

Marion County's Potential 2026 State Legislative Priorities

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Section I. Appropriations Requests

1) Funding the Lowell Municipal Drinking Water Project

Description/Background:

The Lowell area, located in northern Marion County, includes multiple state-run facilities, including the Florida State Fire College. The area is not attached to municipal services at this time. Instead, residents rely on wells to provide them with drinking water. It has also been identified as having soil contamination above FDEP's provisional cleanup target levels. Marion County has developed a concept plan to extend a centralized potable water system into the Lowell area, which would provide clean drinking water to the citizens within the region, including the State Fire College and any other state-run facilities in the vicinity. Marion County received \$3.5 million in state appropriations during the 2024 legislative session and an additional \$1 million from the 2025 session, which will be used for construction costs. Further, the county secured \$1.25 million in principal forgiveness funding through the State Revolving Fund. Those funds will be used for the planning & design portions of later phases of the project.

The proposed 12-inch water line extension is approximately 35,513 feet or 6.73 miles in length, with valves, fire hydrants, and a water booster station included, with the goal of extending a centralized potable water system into the Lowell community. This would provide clean drinking water to the residents and state-run facilities within the area, including the Florida State Fire College.

Request: Marion County is requesting \$2,500,000 for construction costs.

2) Funding for roadway improvements on the Marion Oaks Manor Extension Project

Description/Background:

The Marion Oaks Manor Extension project involves extending the road from SW 49th Avenue to CR 475, which includes the construction of a flyover bridge over Interstate 75 (I-75). This flyover will provide a critical new route for residents south of Highway 484, offering a safe and efficient way to cross I-75. The extension of Marion Oaks Manor will also include widening the road to four lanes, addressing future traffic congestion based on projected growth in the area. The widened roadway will improve traffic flow, reduce bottlenecks, and enhance overall safety.

The project will include necessary upgrades to intersections, traffic signals, and signage to improve traffic efficiency and ensure the smooth operation of the newly widened road. In addition to the roadwork, the project will implement a stormwater management system that meets environmental standards, ensuring proper drainage and preventing flooding. Environmental assessments will be conducted to comply with all regulations, and any required mitigation measures will be put in place.

Right-of-way acquisition and utility relocations will be necessary along the project corridor to accommodate the road extension and bridge construction. Public outreach will be a key element, ensuring that local residents, businesses, and commuters are kept informed throughout the project's duration. The flyover bridge and widened road will not only provide an alternative route for crossing I-

75 but also alleviate congestion and improve the overall quality of transportation for the growing community.

***Requests:** Marion County is requesting \$2,000,000 for right-of-way acquisition, planning & engineering, and construction costs associated with the project.*

3) Funding for project construction costs related to returning swimming to Silver Springs

Description/Background:

In 2013, the Florida Park Service took control and assumed management of Silver Springs, merging it with the adjacent Silver River State Park, forming Silver Springs State Park. In 2014 the state's Unit Management Plan (UMP) for Silver Springs State Park included creating a public swimming area at the headsprings and the construction of a mooring/convenience dock downriver from the headsprings.

In 2016, Wild Waters Waterpark was closed, and the infrastructure of the park was removed in 2019. Since the state gained ownership of the park almost a decade ago, a host of improvements have been discussed and planned; however, few have come to fruition as the projects, including reopening swimming at the springs, have been mired in bureaucratic processes. Marion County has coordinated with DEP and Silver Springs State Park leadership in an effort to move the project forward. After consultation with stakeholders, the project designed to return swimming to Silver Springs would benefit from \$2.5 million put towards construction costs on the project.

***Action:** Marion County is requesting \$2,500,000 for costs associated with project construction.*

4) Funding for the Florida Department of Health – Marion’s Belleview Clinic

Description/Background:

The current modular building FDOH-Marion utilizes for its Belleview clinic is 25+ years old and is well past its expected life cycle. This project is to construct a new site-built health facility on the existing property to replace the aging modular building currently in use. Marion County’s Facilities Management has replaced all the HVAC units once and will need to replace them again in the next 2 – 3 years. The roof has been replaced, as well as all the floor decking. Over the years, they have also repaired and replaced many sections of the access ramps and steps leading into the facility.

The current structural condition of the facility is in fair to poor condition, and there are minimal possibilities to remodel the building to make it more compatible with current health care facility functions. The new facility will be a modern site-built facility that is designed to provide health care services to the residents of southeastern Marion County. It will be designed to withstand 140 MPH wind loads to allow it to withstand hurricane-force winds and be operational after such an event to aid in the recovery efforts. The project is currently in design, and DOH-Marion & Marion County have allocated \$433,920 for design of the new facility.

