

**Official Minutes of
MARION COUNTY
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

March 3, 2026

CALL TO ORDER:

The Marion County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) met in a workshop session in Commission Chambers at 2:02 p.m. on Tuesday, March 3, 2026 at the Marion County Governmental Complex located in Ocala, Florida.

INTRODUCTION OF WORKSHOP BY CHAIRMAN CARL ZALAK, III

Chairman Zalak advised that the workshop was scheduled this afternoon to discuss options for the Parks and Recreation Department projects.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of our Country.

ROLL CALL

Upon roll call the following members were present: Chairman Carl Zalak, III, District 4; Vice-Chairman Matthew McClain, District 3; Commissioner Craig Curry, District 1; Commissioner Kathy Bryant, District 2; and Commissioner Michelle Stone, District 5. Also present were County Attorney Matthew G. Minter, County Administrator Mounir Bouyounes, and Assistant County Administrator (ACA) Angel Roussel,

The Deputy Clerk was in receipt of a 17 page Agenda packet to follow along with the PowerPoint presentation.

WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

1. Presentation by Pegeen Hanrahan, P.E., Trust for Public Land, to Discuss Options for the Parks & Recreation Department Projects:

Parks and Recreation Director Jim Couillard presented the following:

Description/Background: During the Budget Workshop on July 9, 2024, the Marion County Board of County Commissioners (Board) requested more discussion regarding the support needed for the Parks & Recreation Department (Department) projects. This led to a series of workshops related to capital improvement, future parks, funding opportunities and strategies.

On December 3, 2024, a joint workshop was held with the City of Belleview to discuss existing conditions and needs.

On December 5, 2024, a workshop was held with the Board to discuss the Parks & Recreation Master Plan, deferred maintenance & capital replacement, new parks and funding.

On December 19, 2024, a workshop was held with the Board to discuss expansion improvements, funding proposals for the work needed and project classification funding.

On January 29, 2025, a workshop was held with the Board to discuss funding options for the Capital Improvement Program.

During these workshops, the Department presented a diversified funding strategy to meet the needs of our current and growing population. Those strategies include restructuring of the Parks & Recreation Fees fund, the implementation of Parks &

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Recreation Impact Fees and the pursuit of bond funding. Bond funding was recommended to address maintenance projects and as a solution to address the need of regional parks in the higher growth areas of Marion County. To bring clarity to the process of how bond funding for parks can be implemented, the Board requested more information on how a feasibility study can provide a glimpse of the community's tolerance and support of such funding. In response to this request, Pegeen Hanrahan, P.E., with the Trust for Public Land, will be presenting information related to this process.

Budget/Impact: None.

Recommended Action: For review and discussion.

Parks and Recreation Director Jim Couillard addressed the need to continue to work together toward long term sustainable funding solutions for the Parks and Recreation Department. He expressed his appreciation to the Board for its partnership and the shared commitment to meeting the evolving needs of the community. Mr. Couillard advised that the Department has a growing need for consistent funding both to care for and maintain its existing facilities and to plan thoroughly and thoughtfully for future parks, recreation centers, and trail projects.

Mr. Couillard advised that in previous discussions, staff have shared information about its backlog of deferred maintenance, capital improvements and replacement needs, as well as opportunities that new parks and expanded recreation services and spaces can create for residents and visitors alike. Since July of 2024, together with the Board, staff have met several times to explore potential funding options that can help address these needs in strategic and sustainable ways. Impact Fees and bond funding have been two areas of focus, and staff are especially encouraged by the potential role of Tourism Development dollars in enhancing parks that both strengthen the community and supports tourism. Each of these tools represents a promising opportunity, and staff are excited to continue working alongside the Commissioners to bring meaningful improvements to Marion County. He noted today's workshop will focus specifically on bond funding.

Mr. Couillard introduced Pegeen Hanrahan from the Trust for Public Land (TPL), who will share some insights and recommendations on how their team can support the County in reaching shared goals.

