



## Marion County Board of County Commissioners

McPherson Governmental Campus

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District 1 - Craig Curry, Commissioner  
District 2 - Kathy Bryant, Commissioner  
District 3 - Jeff Gold, Chairman  
District 4 - Carl Zalak III, Vice Chairman  
District 5 - Michelle Stone, Commissioner

Oct. 5, 2021

Honorable Senator Bradley and members of the delegation,

Marion County is abundantly appreciative of the wonderful working relationship we enjoy with our state legislative delegation. We are thankful for your continued attention to the needs and interests of our residents and businesses. This year, Marion County will continue intentionally improving our veterans' services, natural resource protection, and economic vitality. We welcome your partnership in our vision for 2022, which will not only benefit Marion County, but also our neighboring counties, fellow Floridians, and visitors. On behalf of the Marion County Board of County Commissioners, we submit the following for your consideration.

### **Appropriation Requests:**

#### **Veterans' Nursing Home**

Marion County's central location provides a unique ability to directly impact more than 650,000 veterans within a service area of less than 75 miles. Nearly 300,000 of these veterans are over the age of 65. We are requesting your continued support with the designation of Marion County as the site for the ninth state veterans' nursing home within the budget for the Florida Department of Veteran's Affairs. In 2019, state legislature approved funding in the amount of \$500,000 to support and assist in site selection for the proposed project. Upon completion of the initial analysis, the ideal site was identified. We are requesting \$6,000,000 in funding to initiate the design and construction phase of this project.

#### **Dunnellon Trail**

Blue Run of Dunnellon Park, a 33.4-acre passive park, was acquired in 2008 by local and state partners for conservation and recreational use. Marion County has been the lead operator, and has via several capital improvement projects, invested over \$1,102,000. The addition of a protected pedestrian lane on the existing bridge over the Rainbow River which will serve as a safe walkway for visitors using the river while allowing users of the Heart of Florida Loop Shared-Use Trail access into downtown Dunnellon. It has become an obvious priority is the addition of a bicycle/pedestrian connection access across the Rainbow River from the park into downtown Dunnellon. The city of Dunnellon commissioned a master pedestrian plan to develop a multi-modal access system consisting of a 12-foot bicycle/pedestrian trail along the road and pedestrian crossings to connect trail users to businesses. We are requesting \$2,536,000 to fund both connection projects.

### **Ocklawaha Groves (Hall Property)**

The Ocklawaha Groves property consists of nearly 66 acres, including upland areas with active citrus operations and approximately 2,300 feet of undisturbed wetland and freshwater marsh ecosystems along the shore of Lake Weir. The land is zoned for agricultural uses and has been advertised for sale. Due to the lack of central water and wastewater services in this area of the county, any residential development would create a need for additional septic services; however, public acquisition of the land would remove this threat along with the threat of residential fertilizer inputs and other non-point source pollutants. Additionally, the acquisition of the land could result in the citrus operation and its contributing agricultural runoff and fertilizer inputs ending as well. Marion County is requesting \$3,637,886 to secure this land, assume management, and begin the process of restoring the property to a pine flatwood/mixed hardwood ecosystem and introduce more recreational opportunities to those offered at nearby Carney Island Recreation & Conservation Area.

### **Municipal Drinking Water within the Area of North Marion County (Lowell) due to Drinking Water Contamination**

The Lowell area includes the Florida State Fire College which has been identified with onsite groundwater contamination as well as soil contamination detected above the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (FDEP) provisional cleanup target levels. The Florida Department of Health (DOH) sampled 170 supply wells, out of which 15 of these wells had levels of contaminate above the health advisory level. 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 area. We are requesting \$5,732,275 to fund the cost of design, permitting, and construction of approximately 35,513 feet of 12-inch water line extension with valves, fire hydrants, and a water booster station.

For the upcoming legislative session, Marion County has submitted the following statewide initiatives to Florida Association of Counties for consideration and, likewise, request legislative support for the following:

### **Statewide Priorities Submitted to Florida Association of Counties:**

#### **Support Florida Building Code**

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 four fiscal years." This portion of the bill does not account for unexpended funds held for the completion of inspections on permits issued beyond the fiscal year. To rebate and reduce building permit fees, this places local government in a precarious position of having to use funds associated with open permits to complete inspections. It is important to clarify that this amount can also be carried forward beyond just the average of the operating budget for the previous four fiscal years. We are requesting support to modify Florida Statute 553.80(7)(a) to clarify the ability to carryforward funds associated with outstanding inspections.

## **Municipal Service Areas**

Marion County formally requests legislation which provides that where a county has, by ordinance, established one or more utility service areas in an unincorporated area and where the county has the current ability to provide service, a municipality may not provide utility services within such county service area(s) without consent of the county. Counties and municipalities are encouraged to cooperatively establish utility service boundary agreements that will maximize the capacities and efficiencies of their respective services, with the goal of providing the most cost-effective utility service to system customers.

## **911 Fee Increase**

Support is needed to increase the 911 fee in the State of Florida. The Florida 911 Coordinators Association is currently seeking support from multiple groups to get the backing to change the legislation to allow the 911 fee to be increased to \$0.80. In order to help move this priority forward, the State E911 Board needs adequate representation from the counties. The Florida E911 Board consists of 11 members, 5 from the private communications service provider industry and 5 from local government county 911 coordinators. The 11th member, the Chair, is the Bureau Chief of Public Safety, Division of State Technology. Presently, all five 911 coordinator positions on the E911 Board have either exceeded their appointment term, are no longer county coordinators, or have retired.