Request: Marion County is requesting \$4,000,000 for the construction of a new FDOH-Marion clinic in Belleview

5) Funding for improvements on the Bradford-Ma Barker House

Description/Background:

The Bradford-Ma Barker house is located in the Carney Island Recreation and Conservation Area. The home is famous for being the location of the longest gun battle in FBI history. The home was originally located on property owned by Carson Bradford, who bought the real estate in Ocklawaha in 1892. His son, living in Miami, built the house in 1930. It is a two-story Florida cracker-style home with three bedrooms and two baths, with a total of 2,100 square feet. The home was quiet, nestled back from the street with a view of Lake Weir, the fifth largest lake in Florida. The Bradford family built the home as a weekend and summer retreat from Miami.

Carson Bradford had never rented his house on Lake Weir when in late 1934, he got a surprisingly generous offer from a representative of Mrs. T.C. “Kate” Blackburn, describing her as “a sweet little old lady” who was looking for an out-of-the-way cottage to spend some quality time with her sons. They needed a place to rest and recoup away from the cold Northern winter. Bradford said the house wasn’t for rent. Not willing to accept no for an answer, the rent offer went up with an offer to pay cash in advance for the entire season. “It is the only time the house was ever rented,” says Carson Good, Bradford’s great-grandson.

Two months later, the Bradford house was riddled with bullets and was (and still is) the scene of the longest FBI shoot-out in history. Only when the shooting was over did Bradford learn the true identity of his tenants. He had inadvertently rented to the notorious gangster, Ma Barker, and her son Fred. It was the FBI they were fleeing, who had zeroed in on them as Public Enemy #1 after the FBI caught and or killed John Dillinger, followed by Al Capone, and Pretty Boy Floyd. The Barker-Karpis gang knew Hoover was coming for them next, so finding the hideout overlooking Lake Weir was a smart move at that time.

The property was sold in 2016, and the new owners did not want to preserve the house. It was to be torn down or moved. Marion County officials decided to preserve the house, accepted it as a gift, and moved it on a barge to its present location across Lake Weir in October of 2016 to its new home at Carney Island Recreation and Conservation Area, a county-owned park, at a cost of over \$252,000. The county has funded further design and construction repairs on the house as well, including a new porch at a cost of over \$63,000. The project received an appropriation from the state legislature in 2025 for \$237,000. The vision is for the public to enjoy maximum access to one of the most famous houses in America. Marion County intends to recreate the setting by opening the house to the public and providing abundant exhibits to interpret the history of the house, what happened during the shootout, and how it effectively ended a history of organized crime and gangs in the country.

Funds would be used for infrastructure, permitting, and site preparation for additional buildings, including an interpretive center to comply with ADA requirements. Improvements include stormwater facilities, tree clearing as needed, and conduit for electrical work, amongst other improvements.

Action: Marion County is requesting \$500,000 for infrastructure improvements to the Ma Barker House

Section II. Legislative Language Change Requests

1) Marion County requests legislation exempting funds set aside for the completion of inspections on issued permits from Florida Building Code carryforward fund limits

Description/Background:

In 2019, Legislation was passed stating, “A local government may not carry forward an amount exceeding the average of its operating budget for enforcing the Florida Building Code for the previous 4 fiscal years.” This portion of the bill does not account for unexpended funds (liabilities) a local government holds for the completion of inspections on permits issued beyond the fiscal year, i.e., if a permit takes multiple years to have all inspections completed. To rebate and reduce building permit fees in cases such as this place local governments in a precarious position of having to use funds associated with open permits to complete inspections. This dollar amount can be significant and has rapidly grown in the last two years because of the upward economy. It is important to clarify that this amount can also be carried forward beyond just the average of the operating budget for the previous 4 fiscal years.

Action: *Marion County is requesting support to modify Florida Statute 553.80(7)(a) to clarify the county's ability to carry forward funds associated with outstanding inspections at their discretion.*

