

Envoy



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At the turn of the millennium Congress named the Wekiva a National Wild and Scenic River. Meanwhile all the powers that be in Florida were moving to complete the outerbelt for metro Orlando by crossing over the Lower Wekiva to hook up at Interstate 4, just below the St. Johns. After ten years of working to block this road rage and the inevitable development that comes of it, FOWR and other environmental groups changed our minds and decided to support the idea because the expressway authority and other forces were open to a variety of mitigations and concessions.

The primary advantage we saw was to preserve the Seminole Woods property and thereby to complete the animal corridors to the north. State Road 46 was becoming a traffic nightmare and four lanes was absolutely necessary. Roadkill was already bad and would only be multiplied by making it a four-lane highway. FOWR began to imagine that if the outerbelt virtually replaced this road, we would fight for it to be completely elevated, designed with a whole new concept of plant and animal protection. The most important habitats could be preserved and the whole forest area safely designed for fire regimes and water conservation.

In 2002 Governor Jeb Bush appointed a Task Force to study the issues. For three months prior to that meeting we helped form The Wekiva Coalition to gather our information and prepare all our recommendations to bring to the governor's commission in a handsome booklet.¹ After negotiations with the governor's staff, the coalition got four positions on the panel of thirty delegates. All the state agencies and most of the local governments were represented as well. Pat Harden, our most seasoned veteran, was the FOWR representative, but behind the scenes were a half-dozen others working the room and providing additional materials when needed.

¹ Florida Audubon, the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and the Defenders of Wildlife provided a great variety of resources and information, but we had many individuals from other groups and agencies.

All the time I attended the meetings of the coalition, I was thinking (sometimes out loud to the group) that this was a dangerous undertaking and would likely backfire on us all. The community support for Wekiva is very strong. What if they dangle these plums in front of our noses, get us to endorse the highway and agree on its actual path, and then in the final analysis use budgetary constraints and the fine print to evaporate the ecological design, the watershed protection, and the curbs on development in north Orange and Lake County? In that case, the public who support us would be completely disenchanted with our falling for the oldest of shell games and cooperating with the wolf in the deprivations of the farm. So far, however, bait and switch does not appear to be their game.

The task force held pairs of public meetings each month for half a year in advance of the legislative session in the spring, using the facilities of the Department of Transportation in Orlando. It was big-time political theater, a large low-ceilinged room with seats for several hundred facing the principals with lights, state of the art projection facilities, television setups for several stations, and teams of staff support behind each of the speakers. I signed in at the desk in the back, gathering reams of information the task force had already generated, and filled out a card to have my five minutes later in the morning when the public was invited to comment on the proceedings.

Seats were at a premium, so I settled in among a group of strangers who turned out to be lawyers associated with development interests. They were scoffing most of the time about how one-sided the progress of the meetings had been. Meanwhile, a succession of fine powerpoint presentations from government and non-profit organizations were addressing major issues in the project.

The 1000 Friends of Florida, dedicated to environmentally friendly growth management, set forth ideas about how to preserve the watershed while opening up so much new land to development. Their proposal outlined a new system of laws to assure that local governments would use the latest data about watershed recharge areas to steer development away from the most vital upland reaches so as to assure the spring flows of the river and the ecological community depending on that. Their proposals would require more restrictions and of course potential court challenges. It was a compelling presentation that the task force seemed inclined to accept.

As happens in such meetings, the recommendations to come out of all these presentations were not going to be voted on this month, but in fact were being decided while we watched. Objections brought up today would be resolved in public or behind the scenes so that the next meeting would be coming in with something to vote on that had for the most part been approved. All around the room earnest one-on-one conversations were proceeding in various dugouts, as it were, while the game was being played on the field of microphone and powerpoint.

I watched Charles Lee of Florida Audubon and our own Pat Harden work the table over diligently with questions and observations that were guiding the doubtful panel members toward a public understanding. They were no strangers to the panelists, bringing more experience to the scene than most of the government employees and elected officials. Supporting them was the one basic fact: the historical decline of spring flows in the face of rising population and water use.

The skeptics needed assurances about how the new laws would work with the old bureaucratic system and Pat especially, through her work with the Water Management District,

was not just competent to explain. She could entune her commentary with native accents and good humor, all the common language by which one charms an audience and wins approval. She was one of the few sitting at the table whose public interest was not supported by a paycheck.

When the public comment session began later in the day, I started to be very nervous. My plan, as always, is to speak for children as an educator who uses the river as a teaching tool. I wanted to remind the task force about the stellar history of protection of the Wekiva that commends our community to all who visit or settle here. As each new speaker got up, I adapted my planned remarks accordingly until the surprise of the day arrived.

A thirteen-year-old girl, playing hooky I supposed from some middle school in the basin, stood up and said how much she loved the river and how she couldn't believe it when she read in the paper that anyone would dream of putting a highway over her favorite place. You had to laugh. She got mad and came down here to set us straight: "You can't do this." At once both sweet and imperious, as only an adolescent can be, she had passion and good will on her side.

The audience was stunned, at first, but then she carried on to say that she had looked at the proposals and the gains for wildlife and watershed which were a part of the task force's intention. However, she was still skeptical and wanted everyone to know that righteous anger awaited them if they ignored the treasures of the Wekiva.

I felt as though by some magic Pat Harden had entered her next life and was already taking up the task of river community. My own speech evaporated because it had an embodiment far beyond any rhetoric of mine. In my own democratic vista, Alexandra some day becomes our governor.²

In the spring of 2003, the Task Force reported to the legislature a long set of recommendations which the Wekiva coalition could completely support. It was a bright day for us to see that all our preparation had paid off, but unfortunately a group of disgruntled local governments, including John Land, the mayor of Apopka, felt left out in the process. They hired a proven development lobbyist and effectively torpedoed the proposed legislation. The governor, to save face it seemed, appointed a second commission with fewer environmentalists and more of the disgruntled opposition, hoping to find some common ground before the next year's legislative session. Oh brother, we thought, here it comes.

However, confronted by the same data and hundreds of hours of now boring presentations, they came to the same conclusions with quite a few more refinements about how to carry the law out so that everyone's interests would be protected. From this teacher's point of view, the opposition in the first task force got caught without doing their homework or didn't sign up for the class or simply thought it would all go away. Faced, however, with the essential and complicated facts, they backed the next version of the bill and it passed unanimously in the 2004 legislature.

The highway, however, is far from built at this time. A third commission is charged with the job of implementing the law, the state's checkbook is open to purchase the four large parcels of land, but calculating the fair price of land in a speculative market is not easy. By law, all the land or development rights must be purchased before the Parkway can be built. It may all fall apart yet, but it looks as though sometime in the next decade a triumph of our social capital in

² Her full name is Alexandra Bunker and I found out later she was home schooled.

central Florida will have built a parkway designed with state of the art regional ecology. If so, everyone from the governor to Alexandra can be proud.

It is 150 years today since Walt Whitman built his parkway into the heart and mind of America. He was not blind and deaf to the troubles and the terrors of life. Who of us can afford to be? But he always remained optimistic in the near future, as I am today, on the birthday of his *Leaves of Grass*. He was fond of saying that America itself is the greatest of poems. That's my song and yours.

*The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my
gab and my loitering.*

*I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

*The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd
wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.*

*I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.*

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.*

Whitman: "**Song of Myself**" final stanza