

“WE DON’T CARE ABOUT YOU OR FLORIDA’S FUTURE” –FLORIDA LEGISLATURE

March 4, 2016

The leadership void at the top of the Florida pecking order continues to be exposed as caring, knowledgeable people repeatedly have to remind Tallahassee of its failure to carry out the people’s mandate regarding Amendment 1.

Tom Hctor of the University of Florida has written an opinion piece in the March 4, 2016 [Gainesville Sun](#) exposing the Legislature’s refusal to do their job.

So far, the majority of Florida’s Legislature has a simple message for the 75 percent of Floridians who voted for constitutional Amendment 1 last year: We don’t care about you or Florida’s future.



AP Photo/FloridaWildlifeCorridor.org, Carlton Ward Jr. Sandhill cranes walk at the edge of the Green Swamp in Central Florida, in a photo taken as part of an expedition promoting the Florida Wildlife Corridor.



Tom Hoctor: Legislature must fund land conservation

By Tom Hoctor
Special to The Sun

Published: Thursday, March 3, 2016 at 6:01 a.m.

Last Modified: Wednesday, March 2, 2016 at 11:15 a.m.

The Florida Legislature is on the verge of making a policy decision that will affect Florida Forever. It can choose to fund

land conservation programs sufficiently using the Amendment 1 funds voters approved. Or it can continue to allow Florida's natural and rural ecosystems to be lost to a revived onslaught of human migration to our state, which is back to a growth rate of about 1,000 people a day.

So far, the majority of Florida's Legislature has a simple message for the 75 percent of Floridians who voted for constitutional Amendment 1 last year: We don't care about you or Florida's future. By refusing to adequately fund Florida Forever, Florida's most important conservation program, for at least \$300 million a year and other land conservation programs including the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, the Legislature is stating clearly that it does not care about the long-term health and vitality of our state.

A refusal to adequately fund land-conservation programs will have very profound negative impacts on Florida's future. Every day we delay protecting the lands essential for conserving Florida's biodiversity and ecosystem services, the more likely they will be lost forever. And with them goes many essential resources including sufficient clean water, flood and storm protection, clean air, resource-based recreation, and food and fiber that we are dependent on to have viable and healthy communities into the future.

Another legitimate way to look at this issue is that your legislators, if they don't adequately fund our conservation land acquisition programs, are telling you they prefer a Florida future dominated by dirty and diminished water, degraded estuaries, lost natural heritage, and a paved-over state overrun with shopping malls, cookie-cutter houses, condos and gridlocked roads.

We need well-funded Florida Forever and Rural and Family Lands

programs as well as Everglades restoration efforts. Florida has much more conservation land acquisition needs than we have dollars allocated. Florida's future is dependent on a functional balance between future development and protection of significant tracts of additional conservation lands.

Conservation easements, which protect land from development but keep the land in private hands, can be emphasized in both the Florida Forever and Rural and Family Lands programs, though Florida Forever easements provide more protection for natural resources whereas Rural and Family Lands is more focused on maintaining active agriculture. But both have an essential role to play in protecting our water, wetlands, wildlife and wildlife corridors.

The Florida Wildlife Corridor, which envisions protection of a large and functionally connected statewide network of public and private conservation lands, is a particularly relevant proposal that would ensure safeguarding of our ecosystem services, our wildlife and our natural heritage (i.e, our green infrastructure). And this green infrastructure is just as important for Florida's future as our homes, businesses and transportation systems.

That includes the important link between protecting our green infrastructure and maintaining a healthy and vital tourism-based economy. But the Florida Wildlife Corridor will never be protected, and our tourism-based economy will suffer significantly, if Florida Forever and other conservation land programs are not sufficiently funded.

The Legislature needs leaders who understand these connections and can rise above political dogma, envision Florida's needs into the future and lead Florida back to a strongly funded conservation program. And we have the science and the data

(including the Florida Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project) to guide us to identify and protect the most important places for providing these conservation values.

We just need the Legislature and governor to provide sufficient funds and the political sensibility to make it happen. And I assure all current legislators that if we accomplish these goals, future generations will thank us for our foresight.

– Tom Hoctor is director of the Center for Landscape Conservation Planning at the University of Florida.