Pegeen Hanrahan, P.E., National Associate Director of Conservation Finance with the TPL, introduced her new colleague, Casey Bauer, Florida Director for Conservation Finance for TPL. She stated Mr. Bauer comes to the firm from the Tampa Bay Downtown Partnership and knows the rough and tumble of local government and the exciting mission that Marion County has as a community. Ms. Hanrahan stated Marion County has one of the longest records of voter authorized funding for parks going back to the Pennies For Parks initiative created in the 1990s, noting other communities have always looked up to the Marion County BCC for its early leadership. She commented on the recently passed Marion County One Cent Sales Tax to support its transportation program, which has been very strongly supported by voters and speaks well to people's trust in Marion County government. Ms. Hanrahan advised that TPL is a National nonprofit organization founded in 1972, noting she and Mr. Bauer work for the segment of the of the organization called Conservation Finance and work almost exclusively at the ballot box with voter authorized funding sources, but also do some Legislative work. She noted she is currently working with the State of South Carolina and the State of Georgia on their funding sources. Ms. Hanrahan stated she and Mr. Bauer work together on parks, trails, natural lands, open space and also schoolyards. She noted TPL is the biggest organization in the Nation for

rail and trail projects, as well as the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program, which protects the Nation's military assets and land around military bases. Ms. Hanrahan stated over the arc of time TPL has worked on over 5,500 land acquisition projects and 311 Community Schoolyards by opening them up to public use during non-school hours. The organization's work has protected over 4,000,000 acres of land and helped achieved over \$112,000,000,000.00 in voter authorized funding.

In response to Commissioner Bryant, Ms. Hanrahan advised that her presentation does not include details regarding the Community Schoolyards projects, but would be glad to connect the Board to the organization's School Yards Director. Commissioner Byrant opined that Ms. Hanrahan could get consensus from the Board to share more information on that because it has been discussed in the past.

In response to County Administrator Mounir Bouyounes, Ms. Hanrahan advised that TPL has done a couple of School Yard projects in Florida, noting Alachua County has invested in a Wild Spaces/Public Places program at some of its school facilities. She noted those projects were funded by County Sales Tax dollars. Ms. Hanrahan provided a brief overview of similar types of school projects. She stated one of the other things that TPL works on with local governments is figuring out how to help bring down State and Federal dollars with programs like Rural and Family Lands, the Greenways and Trails funding, the Florida Communities Trust funding, etc. Ms. Hanrahan provided a brief overview of some of the other rural protection projects, noting the organization has worked on 470 projects in Florida, especially as it relates to the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

Ms. Hanrahan advised that the TPL's primary funder is a Tampa focused technology entrepreneur named Arnie Bellini who has funded the organization to work predominantly with local government through Live Wildly and the Bellini Better World Foundation to try to encourage local funding sources to help protect the Florida Wildlife Corridor. She reiterated that the organization has worked on many ballot measures that are purely for parks or even individual projects. Ms. Hanrahan advised that TPL has the ability to work on ballot measures that include priorities other than parks, trails or open space, most commonly roads, because that is one of the most expensive capital needs of County governments. The organization has also worked on fire stations, sheriff's facilities, animal shelters, libraries, affordable housing, anything that is a legal public use of capital dollars. In Florida, TPL has worked on 45 successful ballot measures with an overall 90 percent (%) win rate. She stated over the long arc of time, about 77% of all measures that have gone to the ballot in the United States (US), including some outdoor recreation conservation uses have passed.

Ms. Hanrahan advised that there are 3 main local capital funding options: 1) General Obligation Bonds (single subject, focused on capital project and typically backed by ad valorem property tax millage); 2) property taxes or budget allocation (BCC can allocate on their own without voter approval); and 3) Sales Tax (usually for capital projects and placed on ballot for voter approval).

Ms. Hanrahan commented on General Obligation Bonds, which to a local government is similar to a mortgage as it is a long term lending instrument. It is usually backed by the property tax if it is voter approved, but the County can of course bond for other revenue sources as well such as property taxes or budget allocations. She noted there are Counties in Florida like Lee, Collier, and Volusia that do a voter dedicated property tax. Ms. Hanrahan opined that it is a little bit easier to pass a bond than a Sales Tax, noting the other piece of that is anyone who is buying anything that is taxable does pay a Sales Tax, whereas a bond is only paid for by property owners if it is backed by the property

