

## White Paper:

### A Two-Step Plan for Preserving More Open Space and Enhancing our Parks and Recreation Programs

Councilman Rich Blonna 4/11/24

#### Introduction

For each of the three years I have been in office I have advocated for two things to help us preserve more open space and enhance our Parks and Recreation programs and facilities: create an Open Space Preservation and Parks and Recreation Enhancement Fund and seed it with at least \$500,000 in FY 2024-2025 and every year thereafter and hire a full-time Grant Writer to obtain public and private grants to seek out and apply for relevant grants.

Obtaining financial assistance by obtaining public and private grant funding to protect more habitat and enhance our parks and recreation is even more critical in FY 2024-2025 and beyond as we face a loss of revenue associated with the one cent sales tax and the ever- increasing costs to run the city.

In each of the three years I have brought these two issues up they have been shot down by my fellow City Councilors because they argue that it would cost too much money. Quite frankly I don't understand how it costs more to create one additional staff person whose work could bring in millions of dollars of additional revenue to the City of Marco Island.

Investing \$500,000 out of a budget of over \$30,000,000 dollars seems a small price to pay if it allows us to leverage matching grants that could return the investment and set the stage for receiving additional grants. Hiring one additional staff member (Grant Writer) who would help us acquire millions of dollars in additional grants would more than cover the cost of the person's salary.

#### **Why Creating an Open Space Preservation and Parks and Recreation Enhancement Fund is a Crucial First Step**

Many public and private grants related to obtaining Open Space and Enhancing Parks and Recreation programs and facilities have a matching funds requirement. It can range from 25% as [The Parks and Open Space Florida Forever Grants Program](#) requires or 50% as [The Florida Communities Trust \(FCT\)](#) grant program does.

Many public and private granting agencies require some sort of matching funds as a way of guaranteeing that applicant is serious, has a financial commitment to the project, and will follow through if the grant is awarded.

There is serious competition for public and private grants and having an ongoing source of matching funds through something like the proposed Open Space Preservation and Parks and

Recreation Enhancement Fund would show that Marco Island is serious and committed to enhancing the quality of life of its residents.

### **Why Creating a Grant Writer Position is a Critical second Step**

Currently, all grants are managed by Department Directors. These department heads have multiple job responsibilities ranging from overseeing the day-to-day operations of their departments to being first responders in emergencies when storms and hurricanes hit. Folded into their myriad responsibilities is managing grants. While I think they do a decent job managing known and existing grants, they do not have the training, background, and full-time commitment to researching new grants on a daily basis. This includes private, as well as public sector grants. Every year, millions of dollars in available grant money is left on the table because our Directors simply do not have the time or the staff to aggressively go after them.

If we set up an Open Space Preservation and Parks and Recreation Enhancement Fund and have money available to go after matching grants but lack an experienced Grant Writer to be 100% responsible for this on a day-to-day basis, we will fail.

### **Two Examples of Public Grant Programs We are Missing Out on**

[The Florida Communities Trust](#) - The Florida Communities Trust (FCT) is a state-funded land acquisition program created by Chapter 380, Florida Statutes. The grant programs administered by FCT were initially funded through bonds issued under Preservation 2000 and currently through the Florida Forever Act. FCT assists communities with protecting natural resources, providing recreational opportunities and preserving Florida's traditional working waterfronts through the competitive criteria outlined in the Parks and Open Space and the Stan Mayfield Working Waterfronts Florida Forever Grant Programs. FCT is governed by a five-member board with the Secretary of DEP or their designee serving as the chair.

FCT helps Florida communities create local recreational opportunities, ensure public access to our beautiful beaches, protect our historical and cultural resources, preserve Florida's commercial fishing heritage and traditional working waterfronts, and provide clean air and drinking water essential to creating livable communities. FCT helps local governments implement their comprehensive plans through the acquisition of land and utilize funds from the Florida Forever Program. As a non-regulatory program, FCT promotes innovative solutions to the challenges inherent in the comprehensive planning process

[The Parks and Open Space Florida Forever Grants Program](#) is dedicated to the preservation of green space, including parks, open space, beaches and natural areas, is an important factor in creating livable communities. In 1989, the Florida Communities Trust was created to meet this need. The Trust was funded through the Preservation 2000 bond program until the Florida Forever program was approved by the Florida Legislature in 1999.

The Parks and Open Space Florida Forever grant program provides funding to local governments and eligible nonprofit environmental organizations for acquisition of community-based parks, open space and greenways that further outdoor recreation and natural resource protection needs identified in local government comprehensive plans. The program provides local governments the opportunity to leverage local dollars with state dollars to optimize conservation benefits and encourages both public-private partnerships and land acquisition initiatives.

The Parks and Open Space Florida Forever Grant Program requires local governments to provide a minimum 25% match, except for nonprofit environmental organizations and small local governments (defined as municipalities with a population less than 10,000 and counties with a population less than 75,00).

### **Desired Action on New Budget Initiatives**

Support the creation of an Open Space Preservation and Parks and Recreation Enhancement fund and commit \$500,000 in FY20-24-2025 and every year thereafter.

Support the creation of a Grant Writer staff position whose sole function is to secure public and private grants related to Open Space Preservation and Enhancement of Parks and Recreation programs and facilities.