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Scenic Watch is a free bi-monthly publication of Citizens for a Scenic Florida, Inc., dedicated to the preservation, protection and enhancement of Florida's scenic heritage. Individuals, organizations and government agencies are welcome as members. [Join Scenic Florida now](#) to protect our scenic qualities.

Melanie Cross, former Executive Director of Citizens for a Scenic Florida, Inc. and a founder of the historic preservation group Old Arlington Inc. and a community activist, died at her Jacksonville home Monday after a three-year battle with cancer. She was 55.

Born in Jacksonville and reared in Arlington, Mrs. Cross moved to Mandarin in 2002. A graduate of Terry Parker High School, where she was named the state high jump champion, she graduated from the University of North Florida with a degree in economics. At UNF she started the fencing club, according to her mother, Georgia MacLean.

Mrs. Cross had recently worked as a grants writer for Catholic Charities. She also served as executive director of Citizens for a Scenic Florida and in the 1990s was executive director of the Spina Bifida Association.

Earlier in her career, she was with the Jacksonville Downtown Development Authority, first as a project manager, then as manager of the Downtown Management District.

The family suggests memorial contributions to Catholic Charities, 134 E. Church St., Jacksonville, FL 32202.

National News:

Legislation signed by the President in 2006 established tax incentive provisions for donation of conservation easements. However, these conservation easement incentives expired on December 31, 2007. It is hopeful that these incentives will be made permanent in the Farm Bill, coming up in the next few months. The Farm Bill, which the Senate passed in December, includes a permanent extension of new tax incentives for conservation easement donations. The House Farm Bill doesn't have a similar provision. A House-Senate conference to work out a final Farm Bill could start in late January, but the House and Senate bills are big (1,500 pages), complex, and very different – so a final agreement will probably take weeks to finalize.

What you can do:

Check to see if your Congressman has cosponsored HR 1576, the stand-alone bill to make the easement incentive permanent. If not, please ask him to do so.

If he has cosponsored, thank him and ask him to please write House Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel (if he is Democrat) or Ranking Member Jim McCrery (if he is Republican) to ask him to help ensure that the extension of the incentive for conservation easement donations in section 12203 of the Senate's Farm Bill – which is identical to HR 1576- is included in the final Farm Bill.

A new battle is sprouting over billboard-blocking palm trees

Scott Maxwell | TAKING NAMES

February 29, 2008

It's hard to see several of the billboards along U.S. Highway 17-92 and Lee Road in Winter Park.

It's also hard to believe that the perfect rows of nearly 40-foot-tall palm trees blocking them grew there naturally.

That's because they didn't.

They were actually planted by Winter Park developer Dan Bellows, who does not like the signs.

Now, many people don't like billboards. But most people don't have as much money as Dan.

And this is what happens when rich people get angry. They do things that you can't -- like spend what's probably more than some people make in a year on tall trees propped up in their parking lot.

The problem, according to the company that owns the signs, is the signs are in a completely legal location. "Dan knows that," said Craig Swygert, president of Clear Channel Outdoor's local division. "He bought this property full-well knowing there was a permanent easement on it."

Bellows couldn't be reached this week to talk about the battle or how much money he's spent. But local nurseries said trees like these can cost upward of \$1,000 each if purchased. And late last year, after Bellows first hatched his plan, he told the Sentinel: "Those billboards, if not all billboards, are blight."

Not long after that, Bellows planted more trees and covered more billboards -- most noticeably around his bar, Tom & Jerry's. He has now put up dozens of them.

Swygert said he's still optimistic about working things out. But for now, he said he's a bit taken aback by just how stubborn Bellows is -- and by how much money he's spending on this "instead of putting it to a good use."

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Sign of times: Billboard enters the digital age on I-9

By Michael Turnbull | South Florida Sun-Sentinel

February 7, 2008

Now showing on Interstate 95 near the Broward-Miami-Dade County line: A new digital billboard that could be a sign of things to come in South Florida's advertising wars.

The virtual slide show is in stark contrast to the static ads that are stretched across most billboard frames.

The new billboard faces northbound drivers at the Hallandale Beach exit, where it has a captive audience of 280,000 vehicles that pass by daily.

"It's a new trend that provides a lot of opportunities for advertisers in high-demand locations," said Jodi Senese of CBS Outdoor, which installed the billboard in November, the company's first in South Florida.

Digital billboards look like giant high-definition TVs. Each one carries more than 400,000 light emitting diodes that makes them stand out even in the brightest sunlight.

While it can take weeks to change a traditional billboard, new technology allows the digital models to be programmed remotely. Multiple ads can be sold on the same space. The signs also can be used to convey public safety messages.