Florida Statutes 553.80 Building Construction Standards - Enforcement

(7)(a) The governing bodies of local governments may provide a schedule of reasonable fees, as authorized by s. 125.56(2) or s. 166.222 and this section, for enforcing this part. These fees, and any fines or investment earnings related to the fees, shall be used solely for carrying out the local government's responsibilities in enforcing the Florida Building Code. When providing a schedule of reasonable fees, the total estimated annual revenue derived from fees, and the fines and investment earnings related to the fees, may not exceed the total estimated annual costs of allowable activities. Any unexpended balances shall be carried forward to future years for allowable activities or shall be refunded at the discretion of the local government. A local government may not carry forward an amount exceeding the average of its operating budget for enforcing the Florida Building Code for the previous 4 fiscal years. For purposes of this subsection, the term “operating budget” does not include reserve amounts nor funds set aside for the completion of inspections on issued permits. Any amount exceeding this limit must be used as authorized in subparagraph 2. However, a local government that established, as of January 1, 2019, a Building Inspections Fund Advisory Board consisting of five members from the construction stakeholder community and carries an unexpended balance in excess of the average of its operating budget for the previous 4 fiscal years may continue to carry such excess funds forward upon the recommendation of the advisory board. The basis for a fee structure for allowable activities shall relate to the level of service provided by the local government and shall include consideration for refunding fees due to reduced services based on services provided as prescribed by s. 553.791, but not provided by the local government. Fees charged shall be consistently applied.

(Ord. No. 16-34, § 1, 10-4-2016)

2) Marion County requests legislation raising the CCNA continuing contract study cap from \$500,000 to \$1 million

Description/Background:

Florida Statutes relating to CCNA (Competitive Consultant's Negotiation Act) are our largest obstacle in the county-level procurement process. CCNA relates to Architects, Engineers, Mappers, etc. The restrictions set by the State regarding CCNA prohibit the county from bidding these types of services against each other, and also prohibit the County from asking for the price of a project upfront and require the County to shortlist for interviews/presentations. If these restrictions were lifted it would enable the County to receive better pricing for consultants of this nature as we would be able to bid them against each other. CCNA process takes approximately 3 months to go through; by reducing the restrictions we could shorten the time frame it takes to obtain these consultants thereby saving time for our taxpayers on projects they are waiting on (i.e. road construction, designs for all construction projects, etc.). While we are certainly able to meet and fulfill the requirements of CCNA through our solicitation process; it would be a great benefit to have these small changes made or even revert back to the Brooks Act (Federal Law) governing procurement would be better than following the much stricter Florida Statutes. Additionally, the cap for continuing contracts was raised during the 2024 legislative session from \$4 million to \$7.5 million with an annual CPI increase. However, the continuing contract study activity cap was not raised. This request would bring the study cap more in line with the continuing contract threshold.

Action: *Support legislation that would amend 287.055(2)(g)b F.S. that raises continuing contract study activity thresholds to \$1 million for professional services.*

287.055 Acquisition of professional architectural, engineering, landscape architectural, or surveying and mapping services; definitions; procedures; contingent fees prohibited; –

- b. Study activity if the fee for professional services for each individual study under the contract does not exceed ~~\$500,000~~ **\$1 million**; or for
 - c. Work of a specified nature as outlined in the contract required by the agency, with the contract being for a fixed term or with no time limitation, except that the contract must provide a termination clause.
2. Firms providing professional services under continuing contracts may not be required to bid against one another.

3) Marion County requests legislation related to special assessments on agriculturally-zoned land

Description/Background:

In Marion County, we're committed to improving local infrastructure while keeping taxes low. One of the key tools we use to fund these improvements is the Municipal Services Benefit Unit (MSBU). MSBUs allow neighborhoods to fund roadway and infrastructure upgrades through either resident petitions or a Pavement Condition Index (PCI)—a process where costs are assessed without a petition due to poor road conditions. These programs have been essential to maintaining and enhancing neighborhood services such as road paving, street lighting, stormwater drainage, and infrastructure. This is especially

important in Marion County, where many subdivisions are still located on unpaved, dirt roads and rely on these programs as their only realistic path to improvement.

However, a recent change in state law is significantly altering how we can move forward with these types of projects. In 2023, the Florida Legislature passed HB 7063, updating Section 125.01(1)(r) of the Florida Statutes. The revised law now requires that all special assessments must provide a direct, measurable, and proportionate benefit to each individual property being assessed. That means vacant properties or those with an agricultural exemption (classified as "08") can no longer be included in the cost, even if they're located within the neighborhood receiving the improvements. In addition, the law prohibits local governments from redistributing the unpaid share of those parcels to other property owners. This restriction makes it extremely difficult to move forward with improvement projects in areas where a significant number of parcels cannot legally be assessed.

For fast-growing counties like Marion, this presents a serious funding challenge. It limits our ability to respond to community needs and puts increased pressure on the general fund and other already-stretched resources. Even more importantly, it places an unfair burden on homeowners who want to see their roads improved, but find themselves stuck because surrounding properties are ineligible to contribute. This change leaves many neighborhoods without a clear or viable path forward for essential upgrades.