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tax. She referred to the map on page 9, which reflects Counties in the State of Florida with existing voter approved conservation funding. Ms. Hanrahan addressed the key ingredients that go into a voter approved funding source, which are: 1) a demonstrated need, 2) elected leadership, and 3) community engagement and support. She commented on the need for clear, legal, descriptive ballot language. Ms. Hanrahan addressed the process that TPL follows to help decision makers assess funding options, which includes the County's request for technical assistance, which the Board approved a few weeks ago; feasibility research; public opinion survey/poll; program recommendations and ballot language; and a privately funded campaign (most locally raised funds). She opined that people already know how they feel about Marion County, whether they want to invest in their parks, whether or not they think their taxes are at a good level or too high, etc. TPL always requests the local County attorney review and approve as to what the actual ballot language will look like. Ms. Hanrahan commented on the importance of people having trust in their government to do what it says it will. She advised that trust is usually translated to the voters through things like citizen oversight committees, annual public audits, and ensuring citizens understand that all of the expenditures are open to public review by placing the information on the County's website.

Commissioner Curry commented on the process of a privately funded campaign, noting in regard to the One Cent Sales Tax that recently passed, it was the CEP that did the polling and actually ran that campaign because the BCC could not do it from a governmental standpoint. He questioned whether TPL would go out and enlist organizations like the CEP and other groups in the community to help support the effort. Ms. Hanrahan stated TPL can; however, it is always strongest when a campaign looks and feels like Marion County. A privately funded campaign can include the business community and charitable organizations. She stated she knew enough about Marion County to know that it has a lot of capable people here who would likely be willing to step up and help with that privately funded campaign.

General discussion ensued.

Ms. Hanrahan commented on the feasibility research, which she opined was a very useful document, noting it brings things together and puts them in one place. The demographics, the parks and conservation budget, the fiscal capacity, etc. She advised that TPL will work with staff on what the County's outstanding obligations are, its political profile turn-out, the breakdown between different parties, the history of what has or has not been approved in the past, as well as election requirements.

Ms. Hanrahan referred to the charts on page 12, which provide examples of bond cost calculations and the costs for typical homeowners in the community. The calculations assume a 4% interest rate and a 20 year bond maturity. The calculations include a 0.1100 of a mill increase for the average assessed residential value of \$155,621.00, which would translate to an \$18.00 per year cost for the average single family home. Another calculation was provided at a millage rate of 0.2500 of a mill based on \$38,000,000,000.00 in taxable value that would lead to about \$9,500,000.00 in annual revenue. The average cost for a single family home with an assessed residential value of \$155,621.00 would be \$39.00. She stated this is the type of data that TPL would analyze in the feasibility report.

Ms. Hanrahan referred to pages 13 and 14, which reflect examples of the ballot language utilized in Clay and Collier Counties. She commented on higher turnout elections and advised that TPL generally recommends a General Election for the ballot to be placed on,

whether it is an off year like 2026 or a presidential year like 2028.

Ms. Hanrahan referred to the map on page 15, noting TPL has a system entitled "Park Serve" where it maps the public parks in 14,000 cities and towns. She noted the areas in purple reflect areas in Marion County that have priority needs for parks. Ms. Hanrahan advised that Marion County has a capital plan for its parks, but should continue to make sure that it is touching base with the growing community, noting there should be equitable distribution of funds.

In response to Commissioner Curry, Ms. Hanrahan advised that Clay County utilized more of their Bond for acquisition of sensitive land and the purchase of development rights on private farms and forests. She noted Marion County has a very strong planning orientation in terms of its horse farm areas and has created a very protective land conservation through the Comprehensive Plan. Ms. Hanrahan advised that there is also another option where conservation easements are donated, noting some people choose to donate an easement for a tax benefit, but often times they are purchased.

Ms. Hanrahan stated similar to candidate campaigns, elected officials and staff should not expend County resources to advocate for or against passage, but unlike candidate campaigns, non-profits may do so legally. She advised that usually there is a political action committee led by local people that are raising and expending funds, which is all publicly disclosed through the Supervisor of Elections Office.

General discussion ensued.

Ms. Hanrahan stated it is not too late to consider placing this matter in the 2026 ballot or the Board could wait until 2028.

Commissioner Stone referred to the sample ballots and questioned whether there were any other agencies requesting funding at the same time or whether this was the only dollar value being asked of the voters. Ms. Hanrahan stated she was not certain, noting it is quite common for there also to be a School Board measure on the same ballot.

