



Florida Headlines

Billboards

[Protecting Community Standards](#)

[Waldo Rd. palms marked for the ax](#)

Cell Towers

Farmland Protection

[Fla. Growth to Wipe Out Vast Area of Wildlife Habitat](#)

Land Use & Smart Growth

Scenic Highways & Trails

Other Scenic News

[Cleaning Up Florida's Waterways](#)



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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.

National News:

NPR Reports: In Florida, billboards trump trees

A report by [David Barron](#) on [National Public Radio](#) examines an issue Scenic America has been working on for years: the battle between communities who want to plant and maintain trees and the billboard companies who want motorists to have unadulterated views of their signs.



While the practice of billboard companies destroying the public's trees is an issue all across the country, in this story Barron focuses on a swath of trees on a highway near Orlando, Florida. The piece includes commentary from Bill Jonson, a Scenic America board member and President of [Citizens for a Scenic Florida](#).

[Click here to listen to the report.](#)

More information on the practice of tree cutting around billboards can be found [here on our website](#). In addition, our recent publication *Beauty and the Beast* is available as a [free PDF download](#). The publication examines how the billboard industry makes money by chopping down the public's trees, why states let them do it, and how you can stop it.



Billboards

Protecting Community Standards

The Tampa Tribune

Published: September 8, 2008

The small town of Lavonia, along Interstate 85 in northeast Georgia, has the right idea about how to handle undesirable businesses that peddle flesh and clutter interstate highways with sexually suggestive billboards: If you can't shut them down legally, buy them out.

For close to a million dollars, city officials recently purchased such a business - Cafe Risque. The name should ring a bell with frequent travelers along Interstate 75 in north-central Florida because there's another such establishment in the Alachua County town of Micanopy. It's a restaurant that doubles as a strip club - or vice versa - and it tastelessly advertises with billboards that read, "We Bare All," "We Dare to Bare" and "Adult Toys."

Lavonia officials didn't want Cafe Risque when it opened in 2001. Some were steamed after first hearing the business would be a "Skeeter's Big Biscuit" eatery. We can only imagine their shock.

To end years of disputes and the ugly effects on their community, Lavonia decided that buying Cafe Risque was more important than paying off bonds on the water plant, as originally planned.

Good for city leaders for protecting their community's standards. Maybe Micanopy officials, who also have tussled with their Cafe Risque, can follow suit - if they have the money and the owner is willing. Doing so surely would rid I-75 of an eyesore and an embarrassment for parents with children in the car.

A fair-market purchase isn't a bad idea for any community that wants to protect its standards, get rid of troublesome businesses or purchase land for economic development. This isn't to suggest that elected leaders should start buying up city blocks, though, especially considering declines in revenues.

But Tampa officials took the right approach last year in deciding to buy the longtime nuisance in east Tampa that was Gene's Bar, for about \$200,000. The city demolished the building to make way for development and the community is better off.

Similarly, the city of Sarasota plans to purchase a strip club as part of a plan to build a baseball stadium that might lure the Boston Red Sox, who spring train in Fort Myers.

Closing the Scoreboard wasn't lost on Sarasota City Commissioner Kelly Kirschner. "It is almost an afterthought that a topless bar is getting shut down right next to our park," she said. "I think there is a larger conversation here rather than 'we were five bucks above the going market rates.' "

The folks in Lavonia certainly thought so.

[Return to Headlines](#)

Waldo Rd. palms marked for the ax

By MEGAN ROLLAND
Sun Staff Writer

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Trees that were planted more than a decade ago to improve a blighted area along Waldo Road have been marked with red paint and could face removal after an eight-year dispute between the Florida Department of Transportation and a billboard company.



BRANDON KRUSE/The Gainesville Sun

A Clear Channel billboard on Waldo Road is barely visible to passers-by.

Some of the trees marked for removal are cabbage palms — Florida's state tree — located on the corner of Waldo Road and NE 8th Avenue.