Action: *Support legislation to amend Section 125.01(1)(r), Florida Statutes, to provide greater flexibility for levying special assessments on agricultural-zoned or exempt land.*

125.01 Powers and duties. —

~~1. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, a county may not levy special assessments for the provision of fire protection services on lands classified as agricultural lands under s. 193.461 unless the revenue from such assessments has been pledged for debt service and is necessary to meet obligations of bonds or certificates issued by the county which remain outstanding on July 1, 2023, including refundings thereof for debt service savings where the maturity of the debt is not extended. For bonds or certificates issued after July 1, 2023, special assessments securing such bonds may not be levied on lands classified as agricultural under s. 193.461.~~

~~2. The provisions of subparagraph 1. do not apply to residential structures and their curtilage land contains a residential dwelling or nonresidential farm building, with the exception of an agricultural pole barn, provided the nonresidential farm building exceeds a just value of \$10,000. Such special assessments must be based solely on the special benefit accruing to that portion of the land consisting of the residential dwelling and curtilage, and qualifying nonresidential farm buildings. As used in this paragraph, the term "agricultural pole barn" means a nonresidential farm building in which 70 percent or more of the perimeter walls are permanently open and allow free ingress and egress.~~

4) Marion County requests legislation that expressly permits public safety equipment that requires a lease agreement to be classified as infrastructure

Description/Background:

Currently, Florida statute prohibits the use of discretionary sales surtax funds (Section 212.055(2), Florida Statutes) for leased equipment, as such expenditures are classified as recurring rather than capital. This prevents counties from using one of their most important revenue sources for public safety to support the acquisition of critical law enforcement tools, as law enforcement agencies that use conducted energy weapons (tasers) face a sole-source vendor that provides these devices exclusively through long-term lease agreements, with no option for outright purchase.

These arrangements leave public safety agencies with no competitive alternatives, no leverage in pricing, and a long-term obligation to absorb escalating recurring costs. Without the ability to solicit competitive bids or consider capital purchases, counties are locked into inflexible contracts that place a growing burden on local budgets, especially in fast-growing or rural communities with limited revenue options.

Action: *Support legislation that would amend 212.055 (2)(d)1. b. F.S. to include leased public safety equipment to qualify for inclusion in discretionary sales tax spending.*

212.055 (2)(d)1.b.

b. A fire department vehicle, an emergency medical service vehicle, a sheriff's office vehicle, a police department vehicle, or any other vehicle, and the equipment necessary to outfit the vehicle for its official use or equipment that has a life expectancy of at least 5 years, including public safety equipment where a lease agreement is the only means of procurement and no purchasing option exists.

Section III. Marion County – Supported Local Priorities

1) Allowing swimming once again at Silver Springs

Description/Background:

In 2013, the Florida Park Service took control and assumed management of Silver Springs, merging it with the adjacent Silver River State Park, forming Silver Springs State Park. In 2014, the state's Unit Management Plan (UMP) for Silver Springs State Park included creating a public swimming area at the headsprings and the construction of a mooring/convenience dock downriver from the headsprings.

In 2016, Wild Waters Waterpark was closed, and the infrastructure of the park was removed in 2019. Since the state gained ownership of the park almost a decade ago, a host of improvements have been discussed and planned; however, few have come to fruition as the projects, including reopening swimming at the springs, have been mired in bureaucratic processes.

The Marion County Board of County Commissioners, its citizens, and its legislative delegation strongly believe that opening the headsprings to swimming, increasing opportunities for access to the park specifically from Silver River, and increasing the opportunities for public/private partnerships within the park will be key components in the revitalization of the Silver Springs community.

Action: *Coordinate with state agencies and delegation members to resolve issues that are delaying the process.*

2) Continued support for funding septic-to-sewer conversion programs

Description/Background:

In 2016, the Florida Legislature passed SB 552 and the Florida Springs and Aquifer Protection Act (part VIII of chapter 373, Florida Statutes) to protect our water resources in Florida. The policy calls for a Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP), which is a comprehensive set of site-specific strategies to reduce or eliminate pollutant loadings and restore particular waterbodies to health. A specific part of this policy is the septic-to-sewer conversion requirement that would help to reduce the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) into the spring shed through the reduction of nitrogen pollution released into the Upper Floridian Aquifer (UFA).

To achieve this, Marion County proposed a program to fund septic to central sewer projects, package plants to central sewer projects, and enhanced septic tanks within the Primary Focus Area (PFA) utilizing a match funding within the program at a 50/50 rate; other funds and in-kind services secured by the County to advance the BMAP initiatives. The septic-to-sewer project will bolster the State's (SJRWMD's, SWFWMD's, and FDEP's) goal of reducing nutrients by eliminating decentralized wastewater systems and on-site sewage treatment and disposal systems (OSTDS), which will result in a reduction of nutrient loading to groundwater and the springs. By decreasing nutrient loading, the County can decrease the potential of algal blooms and eutrophication.

