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**Naples, FL 34116**

February 25, 2014

Collier County Board of Commissioners  
3301 Tamiami Trail East  
Naples, FL 34112

RE: FINAL REPORT AS REQUIRED BY ORDINANCE

Dear Commissioners:

Conservation Collier is one of the most successful programs in our County's history. Born out of an idea to preserve environmentally sensitive lands and protect vanishing greenspace within our urban core, the issue was placed on the ballot in 2002. It passed by well over 60%. Several years later, the issue was placed on the ballot again to provide clarity on the use of funds collected. This time it passed with an incredible 80% + approval rating. The ten year old program has acquired over 4000 acres with 19 preserves. Equally impressive is the quality of the lands purchased, from Native American historical sites with tropical hardwoods, to scrub jay and gopher tortoise habitats to environmentally sensitive watersheds. A key component to the program is the "public access". Although some of the preserves are remote and very wet in nature, the general public has the right to access it if they can get to it. These preserves were always intended to be shared with those who paid for their purchases.

Another key component was the willing seller concept. This was the basis for creating the public trust needed for our success. We recognized it was not the most economically efficient method purchasing real estate, but it was the fairest. We offered only what the property appraised. There was no negotiating or discounting. As a result numerous properties were nominated to purchase for the Conservation Collier Land Acquisition Advisory Committee (CCLAAC) to review. From the best nominated we made recommendations for purchase to the County Commission. The reports on each property were provided in great detail by the Conservation Collier staff. One of the many considerations we evaluated with each property was its ability to help with the recharge of water into our aquifers. We looked at the costs of exotic removal and the projected costs estimated to maintain the property. We looked at the various habitats for endangered and threatened animals and plant life. We looked at the geographic location of each property in how it relates to historic flow ways and watersheds. We also insured there was a fair representation of the preserves in each of the commission districts.

The CCLAAC is exceptionally proud of the product it has delivered. Freedom Park is an outstanding passive recreation area that citizens use routinely. Additionally it is great example on how multiple agencies within the county government can work together for a common cause. In this case, Storm

Water Management, Parks and Recreation, and Conservation Collier shared the vision and delivered an exceptional product. Gordon River Greenway will be another example of multi-agencies and organizations collaborating together to develop an outstanding community asset.

Many of our preserves have hiking trails constructed from Cocohatchee Preserve and Alligator Flag Preserve in North Naples, Redroot Preserve and Caracara Prairie Preserve near Immokalee, and Logan Woods Preserve in Golden Gate. Pepper Ranch near Immokalee offers the widest range of services including hunting, fishing, equestrian activities, overnight camping, and mountain bike trails. Future plans for preserves with trails include Nancy Payton Preserve, Railhead Scrub Preserve, and River Roads Preserve. On Marco Island, Otter Mound is not only the home of a tropical hardwood hammock; it contains ancient relics from the Calusa Indian tribe. The Marco Island Historical Society has partnered with Conservation Collier to tell the story of these early Collier residents and preserve our history. There is still much work to be done with developing each of these preserves into Collier County "gems".

Bird watching, fishing, hiking, camping, geocaching, and more are all passive recreational activities promoted by the CCLAAC for use within our Preserves. Collier County is an exceptional location for ecological and biological diversity. Conservation Collier has initiated the steps for everyone to share these wonders.

We are now at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> year and taxpayer funding for the program has ceased. According to the office of budget and finance, there is approximately \$33,000,000 in reserves for management. There is also approximately \$4,000,000 remaining for capital improvements. The capital improvement monies will go for boardwalks, construction of parking areas, bathrooms, etc. as specified in each preserves management plan.

There is some question on whether the acquisition fund is completely spent. There is approximately \$600,000 on a line item for a "future bridge" to be built within the Gordon River Greenway budget that will not be constructed and the monies can be returned back into the acquisition account from which it was previously taken. We are to receive monies from a neighboring property on the Gordon River per an agreement to reduce their onsite preserve requirement by a contribution to Conservation Collier. This money is to be earmarked specifically for the purchase of an adjacent property to Conservation Collier's Gordon River Greenway property. Technically we have still have acquisition funds, but for the most part the acquisition monies set aside for this are depleted.

The question now should be "Is there work remaining for the committee to complete?" The members of the CCLAAC unanimously believe the answer is "Yes". In late January, the CLAAC held its first and only evening meeting to give the citizens of Collier County the opportunity to express their views on Conservation Collier. They were specifically asked to tell what they liked, what they did not like, and their opinion on the future of the program. A number of citizens spoke and each expressed strong support for the program and recommended continuing it. There was no opposition to the program.