"We will be doing the pruning that we are legally allowed to do, per our state permits," said Rus Adams, president of the Ocala/Gainesville Division of Clear Channel Outdoor. Adams said the trees had been planted illegally years ago, "and we had requested assistance from the city then, and they did not allow us to do what we needed to."

Florida law clearly designates "view zones" of billboards as protected private interests that cannot be infringed upon by beautification efforts that plant trees and vegetation along federal and state highways. Waldo Road is a state highway — State Road 24.

Community members are still hopeful that a compromise can be reached and the trees preserved, and Adams said he would be willing to have discussions with the city of Gainesville.

"You can't imagine how terrible it is," said Meg Niederhoffer, Gainesville's arborist. "It took a long time to develop the

landscaping in that area. It's grown. It's mature. It's a credit to the neighborhood."

Niederhoffer said she is dismayed by the state laws. "It's obviously something that has been done for the benefit of the billboard industry at the expense of the people," she said.

The dispute arises from interpretation of state law, which specifies "interstates, expressways, federal-aid primary highways and the state highway system."

That dispute was resolved in March by a court ruling granting Clear Channel the right to clear its view zone.

The trees are planted on an old railroad corridor, and thus Florida Department of Transportation employees approved beautification plans thinking the billboard view zone law did not apply, said John Garner, director of the Office of Right of Way for FDOT.

That's why the state approved the city of Gainesville's beautification plans in 1996 and provided \$305,000 for the Waldo Road Greenway project.

But the court ruled in March there was no distinction between rights of way of the railroad corridor and of SR 24.

"Obviously if the department felt that we were doing something incorrect, we would never have provided this funding," Garner said. "There is some money that is now essentially wasted — money spent to plant these."

Adams said that Clear Channel has worked with communities before to relocate trees that have been planted in the vision line of its billboards before the trees get too large to be moved.

In this instance, Adams said the city didn't respond to requests to do that.

Members of the community, who assisted in planting the trees in 2000 through two highway beautification grants, are hoping an alternative can be found.

"If they were to cut down those trees, that intersection would look terrible," said Anita Spring, chair of the City Beautification Board. "What we'd like to do is work it out so the trees stay. I don't think we can stop the business interests of Clear Channel, but we could come up with a solution to move that billboard someplace else."

In April, Clear Channel Outdoor removed four oak trees in the 600 block of NW 13th Street that blocked views of its billboards. Two of those trees had also been planted as part of a City Beautification Board project and community members were upset to find the trees had been cut down.

"I'm more than willing to talk to City Council and try to work something out on this one, as well as other locations throughout the city," Adams said. "The city of Gainesville has disregard the laws in regards to our rights with maintaining visibility."

"This is unique to Gainesville that trees would be planted within the view zone, and there would be a refusal to relocate the trees. In 25-plus years, this is the first time I've been faced with this situation," Adams said.

John Fleming, spokesman for the Florida Outdoor Advertising Association, emphasized that the law does not apply to vegetation that is naturally occurring or that is on private property.

"The idea behind it is simply that if a government designs a road project, and the project blocks the view of a sign that is producing revenue, that is a loss to the business," Fleming said. "What we are doing is trying to be a part of these design projects at the beginning, so we can avoid these situations."

Garner said the laws are straightforward and easy to comply with, and he added that low-growing shrubbery that doesn't inhibit vision of the board is fine.

"But they do restrict the areas that are available for beautification plantings," Garner said. "If you have a billboard every 1,500 feet and each of those has a guaranteed view zone, then it certainly does restrict the amount of beautification efforts the state can do."

[Return to Headlines](#)

Farmland Protection

Fla. Growth to Wipe Out Vast Area of Wildlife Habitat

By [Tom Palmer](#)

THE LEDGER

Published: Wednesday, September 3, 2008 at 12:01 a.m.

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LAKELAND | Florida's population growth will consume wildlife habitat covering an area more than five times the size of Polk County during the next 50 years, according to an analysis prepared by state wildlife officials.



The habitat loss, estimated to total 7 million acres, will come as the result of the expected doubling of Florida's population from 18 million to 36 million by 2060, according to a report titled "Wildlife 2060: What's at Stake for Florida?" that was prepared by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.