In May and June 2019, the President of the Florida 911 Coordinators Association began the process of acquiring nominations and voting for the E911 Board County Coordinators positions to be filled. Upon completion of the process, the nominees for appointment were sent to the Florida Association of Counties (FAC) in accordance with 365.172(5)(b) FS, which began communication with the Governor's Appointments Office. In October of 2020, important planning and fiscal matters were considered and voted upon with little representation on the board from Florida County representatives. The E911 Boards primary function is to administer the funds derived from the monthly 911 fee. Fees are distributed to counties each month and the E911 Board also manages the 911 grant program. The grant program is reviewed and voted on by the E911 Board.

To date, numerous letters and emails have been sent reference filling the E911 Board positions with no results. The five Florida E911 Coordinators are a vital component of the 11-member E911 Board and key to the appropriate disbursement of 911 fee revenues and management of the State 911 grant program.

The 911 fee was enacted over 25 years ago at an amount of \$0.50 per month per device accessing 911 services. In January of 2015, the amount was reduced to \$0.40, a 20% reduction. 25 years ago, cellular telephones were just emerging. At that time, 911 systems had no digital mapping, no text-to-911, no related routers, switches, gateways, servers, no software, no virus protection and the primary answering equipment was mechanical, not software driven. Streaming video to 911 was not even a thought.

In 2008, statewide, approximately 60% of 911 service needs were met with 911 fees. Per the Governor appointed E911 Board's fiscal year 2018 annual report to the Governor, the percentage is now at 39%. The loss of revenue has resulted in two things: 1) local tax dollars replaced the shortfall; 2) expenditures on emerging technology is limited.

Marion County funds an astonishing 57% of the cost of 911 services in the county today. An increase of the fee to just \$0.80 would decrease the contribution of those general funds significantly and those savings could be used for housing, roadways, law enforcement, school safety or social services. Currently Florida has one of the lowest 911 fees when compared to other southern states. Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi have rates between \$1.00 and \$1.75.

Throughout the State of Florida, this same inequitable funding exists whereby property owners carry the burden of the cost of funding 911 services. The fee is intended to fund items such as 911 operator salaries, 911 operator training and certifications, 911 telephone systems and maintenance, 911 circuits, digital mapping, 911 call recording, hearing impaired equipment, backup power systems, time synchronization equipment, location repositories, 911 center security, 911 center and equipment environmental integrity, and NG911 network services.

Additionally, all across the United States, 911 centers are transitioning to upgraded Next Generation 911 (NG911) services with the implementation of Internet Protocol (IP) call routing and regional mapping. Other new technologies in 911 services includes IP routing of data, something Financial institutions have been doing for many years. The development of an Emergency Services IP Network (ESInet) allows a 911 center to operate within a closed, secure, public safety network which provides multiple network paths for 911 traffic and provides the ability to re-route 911 traffic to another municipal or county facility capable of accepting 911 traffic. During Hurricane Michael in October 2018, some 911 centers in the Florida panhandle could not receive or transfer 911 call traffic. If they were on an ESInet, the traffic could have been automatically re-routed to a designated 911 center, anywhere in the state.

Video streaming to 911 is in beta test in parts of the country. Soon this technology will be available to public safety. This emerging technology will require greater bandwidth into 911 centers as well as increased cyber security, both of which will impact annual budgets. This emerging public safety technology will cost more to operate than the current legacy networks.

Approving the efforts of the Florida 911 Coordinators Association and increasing the 911 fee to \$0.80 or higher would eliminate the financial burden of property owners in the county and assist with funding emerging technologies.

### **Taxation Reform – Transportation**

Tax reform measures that simplify administration and provide an economic boost to Florida's taxpayers are essential. These measures must consider and minimize the collective and cumulatively negative impact on local revenues. Marion County has an annual shortfall of approximately \$10 million for capital maintenance projects and a backlog of \$300 million for local transportation capacity projects; therefore, we are requesting support to modify existing laws to allow for enactment of a transportation sales surtax for non-charter counties. This will provide a much-needed revenue source to fund transportation capital projects as the local gas tax is not indexed and has lost most of its purchasing power due to inflation.

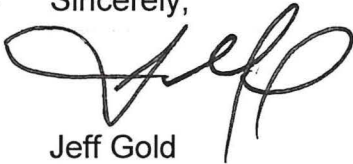
### **Taxation Reform – Discretionary Sales Surtax**

Marion County is requesting support to modify existing laws to allow for a discretionary sales surtax that can be used for general purposes, including operational expenditures to help reduce the ad valorem tax levied on property owners who are burdened with the largest share of taxation under the existing tax structure. The potential reduction in ad valorem could be substantial.

This packet contains details to further illustrate why we feel these legislative actions are critical to support our veterans, remove tax roadblocks, protect our water resources, promote the state and our region's economic vitality, and aid other local efforts. As always, I remain available to answer any questions you may have about our priorities on any issue.

On behalf of the Marion County Board of County Commissioners, I thank you for the opportunity to present our community's legislative priorities. We look forward to working with you during the next legislative session to address issues critical to our community and state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeff Gold", written in a cursive style.

Jeff Gold  
Chairman