Citizens are taking advantage of Conservation Collier properties. The Boys Scouts held a District Camporee at Pepper Ranch. Numerous Eagle Scout projects have been constructed within our

preserves. We hold the only youth hunts on public lands in Collier County. Staff has set up the popular Geocache events on preserves. Our trails are being hiked. Local and national ornithologists have been seen within our preserves. The list of wildlife that can be found within Conservation Collier preserves is impressive.

Additionally we established several partnerships with other agencies and organization to improve our preserves. Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) assists Conservation Collier with the Caracara Preserve. Again, the Marco Island Historical Society works with us at Otter Mound Preserve, a tropical hardwood hammock with ancient Calusa Indian artifacts.

The unanimous consensus of the Conservation Collier Land Acquisition Advisory Board is the work of this committee is too important to discontinue. For the past 10 years, all monies collected by Conservation were reviewed and monitored by our Committee. As stewards to the public trust it was the Committee's responsibility to account for each and every dollar. A lot of time and thought went into our recommendations to both staff and the commission. The collective knowledge of our committee saved the taxpayers monies on numerous occasions. Working with the staff, we followed a fiscally responsible approach in the utilization of taxpayer dollars.

The CCLAAC recommends to the Collier County Commission the following:

1. The County Commission amends the current ordinance for Conservation Collier to allow the committee to continue as a citizen's advisory board. With approximately \$37 million remaining in the accounts, it is more than prudent to have a citizens' watchdog committee overseeing the expenditures and management of these large funds. Additionally the expertise assembled on the CCLAAC provided staff knowledge and experience on numerous subject matters from legal to environmental engineering, to construction, to real estate related matters.
2. The CCLAAC further recommended the frequency of their meetings be reduced so staff time dedicated to meeting preparation and setup is greatly reduced. However the CCLAAC does not want more efficiency at the cost of less public oversight. There has to be a proper balance.
3. The County Commission reviews its current investment policy and seeks investments that yield a higher return without dramatically altering its responsibility to protect the monies invested. It is important to note that the search for sustainable funding is only the difference between 1 to 2 % more on investments that currently yield less than 1 percent. The committee fully understands the need to protect the principal, but also believes there are conservative investment strategies that will yield greater amounts than we get today.
4. Conservation Collier should retain all properties in the program since they were purchased with taxpayer dollars and intended to stay in County ownership and conservation statues in perpetuity. The CCLAAC reviewed all of our properties as requested by Commissioner Nance and found no financial savings or advantage from selling properties. We also looked at the possibility of donating some of the preserves to other Conservation organizations to reduce our receiving a benefit. We found this would only jeopardize the public trust this committee worked hard to achieve.

Additionally those organizations and government agencies would want management dollars as part of the donation. This again would be contrary to the main reason we were considering a donation, to save costs, not give away our funds. We made a promise to the citizens of Collier County that we would purchase environmentally sensitive lands and greenspace and hold them for public use in perpetuity. We believe that promise must be kept.

5. Conservation Collier should continue to explore leveraging mitigation value from the preserves to acquire additional properties and provide future management funds.
6. The final recommendation from the CCLAAC is putting this issue back to the Citizens of Collier County for referendum approval. At a rare evening meeting in January, citizens expressed their overwhelming satisfaction with the program and urged its continuation. We were very pleased Commissioner Nance and Commissioner Fiala attended the meeting so they too could listen to the attending public expressions of approval and encouragement for a public referendum.

Prior to the election in 2002, part of the discussion on the ballot approval centered on the ten year sunset provision and what happens afterwards to the program. Some proponents of conservation land acquisition did not want the sunset provision. They saw the benefits of a conservation land acquisition program. However the electorate demonstrated numerous times in the past they would not accept new perpetual tax programs so the sunset provision was added. Then the question was what will happen to the program at the end of ten years if it is good and worthy program? The reply at the time was simple and straight forth. If it is a good program at the end of ten years and the citizens want to continue it, they can vote to do it.

This is a good program. It is worthy of reconsideration. There are other great properties that would fit well into our current acquisitions and benefit the citizens of Collier. Currently there are a number of properties on CCLAAC's potential acquisition list that would have been purchased had the economy not soured and our investment return had been so low. We still have the opportunity to acquire these valuable environmental properties if the program were to continue. Conservation Collier has been a shining star for our county government and the Collier voters deserve the opportunity to make their own decision on its future. You trusted the voters' decision ten years ago. You should do it again.

Sincerely,

*William H. Poteet, Jr.*

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Chairman Conservation Collier Land Acquisition Advisory Committee