

## Fact vs. Fiction: Emerson Point Preserve Expansion Purchase

The Manatee Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) has a rare opportunity to approve a land purchase deal to secure precious uplands, wetlands, and mangroves for generations to come. A 97-acre property is available for purchase after being on the [Florida Forever project's list of crucial properties to protect](#) for over 30 years.

With the Board's approval, the acquisition would nearly double Emerson Point Preserve, **saving 40.4 acres of wetlands and waterways** and the wildlife species that rely on them.

At their February 27th meeting, however, the BoCC stalled progress on the deal, simultaneously stating that they were "eager to see that property locked up" while providing contradictory claims that obscured the facts of the purchase process from the public.

**Here are their contradictory claims about the purchase, followed by crucial facts that we have pulled together:**

### 1) The State's Support

*"The state has not guaranteed that money as of right now. That would make things a lot easier, if the State would actually commit to something instead of just wishy-washy saying 'maybe first buy it and then we'll let you know if we're involved', but they haven't."*

**FACT:** On 2/26/24, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Director of State Lands, Callie DeHaven, published an official [letter of support](#) stating that the "**Division of State Lands [DSL] supports Manatee County's effort in acquiring the 97-acre Emerson Point Preserve additional property**". DeHaven continues writing, "DSL is willing to purchase the subject property from the County at no more than the DSL-approved appraised value".

Support at this level, with an official letter from the DEP - DSL, is not to be dismissed. Very few acquisitions receive this much public support and its existence makes it clear that the State is far more invested than the BoCC alluded to during their meeting. This letter exceeds the normal level of "commitment from the State" that is received for any other land acquisition. **If all conditions are met in the letter, then this is a "guarantee"**. In addition to the letter, a DSL employee stated during a phone call on 3/5/24 that the State has been in talks with Manatee County staff expressing its "formal commitment to purchase" and that it has "money allocated" for this property.

The [initial acquisition of Emerson Point Preserve](#) was an approved joint venture between the State and the County, with the State reimbursing the County around 70% of the purchase price once the management plan was developed and approved by the County. **The letter provides reason to believe that the State would reimburse the County again, up to the amount of the full appraisal value.**

## 2) The Asking Price

“Seller asking an exorbitant price that’s millions and millions of dollars above the highest appraisal that we have...we have to be cognizant of the fact that we are playing with other people’s money up here.”\*

**FACT:** While the seller is asking for more than the appraised value, there are funds available to cover that cost from the 2020 referendum millage and purchased bonds. [The referendum](#), approved by 72% of Manatee County voters, sanctioned the use of additional tax dollars “to finance the acquisition, improvement, and management of land to protect drinking water, preserve fish and wildlife habitat, prevent stormwater runoff pollution, and provide parks”. In plain, the majority of Manatee County citizens approved for these funds to be used for this very purpose.

So let’s hypothetically say the owner wants one-third over the appraised value of the property, which was \$12 million in September 2023. With the State’s reimbursement, the final cost to Manatee County’s Conservation funds (the referendum millage/bonds) would only be the difference between the appraisal value and the asking price.

The County has a long history of paying over the appraised value\*\* for properties it has acquired, including the landfill and various right of ways. With a property this valuable to the County and the State, such costs are reasonable. Even one commissioner stated that the land in the proposed Emerson Point Preserve acquisition is “the best piece of property they’ve seen from ELMAC”.

## 3) The Owner's "Carve Out"

“The current offer that’s been made doesn’t leave it entirely as a preserve...The offer includes them building homes on the bay and then the preserve around that with a road that goes through the preserve to those bayfront homes”\*

**FACT:** According to the [Concept Map](#) published by the Manatee County Natural Resources Department, the proposed 4-acre “carve out” for the current owner would extend along an already existing subdivision called Amberwynd, thus minimizing any infringement on the integrity of the contiguous acquired property.

In fact, this is a common practice that has been honored with past land acquisitions such as [Triangle Ranch](#), which was conserved by the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast with \$2 million in funds from the Southwest Florida Water Management District. Upon purchase, the seller was permitted to keep a portion of the land for their own estate includes [a few cabins for rent](#). Even the recently celebrated Crooked River Ranch included [a family-maintained homesite](#). The 4-acre property for the seller in the Emerson Point Expansion case is consistent with this practice.

*\*Commissioner quotes are taken from the public record of the 2/27/24 BoCC meeting. Timestamps can be provided upon request.*

*\*\* Information regarding the County's history of purchasing over the appraisal price from personal communications with County staff, local land trusts, and former County Commissioners.*

As stated in the DEP's letter of support, "the Terra Ceia project is significant for the protection it offers on some of the last natural lands left on the southeast shore of Tampa Bay." As with any deal, there are many factors at play, but given this information, it is clear that the BoCC has the means and ability to change the future of Manatee County, our local bays and its inhabitants forever.

**Contact your commissioners before the March 12th meeting, submit a public comment, and show up to the meeting urging the Commissioners to save this land before it's gone.**

## **Emerson Point Expansion Purchase.**

### List of Supporting Documents

- [Florida Forever Map](#)
- [DEP Letter of Support](#)
- [Emerson Point Initial Acquisition Document](#)
- [2020 Referendum Ballot](#)
- [2020 Referendum Resolution No. R-20-105](#)
- [Emerson Point Expansion Sept Appraisal](#)
- [Concept Map for Emerson Point Preserve Expansion](#)
- [Tampa Bay Estuary Program Letter of Support](#)

All documentation, including the content of this email, may also be found at [www.suncoastwaterkeeper.org/emerson\\_point\\_expansion](http://www.suncoastwaterkeeper.org/emerson_point_expansion)