



Tiger Creek Preserve near Babson Park draws its name from a blackwater stream that flows slowly through the property. THE LEDGER

# MAKING A BETTER COMMUNITY

## Lake Wales plan seeks to create Big Green Network around city

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On a map depicting the possible future of Lake Wales, the dominant color is green.

A pair of green arrows flank the city to the east and west, pointing toward large swaths to the north and south labeled “Big Green Network.”

During Tuesday night’s meeting, Lake Wales city commissioners voiced unanimous approval for the concept the map represents, though the vote was more symbolism than policy.

By a 5-0 vote, the City Commission approved a resolution to adopt the ideas of Lake Wales Envisioned, a

### More inside

New growth management director guides Lake Wales’ plans. **3A**

strategy for future growth and revitalization that includes the Big Green Network idea.

The main statement of the resolution reads: “The City Commission adopts the overall ideas in ‘Lake Wales Envisioned,’ as amended from time to time, as a non-binding, guiding body of work to use in the City’s endeavors to foster a continually-improving community through regulation, investment, and collaboration.”

Before Tuesday’s vote, City Commissioner Robin Gibson emphasized that the Envisioned plan reflects not only the Olmsted “city in a garden” concept but also the vision of Edward Bok, creator of Bok Tower Gardens, whose funding helped Frederic Law Olmsted Jr. produce the city design.

Bok’s famous saying, “Make you the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it,” is displayed on a wall in the City Commission



An eaglet is seen on a nest at Tiger Creek Preserve.

PROVIDED BY THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

chambers.

“I think the standard that Lake Wales Envisioned initiates and follows is that growth need not be

**See LAKE WALES, Page 4A**



## Lake Wales

Continued from Page 1A

harmful, and growth can actually make things better or more beautiful, and that should be our standard," Gibson said. "When we combine the Bok ethic with the Olmstead plan and the Olmstead heritage, as the amended version of this pamphlet now does, we are, I think, measurably strengthening what even this plan had, which was a very strong plan to begin with. But now, it's even better. And it really effectively stands for what makes Lake Wales so unique and distinctive."

The other commissioners all spoke favorably of the Lake Wales Envisioned blueprint, though Commissioner Daniel Krueger expressed some reservations.

### Support from residents

A series of residents encouraged commissioners to adopt the plan at Tuesday's meeting.

"I think it's a piece of artwork, really," Tammy James said of the guidebook. "It lets us set the goals for what do we want to be in five to 10 years. And I think that's a much better approach than allowing a developer or a variety of developers to set that tone for us."

Charlene Bennett thanked commissioners for the expense of developing the plan and urged them to "stick with it and have the courage to do what is going to be the best for our community."

In all, 15 speakers supported adoption of the resolution, while one resident expressed concerns that it is tied to a "climate change agenda."

Lucy Lawless, a historic landscape architect from Bradenton, spoke on behalf of the Olmstead Network, a national organization that advocates for protection of Olmstead's parks and legacy. Paul Owens of 1000 Friends of Florida, a nonprofit smart growth advocacy organization, praised Lake Wales Envisioned as "a visionary plan."

Lake Wales Envisioned, a plan prepared by the consulting firm Dover, Kohl & Partners, evolved from Lake Wales Connected, the blueprint the Coral Gables company unveiled in 2019. That illustrated guide drew upon a city design created in 1931 by the Olmstead Brothers, a framework that conceived of Lake Wales as "a city in a garden."

Lake Wales Connected described dozens of projects aimed at revitalizing the downtown area, enhancing pedestrian appeal and bolstering greenery. Dover Kohl later expanded it to incorporate the Northwest neighborhood.

Amid all the lofty planning, Lake Wales — like many small cities in Florida — has faced the reality of a surge in actual and proposed development. Some residents have objected to the City Commission's approval of certain projects, fearing a loss of the city's verdant charm.

Tensions escalated after Lake Wales held a public meeting last year at which a map depicting future utility service boundaries stretching well outside the current city limits. Some residents reacted with alarm, interpreting the map as an indicator of looming urban sprawl.

The city paid Dover, Kohl & Partners about \$580,000 to produce Lake Wales Envisioned as a strategic guide toward city planning, looking ahead as far as 50 years. The company released a 68-page draft brochure this month and also presented a 30-minute video summarizing the plan.

The resolution adopted by the City Commission does not create any obligations to acquire or otherwise conserve land in the Big Green Network. Most of the land is outside Lake Wales' current boundaries, though city officials said some could eventually be annexed.

"Now, while the plan is non-binding from a legal perspective, the city's going to use it as general guidelines on future development decisions," City Manager James Slaton said. "The Big Green Network concept, and I'll just tell you kind of candidly, is in my opinion, just me personally, is one of the most important elements of this entire plan. This is one thing that I care the most about, and that's protecting those lands, the high-value lands that have real ecological value."