"Fishing, hunting, bird-watching, all kinds of outdoor activities, which brought many of us to Florida in the first place, would be greatly diminished," said Thomas Eason, conservation initiatives coordinator for the commission. "This affects our quality of life and our economy."

The report outlines actions government officials and residents can take to reduce the impact of population growth on Florida's wildlife.

Specific concerns raised in the report include:

Wildlife habitat could not only diminish, but could become fragmented, leading to loss of wildlife diversity.

Human-wildlife encounters will increase, leading to calls to further eliminate some wildlife populations. Opportunities for outdoor recreation will diminish, along with the revenue these activities generate for local businesses and government agencies.

The bleak scenario comes at a time when tight finances have derailed lobbying efforts unveiled last year by wildlife advocates to accelerate spending on conservation land purchases to preserve some of the remaining large, intact parcels and to purchase buffers and connecting lands.

Those purchases were proposed to take advantage of lower land prices in the wake of collapse of the real estate boom, and to secure land before it was threatened with development and became either more expensive or more difficult to obtain.

It also comes at a time when Polk County officials are planning to ask Polk's voters in 2010 whether they want to extend the tax approved in a 1994 referendum to buy and preserve environmental lands in Polk County.

Gaye Sharpe, Polk's natural areas manager, said they're at a stage in the Polk County Environmental Lands Program where they are looking at trying to connect more parcels both within Polk County and between Polk and adjacent counties with environmental lands programs.

"We're trying to develop a 'greenprint' map and looking at all kinds of methods to acquire environmental lands and to preserve farmland adjacent to environmental lands," she said.

Chuck Geanangel, a longtime conservation leader from Winter Haven who has been involved in the local program, said that although the Conservation Commission's report didn't tell him anything he didn't already suspect was true, it did provide a new focus.

"It formalizes what we have all understood all along," he said.

guiding development

Tricia Martin, who heads The Nature Conservancy's Lake Wales Ridge office in Babson Park and is involved in the Heartland 2060 regional visioning effort, said the report makes it clear how closely the health of wildlife populations' habitat is linked to human well-being, such as clean water and

recreation.

She said the challenge is to link wildlife habitat protection more closely with land planning and road planning.

"We want to make sure one doesn't get in front of the other," she said.

Martin said the issue is not how to stop development, but how to guide it so that it occurs in a sustainable manner.

She said some computer programs are being developed that overlay various factors - bear-movement corridors, smoke-dispersal zones from prescribed burns in natural areas, key species habitats - would help if they can be used to set up interactive programs that can be used to plan developments more intelligently.

Martin said another factor that may come into play beyond 2060 is the effect of climate changes on sea levels.

That could force people to abandon coastal areas and could mean an increase in development pressure on inland areas of Florida.

Most of the efforts to save wildlife in Florida have emerged only in past couple of decades.

For much of Florida's history, people viewed wildlife much as they viewed water: There was too much of it, and it was often an obstacle to "progress."

Carolina parakeets were shot into extinction to protect crops.

Florida panthers were shot on sight by bounty hunters to protect livestock.

Alligators were hunted relentlessly for meat and hides.

Population growth's effect on wildlife habitat was not a recognized public-policy issue until relatively recently.

fragmented habitat

Florida's population didn't reach 1 million until the 1920s, and as recently as the early 1960s had grown only to 5 million.

But today, Florida's population is 18 million, and it is estimated to double to 36 million by 2060, according to the Conservation Commission's report.

The concern is not only the 7 million acres that will be bulldozed to make way for subdivisions and shopping centers, but plans for a network of toll roads and other new roads through the state that will aggravate the impact.

New roads further fragment wildlife habitat, increasing the number of road kills, allowing exotic species to spread into wild lands and making important land-management techniques, such as prescribed burning, more difficult to accomplish.

In coastal areas, one of the emerging issues is the conflict between coastal development and the preservation of working waterfronts - "oysters vs. yachts" as the report puts it - as well the fact that the growth in boat registrations are expected to outstrip the construction of new launching areas.

