

Hays: State budget exceeds Amendment 1's requirements

By Alan Hays
Guest columnist

JUNE 21, 2015

In November 2014, 4.2 million Floridians, roughly 20 percent, or one in five of the nearly 20 million people who call our state home, voted in favor of the Water and Land Conservation Amendment (Amendment 1).

As stated in the ballot summary, the amendment dedicates 33 percent of documentary-stamp tax revenue to "acquire, restore, improve and manage conservation lands including wetlands and forests; fish and wildlife habitat; lands protecting water resources and drinking water sources, including the Everglades, and the water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams; beaches and shores; outdoor recreational lands; working farms and ranches; and historic or geologic sites," for 20 years.

The Legislature has worked diligently to implement this amendment, which will set aside \$741.8 million from existing revenue this year. It is projected to generate \$22.3 billion over the next 20 years.

The good news is the Legislature did not wait for the passage of Amendment 1 to renew its dedication to funding Florida's environment; nor did we limit funding for this purpose to the mandatory \$741.8 million.

Recovering from a recession that impacted every area of the budget, the Legislature last year appropriated well more than \$3 billion in funding for environmental programs, dedicating approximately 21 percent of documentary-stamp revenue as well as general revenue, federal grants and other state funds to conserve, protect and enhance the natural resources we Floridians treasure.

This tremendous level of funding demonstrates the long-term and broad-based commitment to conservation by our local, state and federal governments that has led to the purchase of more than 10 million total government-owned acres across Florida, a commitment clearly reflected in the balanced budget the Legislature passed on Friday.

The 2015-16 budget provides substantial funding for land acquisition, springs protection, recreational trails and restoration of the Everglades. The budget provides nearly \$200 million to pay for existing debt the state owes within Florida Forever, the Everglades and the Florida Keys. In addition to dedicating more than \$50 million toward the purchase of even more conservation land, the budget dedicates hundreds of millions to improve the management of and expand public access to lands the taxpayers already own.

We also dedicated tens of millions to nourish Florida's beaches, restore our lakes and protect rural and family lands from development. We set aside funds to protect endangered plants and to mitigate the harm caused by invasive species that threaten various habitats across Florida. We also allocated significant funding to improve the quality of our water resources.

As you can see, there is a whole lot more to being a conservationist than acquiring property.

And while the proponents of Amendment 1 would now like us to believe their purpose was to require the state to purchase more land, the ballot language above clearly shows there is no requirement to spend a specific portion solely on land acquisition. Neither does the language indicate the entire sum is to be used for new purchases.

Rather, the actual text of the amendment recognizes the broader responsibility in protecting and improving the state's natural resources. In fact, arguing in favor of Amendment 1 before its passage, proponents contended the amendment would not require cuts to other programs or increases in revenues since nothing in the amendment prevented the use of funds for existing programs, including operating expenses.

Some have compared Amendment 1 funding for the environment to the Florida Lottery funding dedicated to education. Let's be clear: The lottery generated new funding for the state. Amendment 1 does not generate any new funding. Rather, it mandates the allocation of an existing revenue stream now be set aside to fund environmental purposes. Currently, about 21 percent of doc-stamp revenue supports environmental programs, and these expenditures were continued. Amendment 1 required an increase to 33 percent, so the general revenue fund that supports our school system, health care and other state needs was reduced by \$174 million to implement the amendment.

Addressing Florida's environmental needs is a marathon, not a sprint. Our budget not only meets, but by every measure exceeds the requirements of Amendment 1, which, unlike the current rhetoric, recognizes that being good stewards of Florida's natural beauty means more than simply buying land.

Sen. Alan Hays represents District 11, which consists of parts of Lake, Marion, Orange and Sumter counties. He has served the last three terms as chair of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on General Government, which includes agriculture and natural resources.

Copyright © 2015, Orlando Sentinel
