

Marihelen Wheeler: Growth Threatens Wild Florida

July 9, 2017



In an excellent op-ed in today's *Gainesville Sun*, July 9, 2017, OSFR advisor Marihelen Wheeler describes the disappearance of rural Florida, transformed by business and construction.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-

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By Marihelen Wheeler / Special to The Sun

Posted Jul 4, 2017 at 2:00 AM Updated Jul 6, 2017 at 2:14 PM



Marihelen
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If you have not traveled east toward Jacksonville lately, you may be as surprised as I was seeing the road work that is quickly transforming the land and Highway 301 between Waldo and Interstate 10.

The lines are becoming startlingly clear as construction begins to connect the dots of gas pipelines, Department of Transportation expansions across virgin lands and private properties, expanded rail service from New Orleans to Jacksonville, and the dredging of the St. Johns River to accommodate larger cargo ships. The imaginary lines drawn across the Florida map as our legislators open Florida for business are becoming alarmingly real to astonished locals as the construction actually begins.

The Sabal Trail pipeline was proposed some four years ago and was quietly put into play until the reality of its impact brought activists to the defense of the environment. Unfortunately, their acknowledgement of the dangers came too late to protect the property of unsuspecting landowners from the reality of our government's investment in industry at any cost.

Those of us who tried to sound the alarm could not make the dangers known as our voices were drowned out by the roar of big utility conglomerates. It's done, but the fight against the

Sabal Trail pipeline continues even as another assault is happening to our east.

A very small notice recently appeared in the back pages of The Sun announcing that President Trump has approved \$17.5 million for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' project to deepen the port of Jacksonville for cargo ships. This will enable blasting the bottom of the St. Johns River.

Those of us who have been watching water management for the last several years are rightfully concerned that heavy metals that have been dumped into the river will be shot back into the flow from this blasting. As minimum flows and levels are lowered in rivers and streams feeding the St. Johns, the danger of metals, along with salt water intrusion, will further imperil our shrinking aquifer.

It's becoming clear that what is left of wild Florida in our northern communities is being transformed to accommodate big businesses, which are being allowed to use the state for their own growth. We endanger our way of life by not paying close enough attention until the damage is done.

This is not entirely the fault of residents. Generally, they are unaware of corporate land abuse, because these businesses dodge honest communication so that locals are not fully informed of the rights of all parties. Often information is misleading or not forthcoming to allow informed discussion or opposition.

The prospect of jobs feeds hopes of a better life for locals when often the sad reality is that workers are brought in from outside the state, and even the country, to fill positions that were promised to job hopefuls. "Corporate bait and switch" is not the way we do business locally and so some are often duped into agreements that leave our local economies at a great disadvantage.

I urge everyone to pay attention to the area surrounding us as it is being transformed beyond recognition. Interstate 75 is already being overrun by trucks transporting goods toward the ports of Miami, Jacksonville and Tampa. They have aggressively claimed the roads from local motorists and tourists making hazardous driving conditions that should concern us all.

We need to be diligent. We need to keep our eyes and ears open, speak with our neighbors about what is happening in our area so that we are not caught off guard when things happen that effect our community and other parts of North Florida. We must make our voices heard regarding decisions that effect the places we call home and find ways to defend those places when necessary.

– Marihelen Wheeler lives in Gainesville.

Photo; Sabal Trail near Dunnellon, Sun photo.