Ms. Hanrahan advised that the one thing about bonds is they must be single subject. For example, if the County wanted to fund two different types of projects, such as Sheriff's capital and parks, that would need to be two different bonds. She noted it is pretty common for TPL to work on multi issue bond measures.

Chairman Zalac stated there has to be single issue in regard to bonds, but questioned whether parks funding for playgrounds, equipment, purchasing conservation land, buying farm credits or whatever the Board decides, is that all under that one bond or would that have to be multiple bonds. Ms. Hanrahan advised that TPL has certainly seen that in a single bond, sort of all of the parks and conservation uses, but recommended the County Attorney perform some research and determine whether it should be one or two separate bonds.

Commissioner McClain questioned whether bond referendums are required to be by Super Majority (60%) vote. Ms. Hanrahan stated the threshold in Florida is 50% + 1.

Commissioner Curry commented on bonds in terms of the operational funding, noting once the parks are built, they have to be operated and maintained and questioned whether a capital funding bond can be joined up with maintenance bond.

Ms. Hanrahan advised that there is an option where it can have a single question that includes some bonding and some operational. The one limitation of that is that the operational funding is supposed to be affiliated only with the projects that were bonded. She stated Sarasota County is planning to have two questions on its next ballot, one is for bonding and one is for operational millage and the reason they did not want to do that as a single question is because their operational millage needs to be for projects that are

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not in the current bond.

General discussion ensued.

In response to Commissioner Bryant, Mr. Couillard stated staff have an extensive list of capital asset replacement projects, expansion projects, as well as new projects. He opined that if the County is considering simply replacing or updating parks that are already there, while communities that are growing are not seeing any new infrastructure being added, that could be a little bit of an issue to deal with through this process. Mr. Couillard commented on expansion of park projects on existing lands the County currently has; for example, Orange Blossom Hills is a park that is still an open pasture with no funding to develop. He advised that Independence Park is another one, noting staff are working with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) on a potential land/lease swap that will include the need to invest in that land because DEP will want to see a five year plan. In response to Commissioner Bryant, Mr. Couillard advised that the estimate in dollars needed for what staff is envisioning now is approximately \$100,000,000.00, which includes \$30,000,000.00 in deferred maintenance and another \$19,000,000.00 in asset capital replacement.

Mr. Couillard opined that as long as the County wants to remain competitive in attracting sports tourism, it has to take a look at the competition. He advised that there are a lot of communities out there that are investing and are well ahead of Marion County in regard to bringing in major tournaments because they are spending big money on sports complexes with all of the amenities. Mr. Couillard noted most of their fields are lit differently, have paved parking, grand features, and other things to attract people to that sports complex.

General discussion ensued.

In response to Commissioner Bryant, Ms. Hanrahan stated the next step would be guidance from the BCC as to whether it is contemplating placing something on the 2026 or 2028 ballot.

General discussion resumed.

Chairman Zalak opined that the County needs to perform the polling and then bring the polling data back for consideration prior to deciding which ballot to place the bond request on.

Ms. Hanrahan advised that the one piece of polling that takes a little bit of time is making sure TPL can articulate to voters exactly what would or would not be included, noting the Board needs to get a recommendation from staff in terms of what the capital needs are and whether it would be for parks alone or would it include parks, trails and land conservation.

General discussion resumed.

Mr. Bouyounes stated staff will need to do some additional work, revamp the priority list, have some communication with the Board to agree on the list, and at the same time staff will also be working on ballot language.

Commissioner Stone questioned whether that also includes talking with some stakeholders out in the community and getting their support.

Chairman Zalak stated if the bond conversations include conservation opportunities, there may be other folks beside the Board that would want to be included; however, if it is just talking about park operations that can be more of a County discussion.

Ms. Hanrahan concurred, noting if that discussion includes conservation, the County has its Farm Bureau, Horse Farms Forever, Conservation Florida, and the Florida Trails Association it may want to include in that conversation.

Chairman Zalak stated his preference is to keep the park system regional, except where it does tie into the trail system (i.e., Greenway Trails).

