

# BURROWING OWL GRANT

Jared Grifoni  
Councilor  
Marco Island City Council

Submitted Date 3/20/19

## I. Requested Action

That the City Council of the City of Marco Island enacts a policy that would place up to Five Thousand dollars (\$5,000) as a yearly line item in the budget, potentially as part of and administered through the Beach and Coastal Resources Advisory Committee. The purpose of the line item would be providing grants to property owners who volunteer for a “starter burrow” that becomes active on their vacant or improved property within the City limits.

## II. Action Background

- A. The Florida burrowing owl is a “state-threatened” species with a limited habitat within southwest Florida. The cities of Cape Coral and Marco Island recently enacted ordinances strengthening protection for burrowing owls within their respective city limits.
- B. Burrowing owls tend to utilize open spaces, like those of vacant lots, to dig their burrows and raise chicks but also have been known to burrow on and around improved property. As vacant land on Marco Island continues to be built out, this directly impacts the available habitat for the island’s burrowing owl population.
- C. The Audubon Society of the Western Everglades will set up “starter burrows” for property owners who wish to encourage burrowing owls on their property (vacant or improved). The Marco Island Owl Watch also monitors the species and their burrows for active status and contributes to the overall scientific research of the species.
- D. Audubon/Owl Watch are currently working with Florida Fish and Wildlife to draft a “safe harbor” agreement for individual property owners on Marco Island who install starter burrows on their property in the event they wish to remove, with no penalty, after 5 years.
- E. Frequently, the cost of burrowing owl mitigation is cited by both commercial and residential interests and this may result in a reduction of burrowing owl habitat, potential mistreatment, or a negative perception of burrowing owls in general. The City grant and safe harbor agreement could serve to ameliorate the foregoing.

## III. Specific Requested Action

- To encourage participation in the starter burrow set up, the City can offer a percentage of the yearly budgeted total to those property owners, in the form of a grant, who volunteer through the Audubon Society of the Western Everglades for a new starter burrow on their property that results in an active burrow for at least one nesting season and who apply for it.
- Often times the focus is on penalizing individuals for bad behavior through fines or jail time. If approved, the City would be sending a message of support to those who engage in constructive action that benefits the community and island burrowing owl population.

- Direct the Beach and Coastal Resources Advisory Committee to coordinate with Audubon/Owl Watch and FWC on the safe harbor agreement/permitting fees and conduct additional due diligence to be brought back to Council as soon as possible for final action.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In order to encourage additional locations for burrowing owls within the city limits, the Council should create the proposed incentive for our local citizens to provide safe and reliable space for owl burrows, and coordinate with Audubon/Owl Watch and FWC on safe harbor protection. The burrowing owl population would benefit and it would send a positive message to the citizens and visitors of Marco Island. The program can be initiated within the Fiscal 2020 budget cycle.