Senese said digital billboards were deployed in the Twin Cities to warn drivers about last year's bridge collapse. They also were used last month in Iowa and South Carolina to post election returns.

Critics such as the Scenic America, a Washington-based group opposed to billboard blight, say the bright displays are too distracting.

When South Florida drivers recently complained about the nighttime glare, CBS Outdoor dimmed the glow.

The Outdoor Advertising Association of America, a billboard industry trade group, says research shows the signs don't affect drivers.

The Federal Highway Administration plans to submit a report on digital billboards to Congress next year. But the agency issued a memo in September saying the digital signs don't violate the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 if the images are fixed for several seconds. The law prohibits flashing, intermittent or moving lights on billboards.

Opponents decried the decision.

"You'd think that given the problems the government already has with the safety of our infrastructure they wouldn't be looking for ways to add dangerous distractions to our overcrowded and congested highways," said Kevin Fry, president of Scenic America.

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Cell Towers

Court Orders Cell Tower Safeguards for Birds Along Gulf Coast

WASHINGTON, DC, February 19, 2008 (ENS) - A federal appeals court today ordered the Federal Communications Commission to establish safeguards to protect the millions of birds killed each year in collisions with telephone, radio, cellular and other communications towers in the Gulf Coast region.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that at least five million and up to 50 million birds are killed each year in collisions and other accidents with the tens of thousands of communications towers that have been built across the country. Industry groups say these numbers are overstated.

In its decision, the majority of the three judge panel criticized the Federal Communications Commission, FCC, for refusing to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service when approving towers along the Gulf Coast.

The court ruled that the FCC must require those seeking tower construction licenses to comply with the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, which provide guidelines for licensing such structures in order to protect species and limit damage to natural areas and wildlife habitat.

"We are very pleased by today's ruling which will require the FCC to assess the environmental impacts of towers," said Darin Schroeder, executive director of conservation advocacy with the American Bird Conservancy, one of the two plaintiff groups. The other is the Forest Conservation Council.

"Given the large number of bird deaths caused by towers, an environmental review is long overdue," he said.

The ruling will require FCC to better protect endangered species by consulting with wildlife experts before permitting decisions are made.

cell tower

"This is a huge victory for migratory birds and the millions of Americans who love to see them each year," said Schroeder.

Tens of thousands of communications towers pose hazards to migratory birds. (Photo courtesy Celltowerinfo.com)

However, in his dissenting opinion, Judge Brett Kavanaugh said he would dismiss the environmental groups' lawsuit "as unripe because the FCC, in a separate rulemaking proceeding, is re-examining these environmental issues and considering the effects of communications towers on birds nationwide, including in the Gulf Coast region."

"The Commission has gathered considerable factual information and input from interested parties - including from the petitioners in this case - and the FCC's counsel represented to the Court that the Commission expects to act soon," Judge Kavanaugh wrote.

The court also ruled that the FCC had failed to sufficiently involve the public in its tower approval process.

"The Catch-22 ... is that the Commission provides public notice of individual tower applications only after approving them," the court wrote in its decision.

The environmental groups say the situation is critical along the Gulf Coast where thousands of communications towers stand along the 1,000 mile stretch of coastline between Pt. Isabel, Texas and Tampa Bay, Florida. In Texas alone, there are over 10,000 towers.

Towers along this major migratory bird route threaten many different bird species, say the environmental groups. Exhausted from their journey across the Gulf of Mexico, these migrating songbirds collide with towers or the accompanying guy wires.

In some cases, the birds confuse the blinking lights atop the cell towers with the night stars they use to navigate their journey. The birds become disoriented and begin circling the tower until they collapse from exhaustion and fall to the ground.

The public interest law firm Earthjustice brought the case to federal court on behalf of the American Bird Conservancy. Earthjustice attorneys argued that the FCC violated federal law by approving dozens of new towers each year with little or no environmental review.

"The court has clearly directed the FCC to respect national environmental laws when handing out permits for these towers," said Earthjustice attorney Steve Roady. "FCC now must go back and carefully evaluate the environmental impacts of these towers."

Joe Ferrin, spokesman for the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association, said the organization had no immediate comment because, "Our attorneys are still reviewing the decision."

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Farmland Protection

Energy bonanza may be down on the farm

Published 2-22-2008

By [Al Everson](#)

BEACON STAFF WRITER

Noted for food and foliage, the farms in Volusia and surrounding counties may also be the Saudi Arabia of alternative energy. Developing that alternative energy may help save Florida's farms from being paved over for urban-style development.

"We're interested in anything that deals with the economic vitality of the area," said U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, as he opened a forum on the challenges and opportunities for local farmers.