Commissioner Bryant advised that she understands Chairman Zalak wanting to keep it regional; however, there are some pockets, especially out in the southwest corridor where something extremely passive could be beneficial to a lot of those communities.

General discussion ensued.

Chairman Zalak expressed concerns with the costs associated with large sportsplexes and stated tourism will not support the operations and maintenance (O&M) costs of those facilities, noting in 15 years that sportsplex is no longer relevant.

General discussion resumed.

Chairman Zalak opined that the Pennies for Parks Tax was amazing and provided the County all these really cool assets that they cannot fund and are having to struggle with funding as far as keeping up with the maintenance.

In response to Commissioner Bryant, Mr. Couillard advised that the last \$10,000,000.00 of the Pennies for Parks Fund was split between improvements at Carney Island and Wrigley Fields, as well as the acquisition of Brick City Adventure Park.

General discussion resumed.

Ms. Hanrahan stated she has heard a lot of different visions from what each Commissioner wants and recommended that the Board direct staff to come back with different funding amounts, what the County could accomplish, etc. and whether or not that is what the constituents are looking for. She advised that TPL can bring back statistically valid public opinion.

General discussion resumed.

Chairman Zalak opined that the Board needs to also look for opportunities that will generate future income for the Parks Department, whether that includes creating another KP hole, RV park, or other type camping in order to use the parks for some of those other opportunities as well.

Commissioner Curry stated he did not want to wait until the 2028 ballot, noting the County is growing too fast and as long as the polling is indicative of moving forward, his preference is to place this matter on the 2026 ballot. He advised that the makeup of this Board is going to change after this year, noting he would rather have this Commission, with the expertise that it has, move this particular issue forward.

Chairman Zalak stated it was the Board's consensus to move forward with placing this matter on the 2026 ballot and directed staff to put a team together to make it happen and to bring back its recommendations.

In response to Chairman Zalak, Ms. Hanrahan advised that TPL would need the information within about a month and then it could bring back the polling data before May 1, 2026.

In response to Chairman Zalak, Ms. Hanrahan stated TPL work in Florida is primarily funded by Bellini Better World Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, so this work can be done for Marion County at no cost. She advised that Marion County is richly blessed with natural lands; however, there are still some important natural lands that have not been protected. Ms. Hanrahan commented on the need to have a local funding source to bring down those State and Federal funding sources. She advised that the TPL have staff in Washington who hold an annual Lobby Day where they can line up and request the County's Federal Representatives to provide funding from their specific Land and Water Conservation Fund or the REPI program, which is more military focused. General discussion ensued.

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Chairman Zalak commented on the robust operations happening at the Southeastern Livestock Pavilion (SELP) and the Dunnellon Airport and questioned if the County is missing anything to maximize those assets.

General discussion resumed.

Ms. Hanrahan stated the County does have the ability, for as long as they issue the bonds, to also take in some additional revenue affiliated under a certain millage rate as allowed under Florida Statute (FS). She advised that normally, once a local government starts a program and then goes back to the voters for reauthorization, the voters almost always say yes because it becomes important to their quality of life, especially when it comes to having access to the outdoors, whether it is hunting and fishing, riding horses, playing pickleball etc.

Ms. Hanrahan clarified that the County may have to do the bond and then a straw poll for a long term millage rate to secure the O&M, especially if the County needs operating money for something it is not putting in the bond, then it might be better to have two separate questions on the ballot.

NEW BUSINESS:

Mr. Bouyounes requested consensus from the Board to schedule a public hearing for the next Board meeting March 17, 2026 to consider some minor modifications to an existing Ordinance that deals with the low income non-ad valorem assessment assistance program. He clarified that every year the County sets aside some funding to assist those people with their assessment if they meet certain qualifications. Staff wanted to look at those qualifications and bring back a revised Ordinance. Mr. Bouyounes clarified that the level of percentage of the poverty rate the Ordinance allows today needs to be adjusted. He stated he would like to do some more work with the County Attorney and Community Services Director Cheryl Butler before the Board finalizes that Ordinance. It was the general consensus of the Board to concur.

Chairman Zalak expressed his appreciation to staff for a great workshop.

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting thereupon adjourned at 3:27 p.m.

Carl Zalak, III, Chairman

Attest:

Gregory C. Harrell, Clerk