaned out so that the creek is visible from the highway and that signage describing the bond effort and importance of the Creek be considered. The existing historic sign is hard to see from the road. It is possible that St. Johns WMD could help in finding funding for cleaning out the overgrown Creek that is choked with Brazilian Pepper, invasive plants, trash, and downed trees.

Rob Salazar, Leisure Services Director, was introduced as the new city staff liaison with the committee. The Turnbull Creek Watershed Preservation Project was included in the recent Leisure Services Budget Presentation. Maintenance Operations is responsible for city parks. There was discussion that the Committee fit better with Maintenance than Leisure Services. The committee asked that the City Commission confirm the department overseeing the Turnbull Creek properties.

The City and the Land Trust will need to look for new grants. (Grants could be for land purchases, water quality studies, historic research, conservation easements and/or maintenance.) Staff will research to determine if funds from the City's American Rescue Plan can be used for any of the above.

Chairperson Ahearn asked that the 400 acres North of SR 44 near Williams be considered for purchase and that the property owners be contacted. Most of the land is zoned agricultural. Parcels 93, 94 and 108 may be available. A year ago, the property owner of parcels 102 and 103 said she would consider a conservation easement. A discussion then took place regarding the value of educating the public on conservation easements. Staff was asked to develop a plan or "tool kit" that included outright purchase, options, first right of refusal and granting or purchase of conservation easements. Perhaps there also could be tax incentives for granting conservation easements?

Staff will need a few months to gather new data and to answer the Committee's questions. Because so much time has passed, the committee suggested that we define a new ranked priority list at the next meeting.

The last Watershed Study was conducted in 1988. The Committee asked for a new study that includes the Creek. They also suggested that one of the top priorities would be to complete the purchase of property and conservation easements for a long, contiguous, portion of the Creek so that it can be used for recreation.