That forum, which Mica hosted Feb. 11 at the Pierson Lions Club, drew about 80 farmers and representatives of local, state and federal governments. Mica said the gathering had come as a result of a dinner meeting with local farmers. He decided to convene the informal session to consider ways to encourage farmers to produce alternative fuels.

"We don't want to be the last to know. We want to be the first to help," Mica said.

The eight-term congressman called agriculture "one of the hallmarks of the economy of West Volusia."

"We're struggling," Florida Farm Bureau President John Hoblick told Mica.

Hoblick, one of the panelists, said Sunshine State farms have the capability to produce more ethanol for a growing market.

"Florida is right now the biggest market out there in the United States for ethanol," he said.

With crude-oil prices rising, and retail gasoline at \$3 per gallon or more, the farmers were told of experimental projects and special incentives for producing non-fossil fuels and renewable energy.

While ethanol may be derived from crops such as corn, potatoes and sorghum, there are other sources waiting to be tapped. Joan Dusky, of the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agriculture Science, urged the development of cellulose ethanol from wood waste "rather than from corn." She also pointed out ethanol may come from "urban waste," including lawn clippings.

"We need to keep ag for the environmental service it provides," she said, including "keeping a green Florida."

As well as ethanol, oily plants can be used to produce a synthetic diesel fuel, suggested Dana Venrick, a commercial horticulture agent of the Volusia County Agriculture Extension Service. One such plant is jatropha.

"It produces six times as much oil as soybeans per acre, and it's harvested twice a year," said Venrick.

Michael Ohlsen, the Florida Energy Office's manager of conservation and biomass, advised farmers there are state grants for the production of alternative energy.

Ohlsen said one potential source of ethanol is citrus peels, and other sources may be researched. To spur the demand, he said, utilities may be required to produce a fraction of their electricity with such synthetic substances.

"That creates the market," Ohlsen said.

Solar power and wind energy would also be included in the mix, he continued.

Besides exploring the economic potential of alternative fuels, the farming forum touched upon other issues:

- A positive development for local fern growers is the strong demand for foliage, especially in Europe. "The weak dollar has helped sell local farm products," Venrick said.
- The federal and state governments ought to do more to protect farms and farmers, according to Bill Hamilton, a St. Johns County farmer. Hamilton said the production of food and the protection of farmland from development are "national-defense and national-security issues," as well as vital to preserving the American heritage and family values. "If you want to protect that way of life, you've got to protect the land," Hamilton said.

He suggested the government make available low-interest or zero-interest loans to help those in distress and those beginning careers in agriculture.

- In response to questions about the shortage of agricultural labor, Mica said he favors giving visas to guest workers. He would like to see the guest-worker issue separated from overall immigration reform. However, he predicted the Congress will not act on immigration until next year at the earliest.

"I don't think anything is going to happen until after the election," Mica told the gathering. "I do think there will be a resolution."

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Land Use & Smart Growth

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Scenic Highways & Trails

776 earns designation of Scenic Highway

About 26 miles of State Road 776 -- known as the Lemon Bay-Myakka Trail -- received approval Wednesday from the Florida Department of Transportation for designation as a scenic highway.

ENGLEWOOD -- The Lemon Bay-Myakka Trail, encompassing about 26 miles of State Road 776, received official approval as a scenic highway.

Wednesday night's approval by the Florida Department of Transportation climaxed a three-year effort to seek the designation for S.R. 776 and two loop roads branching from it -- Old Englewood Road and Dearborn Street in Sarasota County and county roads 775 and 771 in Charlotte County.

Four members of the Scenic Highway Advisory Committee made the six-hour trip to Tallahassee, according to Chairman Bret Clark.

"They said we really have a lot of resources along this highway," Clark said. "They also gave us a challenge -- to put the scenic highway together as a comprehensive whole."

Clark said the best way to accomplish that was to get more input from the community.

"The Caloosa Indians lived here and Spanish explorers came through this area," Clark said. "Then you had the pioneers. We need the help of knowledgeable locals to put this thing together as if we're guides."

Clark added the committee still has much to do such as build a Web site, print brochures and create signage, to name a few.

"But the first thing we're going to do is look for funding," he said, "because that's part of the purpose

of being a scenic highway -- that we qualify for areas of (government) funding that we didn't before."

The committee's next meeting will take place at 9 a.m. March 4 at the Englewood Recreation Center, 101 N. Orange St. The group will discuss a ribbon-cutting ceremony and the formation of various subcommittees needed to perform all the new tasks that remain ahead.

"I would ask the public to please come," Clark said. "Especially if you have an area of expertise in land use, historical preservation, archaeology or Web design. We need a lot of help."

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Wilton Rooks

Scenic Watch Editor

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