Increased fishing pressure is expected to bring the need to close more areas to fishing - a move that would have been unthinkable a generation ago - as well as increased regulation of fishing and increased fees to support management and restocking, the report said.

What this means, the report says, is that everyone who values natural resources and outdoor recreation needs to work together to find solutions.

[Tom Palmer can be reached at tom.palmer@theledger.com or 863-802-7535. Read more views on the environment at environment.theledger.com. On the Web: To see the full report, go to MyFWC.com/wildlife2060.]

[Return to Headlines](#)

Land Use & Smart Growth

[Return to Headlines](#)

Scenic Highways & Trails

[Return to Headlines](#)

Other Scenic News

Cleaning Up Florida's Waterways

A lone egret watches as Mark Maksimowicz, 48, pulls on a pair of knee-high rubber boots and wades into a lake in his hometown of St. Petersburg, Fla. Standing in front of a pipe that carries unfiltered rainwater into the lake, he hammers two poles into the lakebed, then cuts netting to fit into a homemade rectangle of PVC pipe. The resulting trash-catching basket acts like a filter, retaining debris that would otherwise wash into the lake.

As a plastic bottle drifts into the net, Maksimowicz catches it and proudly holds it high. "Fancy isn't needed here," says the man who has vowed to clean up Florida's waterways, one piece of trash at a time.

In 1997, Maksimowicz was a successful museum operations director with almost no marketing budget. He came up with the idea of putting billboards on a barge in Tampa Bay to publicize museum programs aimed at sun-loving tourists on the beach. The campaign exposed him to the enormous amount of debris in formerly pristine waters where he had grown up swimming, fishing and boating. So he started going out to collect it. "Some areas smelled so bad I gagged," he says. "But I kept coming back for more."

Maksimowicz's part-time mission expanded when he and two cousins, Jeff and Vince Albanese, vowed to work together to clean the Tampa Bay coastline. With pooled savings, they purchased and customized a boat to work in shallow waters where debris gathers. They named the nonprofit enterprise the Green Armada.

"I'm no scientist and no biologist, but I know Styrofoam cups and plastic bags don't belong in the water," Maksimowicz says.

The Green Armada grew, and after more than 700 volunteers bagged 9 tons of garbage in two and half hours in Clam Bayou, Fla., in 2007, local media declared the endeavor the largest Southern coastal cleanup operation ever.

But the job took a physical toll on Maksimowicz, who developed skin cancer, respiratory problems and lost 30 pounds. Besides, he realized "we couldn't put a dent in the problem even if we went out every day. You have to catch the trash before it gets there."

Splitting off from the Green Armada, he went to work full-time with his wife Sheron, a lawyer and former Green Armada volunteer, for his new organization, New Earth Industries. Maksimowicz's dream is to eventually sell make-your-own trash-catching devices, which he calls Water Goats, around the country, but now he's content to strategically place them locally with help from corporate sponsors who want to protect the environment, and homeowners who want to clean up their neighborhoods.

Tracey Herman, who lives near Crescent Lake in St. Petersburg, is a perfect example of how one person can make a difference. "I would walk by this lake and always see garbage," she says. "It broke my heart one day to see a dirty sock wrapped around an Anhinga's beak. I knew the bird would starve and die, and I couldn't do a thing about it." Herman now takes responsibility for emptying her community's Water Goat litter.

"Mark's ingenuity, a combination of environmental vision and technological solutions that make sense, will drive the green movement forward," St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker says.

"Would you ever think of throwing trash into your bath water before you step into it?" Maksimowicz asks. "Well, that's what we're doing—6 million of us throwing trash into the bath water.

"Just take a few minutes a day to pick up a little trash," he adds. "You'll find it rewarding, relaxing, and you'll be giving a gift to your friends and neighbors downstream."

Story by Cynthia Elyce Rubin of Orlando, Fla.

[Return to Headlines](#)

Wilton Rooks

Scenic Watch Editor

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