



amelia tree conservancy

Amelia Bluff and Our Future

Like others in the City, the Amelia Tree Conservancy Board of Directors has been following the Amelia Bluff developments. It has been a strange and winding path. Through this entire process neither staff nor the developer sought to resolve the discrepancy between the FLUM and the Zoning map although both acknowledge that they had discussed the problem. None of the rest of us, including the Commissioners, noticed the problem until it was recently identified by Planning Advisory Board Chair Frank Santry.

All mature trees on this island are critically important for our future at this point, but the Amelia Bluffs parcel was not just any parcel. This parcel was one of the most outstanding forested upland parcels on the island and certainly the largest of its type remaining. This property was a wonderful place to enjoy, with a high canopy, trails and tranquility. It had a canopy that was working hard to protect us, clean our air and water, manage stormwater, sequester carbon, etc. When we realized the property was under contract, we conducted an i-Tree study of the parcel (www.itreetools.org), a state-of-the-art and peer-reviewed software suite initially released in 2006 by the USDA Forest Service. The results indicated that annually the trees in this parcel removed 25.25 lbs. of Carbon Monoxide, 94.16 lbs. of Nitrogen Dioxide, 922.94 lbs. of Ozone, 28.61 lbs. of Sulfur Dioxide and extensive Particulate Matter. These trees sequestered 115.18 tons of Carbon Dioxide annually. In total, the trees on this property stored 1,864.75 tons of Carbon Dioxide. As we remove more trees, we have more issues with flooding and have to pay for expensive engineered stormwater management projects. According to i-Tree, the trees in this parcel had the capacity to intercept 1,654,201 gallons of storm water annually. Our trees are functionally part of our community's infrastructure.

In the Commission meeting on Feb. 19, Ms. Gibson spoke of the importance of protecting wetlands, but it is equally important that we protect our upland canopy, for a better FEMA insurance rating, protection of our environment, storm protection, our sense of place and quality of life. An excellent summary of the benefits of trees and supporting research is provided by the Arbor Day Foundation (<https://www.arborday.org/trees/treefacts/>). Land conservation is one of the top factors providing points for the FEMA insurance rating. Edward T. McMahon, who holds the Charles E. Fraser Chair on Sustainable Development at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, DC, argues that "sense of place" is most important to the economic sustainability of a community (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qB5tH4rt-x8>).

A sense of place is a unique collection of qualities and characteristics – visual, cultural, social, and environmental – that provide meaning to a location. Sense of place is what makes one city or town different from another, but sense of place is also what makes our physical surroundings worth caring about.

On Amelia Island, our canopy constitutes a major part of our sense of place. It greatly contributes to our quality of life and underlies significant parts of our economy, particularly tourism, outdoor recreation and the retirement community.

We have reviewed the maps and other data, read and listened to the perspectives of citizens, staff, Commissioners and the developer. Based on the maps, developments in the PAB review, Ron Sapp's recent News-Leader editorial, Ms. Gibson's recent presentations, Mr. Santry's legal analysis and other statements in the Commission meeting on Feb. 19, we have no doubt that the portion of the Amelia Bluff property identified on the FLUM as Conservation land is just that. While the initial map discrepancy may have resulted from a



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technical mapping error, we have seen no evidence to refute the intentional nature of the Conservation label. We have also seen no justification for the fact that this issue was not addressed before development was approved. Frankly, since the developer was aware of the discrepancy, based on Mr. Beard's own words in the Feb. 19 Commission meeting, we don't understand why the purchase was completed without resolution of this issue or why Mr. Beard failed to insist on a resolution before beginning the development.

As Commissioner Ross has pointed out, we all share in the responsibility for our current situation with this parcel. However, the handling of this parcel by City staff was far from professional. These individuals are paid by and accountable to the taxpayers of the City. It is their responsibility to represent the best interests of the taxpayers, not to advocate for the interests of developers. This is a costly learning experience.

One of our concerns about this parcel relates to what should be done with this parcel now that much of it has been destroyed. Perhaps it could be a park. Since roads have already been cut, perhaps it could be an accessible passive park, a part of the Greenway, with most of the land being allowed to regrow. Land trusts commonly conserve land as parks. This park could provide education on the history and ecology of the Greenway. EarthKeepers presented a similar concept several years ago that was well-received by Commissioners. We know for a fact that our citizens will volunteer to help if we uphold the Conservation status of this property.

We live on a barrier island that is being overdeveloped. According to Munsell McPhillips, PhD in biomedical engineering and professional in restoring degraded riparian rivers, it is quite possible that we have already gone so far that we will not be able to maintain the environmental sustainability of our island. This will leave us in the same situation as those who live on many other barrier islands in Florida: hot and miserable, uncomfortably crowded, and far more vulnerable to hurricanes, nor'easters and sea level rise. At some point, the economy will follow the degradation of our sense of place. Thus far, the State, City and County have allowed this to happen.

Based on recent elections, surveys, testimony and letters, it seems clear that the citizens of Amelia Island (both City and County) are no longer willing to tolerate this trend. We expect the environment and ecology of Amelia Island to be protected. We expect our sense of place to be protected. We expect our interests and investments in this island to be respected and protected. And, we expect competency and a commitment to the community in the staff whose salaries we pay. We encourage all to express their views on Amelia Bluff to the Commissioners and to attend the Commission meeting on March 19.

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