Lake Wales Envisioned contains much more than the concept of the Big Green Network. The guidebook focuses on four areas: economy, green, neighborhoods and mobility. The "economy" section, for example, advises identifying sites for industry, providing a variety of housing to attract employees and industry and updating zoning and city policies to draw industry.

The "neighborhoods" section promotes traditional, pedestrian-friendly designs, featuring houses with front porches and developments with sidewalk and street trees. The "mobility" section envisions intersections with roundabouts and a network of walking trails.

### Three priority areas

The emphasis on "green," though, seems to reflect a response to citizens' concerns about rapid development.

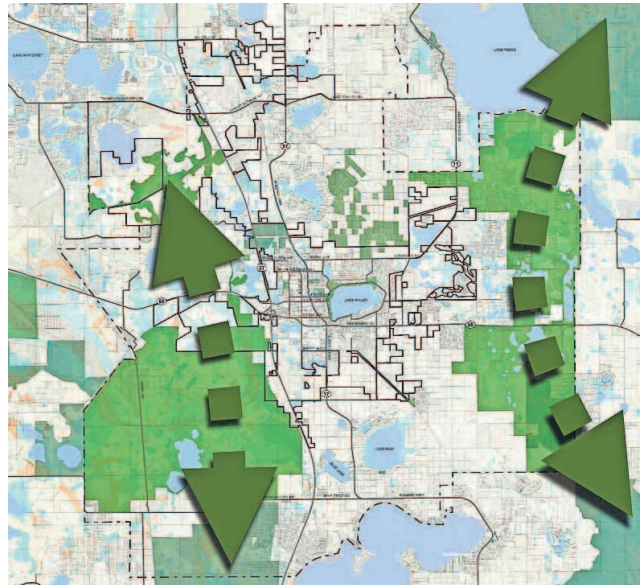
"The expectation of the Big Green Network is that natural lands in the study area will connect with existing conservation lands and form a network of protected areas that would preserve biological diversity, protect wetlands and listed species, store floodwaters, provide recreation opportunities, and serve as a boundary for growth for the city," the brochure states.

The guidebook cites three "priority areas" designated for potential conservation: The Ridge to River Corridor, Peace River Headwaters Corridor and Peace Creek Linkage Conservation Strategy.

Ridge to River refers to a swath of scrub and sandhill habitat between Tiger Creek Preserve and Catfish Creek Preserve, east of Lake Wales, connecting to conservation lands in the Kissimmee River corridor. The Peace River Headwaters Corridor, southwest of the city, is described as ranging from Crooked Lake Prairie across agricultural areas in the watershed with the Peace River and Peace Creek.

The Peace Creek Linkage Conservation Strategy "protects wetlands and the floodway in disturbed and developed lands surrounding Peace Creek and the Peace Creek canal system," west of the city.

The three areas combine to cover about 17,500 acres, most of it outside Lake Wales' current bound-



A map from the Lake Wales Envisioned plan shows potential green corridors around the city. PROVIDED BY EXUM ASSOCIATES

aries. Seeking to protect those lands would involve forging connections with nonprofit conservation organizations that might purchase land or development rights.

The map shows existing conservation land in a darker shade of green, some of it connecting to the priority areas. Smaller swaths colored light green depict a potential inter-neighborhood park system.

Jay Exum, Principal Ecologist with Exum Associates in Longwood, led the creation of the conservation strategy in the Lake Wales Envisioned plan. The Big Green Network concept draws upon state indexes of environmentally important land, including the Florida Ecological Greenways Network.

Almost all the land is privately owned. It includes large parcels currently or previously devoted to citrus and other agricultural uses.

"Lake Wales has this tremendous identity associated with Bok Tower (Gardens) and the vision that Olmstead and his sons have sort of bestowed upon the city, and to me this kind of large-scale conservation fits into that vision in a significant way," Exum said. "To me, it's almost like the large-scale conservation is a piece of that big-picture vision. To me, it's a meaningful contribution to a vision that was crafted 100 years ago."

Exum said he has previously helped develop long-term land strategies for Pasco County and Hillsborough County. He praised Lake Wales for undertaking an ambitious plan.

"The objective was for it to be large in scale, knowing full well that it's going to take a while for either acquisition to occur, and there would need to be some way of making sure that growth didn't compromise the ability of those areas to be protected, through some kind of willing landowner process over a relatively long period of time," he said.

### Getting public input

While helping devise the plan, Exum joined workshops and seminars with Lake Wales residents. He led a "conservation stakeholders" group that included David Price, President of Bok Tower Gardens, and Gabe Sharp, Natural Resources Director for Polk County.