Action: *Marion County will continue to implement the developed septic-to-sewer plan through the ongoing Wastewater Feasibility Study with the ultimate goal of reducing the nutrient levels within the Silver Springs and Rainbow Springs BMAP. This will include the reduction of septic tanks and independent package plants through the installation of central wastewater collection systems.*

3) Coordinate state and local efforts to provide effective natural resource management to Silver Glen Springs and the Rainbow River

Description/Background:

Silver Glen Springs originates in Marion County and flows via Silver Glen Run into Lake George, which falls into Volusia and Lake Counties. Further, eight agencies provide oversight of the area, and coordination between the agencies would be beneficial to the continued responsible enjoyment of one of Marion County's greatest natural resources.

Action: *Support coordination between local, state, and federal agencies to ensure consistency in monitoring, enforcement, and the protection of Silver Glen Springs and the Rainbow River*

Section IV. Marion County – Supported Organizations

1) Continued support for the mission of the Ft. King Heritage Foundation

Description/Background:

The Foundation plays a key role in developing the vision and oversight of the Landmark, with much of the success being attributed to the partnership between it, Marion County, and the City of Ocala. This public-private partnership serves as a shining example of how such partnerships can work together to deliver an excellent experience to both our citizens and the out-of-town visitors who frequent the fort.

Marion County passionately supports the unified vision crafted by the County/City/Foundation partnership for Fort King. We also support the request for funding for the vision to become a reality. With the completion of this phase, Fort King will no doubt become a major destination for tourists. There is no other facility in Florida that will provide such excellent interpretative and educational opportunities for visitors to learn about Fort King, the Seminole Wars, and the early years of Ocala/Marion County.

Action: *Provide the Ft. King Heritage Foundation with any correspondence or other support as needed.*

2) Continued support for Marion Senior Services and its programs

Description/Background:

Marion Senior Services is a nonprofit, charitable social agency providing supportive care services to elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged residents of our county. They help seniors remain living in their own homes independently as long as possible by providing them meals, transit, and in-home support. A variety of public, private, and donor funding enables them to provide services to most people in need, regardless of their ability to pay. Services are provided on a sliding fee basis from no cost to full pay. Marion County supports MSS and its programs, such as the Elder Co-Responder program, a first of its kind in the state designed to identify 911 calls to a residence where someone may have dementia.

Action: *Provide Marion Senior Services with any correspondence or other support as needed.*

3) Support Marion County Memorial Honor Guard and other veterans' organizations

Description/Background:

As a war veterans' organization, the Marion County Memorial Honor Guard provides ceremonial funeral honors and assistance to all military veterans and their families during their time of need, as well as any patriotic services when requested. It promotes Americanism, dignity, and respect for the USA's warriors by upholding the utmost professionalism and integrity through its conduct and image at all times. With the responsibility bestowed upon them, they will never forget that it is the Veteran who commands the dignity we protect.

The Marion County Memorial Honor Guard was formed shortly after 9/11. It officially started as a Florida Non-Profit Corporation on September 23, 2002. The IRS approved it in 2003 as a 501(c)(19) war veterans' organization which provides tax-exempt status for the Memorial Honor Guard and allows all donations and contributions to be deductible under IRC 170(c)(3). They have no employees. They provide their services free of charge to central Florida and have traveled as far as 800 miles to provide

veteran memorial services at Arlington Memorial Cemetery in Arlington, VA. Tax-deductible donations and honorariums are their only source of funds.

Action: *Provide Marion County Memorial Honor Guard and other veterans' organizations with any correspondence or other support as needed.*

Support the 5th Judicial Circuit's request related to additional magistrates operating in Marion County

Description/Background:

Marion County's rapid population growth is placing significant strain on the local justice system, with increasing caseloads in family, civil, and juvenile matters. While the addition of full circuit judges is a longer-term, state-funded solution, the appointment of additional magistrates offers a more immediate and cost-effective way to reduce pressure on the courts. Although magistrates can receive some local support, their primary funding comes from the state, and assignments are made based on overall county-level needs across the state. As a result, Marion County supports expanded state-level funding for magistrates but strongly advocates that any new positions added be assigned to serve within Marion County, where the demand is especially acute.

Action: *Provide the 5th Judicial Circuit with any correspondence or other support as needed.*