According to the resolution, the plan drew input or support from a range of entities, among them the Lake Wales Area Chamber of Commerce, 1000 Friends of Florida, the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation, the Green Horizon Land Trust, Rollins College and Bok Tower Gardens.

The city held a public screening of the 30-minute documentary in early October, and the video is also posted on the Lake Wales Envisioned website.

Slaton said the public response to the conservation element has been almost entirely favorable. Mayor Jack Hillgoss agreed that the general concept has widespread support.

"I don't think that you're going to get hardly any pushback at all from the residents when they see this plan," Hillgoss said. "I really believe the overwhelming majority would look at that plan and say, 'Yes, let's try and make this happen.' And I think the landowners are going to be all for it, as long as their property rights are protected, and they're incentivized and not manipulated or run over in order to make it happen."

Since Hillgoss joined the City Commission in 2021 and was elected as mayor last year, Lake Wales has approved some large residential projects and has others pending. Many residents have spoken at city meetings, expressing their fears that intensive development could alter the city's placid atmosphere.

Florida offers many examples of small cities overrun by development, such as Oviedo and Clermont. In Polk County, rapid residential growth has quickly altered Haines City and the Davenport area, to the north of Lake Wales.

"No matter what your persuasion is about these things, I think we're all concerned about just the density and the monotony that we've seen rolling down Highway 27 towards us, at least here in Lake Wales," Hillgoss said. "I try hard not to be overly critical of that, because we'll need houses, they need places to live and the growth is happening."

He added: "And so the tension that you're always wrestling with is ... you need to serve the housing needs of the people that are here, but at the same time,

how do you do that without just slapping up very monotonous looking subdivisions? I hope we do buck the trend, but I hope that's not our only motivation, I hope that we're not just trying to be unique, I hope we do it in a way that really is driven by a desire to serve our people well."

Brian Herrmann, the city's newly hired Growth Management Director, said the Lake Wales Envisioned plan offers the potential of establishing informal urban growth boundaries.

"I think the city's been very progressive, sort of trying to get ahead of the curve on — we know this growth is coming," he said. "We know it's coming fast. It's already come to other cities in the county. And we want to try to get ahead of the curve and make sure that when it does come, we handle it in a responsible way."

### Wanting 'good development'

Price, the Bok Tower Gardens President, participated in planning sessions as Lake Wales Envisioned was being developed. He cited the history of construction in Central Florida that seems driven by the financial imperatives of developers more than the wishes of current residents.

"What citizens in Lake Wales were looking for was a plan that articulated that things would grow in value, that Lake Wales would be a better community after this development happens," Price said. "There's a lot of people who say that 'You're against development,' and this is not something that was against development. It was more, 'We want good development.'"

He continued: "We didn't want to just go at this and then just end up with lots of traffic, lots of bad development, and then be stuck with a tax bill. It's creating a place where we want our children and our grandchildren to be able to live. And part of that is the protection of open space."

Price noted that the Ridge to River Corridor, east of Lake Wales, adjoins areas in the Florida Wildlife Corridor. The latter, a concept promoted by conservation groups to maintain roaming ranges for Florida large mammals, has spurred allotments of money from the Florida Legislature in recent years for land purchases and protection.

Lake Wales' leaders hope to collaborate with outside organizations to create those protections. The nation's most prominent conservation group focused on land acquisition, The Nature Conservancy, owns and manages Tiger Creek Preserve, a roughly 5,000-acre property southeast of Lake Wales. Bok Tower Gardens, inside the city, has partnered with the Green Horizon Land Trust to secure a grant from the Florida Communities Trust and acquire land and conservation easements covering about 260 acres around the scenic attraction.

Slaton expressed hope that Polk County might obtain some of the land marked for protection through its Environmental Lands Program. Voters established that program in the 1990s, leading to the acquisition of such properties as Circle B Bar Reserve in Lakeland and Sherwood L. Stokes Preserve near Haines City.

"We're going to work as hard as we can to help facilitate and coordinate conversations between the various stakeholders that make these decisions on these lands," he said. "Now that we've got a map, if we need to play a role in connecting, let's say some of those landowners that want to conserve their land with other entities such as the (Polk County) Conservation Land Acquisition Selection Advisory Committee, we need to facilitate some of those discussions and move some of those decisions to the forefront."

Two commissioners, Krueger and Keith Thompson, stressed that the Envisioned plan is a draft. The commission inserted the line "as amended from time to time," into the resolution before adopting it.

"I really hope we don't lose that word ('draft'), because I think this is going to be an ever-evolving plan," Thompson said. "I don't think it's ever going to be complete. I think we're always going to be looking at amendments and things that we would like to see done differently or better or more beautiful."

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