

Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District Meeting of the Board of Supervisors

June 30, 2025 @ 10:00 AM

Location: HSWCD Office/4503 Coronet Rd/Plant City/FL/33566

Supervisors and staff in attendance: Terri Parke (Seat 1), Betty Jo Tompkins (Seat 2), Gretchen Hoke (Seat 3), and Aly Sullivan (Seat 5); Special Counsel Tom Gonzalez; Dr. Joe Walsh (Executive Director); K. Eckdahl (Office Manager); Brooke Saunders (Intern)

Absent: Absent/Vacant (Seat 4)

Items 1-4

1.-4. Call to Order / Pledge of Allegiance/Introductions: Chair Parke called the meeting to order at 10:00 A.M.; led the Pledge of Allegiance; Vice Chair Hoke led the prayer; Chair Parke welcomed attendees; and asked for introductions.

Partner Agency and Vendor Representatives in Attendance: *in-person* Simon Bollin, Hillsborough County Agribusiness Development; *by video-conference*, Troy Green, HCBOCC-Div Env. Mgt.; Vanessa Bauzo-DeLeon, Env. Consultant,, Florida Department of Ag & Consumer Services FDACS, Office of Agricultural Water Policy (FDACS-OAWP); Ellen Cruz, Regional Director, FDACS; Ross Dickerman, HC Conservation & Environmental Lands Division; Margie Martin, Martin Communications.

Public in Attendance: video-conference attendee: Christian Padgett, (Hillsborough/Pinellas Chapter President, FL. Nursery Growers and Landscapers Assoc.); Thomas Ries, President, Ecosphere Restoration Institute; Debbie Hunt (member of the public)

Item 5. Public Comment: None at this time.

Item 6. Public Correspondence: None at this time.

Item 7. Review and Approval of Agenda: Supervisor Hoke moved to accept the agenda for June 30, 2025. Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Motion carried: 4-0.

Item 8. Partner Agencies (introductions and reports):

- a. FDACS – Vanessa Bauzo-DeLeon briefed the Board on 1) FDACS Regional Projects Program is a new requirement for FDACS as the 2025 BMAP rule [updates] state that FDACS must include regional projects for those BMAPs where Ag contributes to 20% or more of the total load. A news release is scheduled to occurred in the next week; FDACS’ first priorities are several projects in other regions of the State, which are running parallel to USDA-NRCS regional projects and Rural and Family Lands Protection funded projects. 2) FDACS recognizes that the Alafia River Basin Management Action Plan (“BMAP”) was expanded, and will get to it, but does not have a timeline

to share with the public yet. FDACS priorities are being based on how much water agriculture producers are utilizing within each BMAP area. 2) Vanessa noted the FDACS' Agricultural Career Exploration (ACE) program, and that applications are available on the FDACS website.

- b. SWFWMD - *no representees of SWFWMD were available to make report.*
- c. Hillsborough Agri-business Development – *Simon Bollin.* announced that the next AEDC Board meeting is scheduled for Aug 12, 2025; he is working on the agenda, but foresees no content requiring special attention of the Soil and Water Conservation Board at this time.

Item 9. Minutes of May 12, 2025, HSWCD Regular Board Meeting: The Board's meeting minutes from May 12, 2025, were presented. Supervisor Tompkins requested a notation in the meeting minutes that she had provided her work summary (resume) to the Board and Special Council. Supervisor Tompkins moved to accept the amended meeting minutes as revised. Supervisor Hoke seconded. Motion carried: 4-0.

Item 10. Financial Report for May 2025: The May 2025 Financial report and bank statement were reviewed. Treasurer Hoke moved to accept and file for audit the May 2025 Financial Report and Bank Statements for audit. Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Motion carried: 4-0.

Item 11. Supervisor Announcements:

Supervisor Parke: summarized her month of activity as follows: she participated in the 2025 Florida Strawberry Growers Assoc. (FSGA)'s 2025 Agri Tech Expo; the NRCS' State Technical Advisory Committee (FL TAC) meeting; she hosted the Conservation District's kickoff meeting with Martin Communications for the Conservation District's Strategic Plan Stakeholder Interview process; and attended the Plant City Chamber's Legislative Update Meeting. She offered more detail below:

1) **NRCS FL TAC meeting - Juan Hernandez, State Conservationist, reported that there would be cuts in funding to EQIP and CSP; hence we should expect to see no funds awarded to the Urban Agriculture and Traditionally Underserved Demographics rankings; 60% of their funding is going to large regional projects in the panhandle and north central Florida. Grazing rights were discussed in the conservation easement context.**

2) Supervisor Parke opined on the lack of clarity in the NRCS' Resources of Concern Survey, and that we needed to get a more Florida-centric version of that survey in place for next year. She also noted her intention to work with Dr. Walsh and the FSGA to find a way to have the LWG meeting coincide with the FSGA Agi-Tech Conference, as that seemed the best way to improve on farmer participation in the NRCS Local Working Group and Survey.

Vice Chair Hoke: participated in the Conservation District-NRCS' Local Working Group Meeting, and in the 2025 Florida Wildlife Corridor Summit. She noted that Ex. Dir. Walsh also was in attendance and asked that he provide comments on value of participation and lessons learned.

Supervisor Tompkins: participated in the 2025 Florida Strawberry Growers Assoc. Agri Tech Expo; and the Conservation District-NRCS' Local Working Group Meeting; She made special note that she was engaged in meetings and conversations regarding the start-up of a new conservation association. She noted that the concept is similar to the Assoc. of Florida Conservation Districts, which she asserted had become inactive. Supervisor Tompkins reported she was involved in many other events as a representative of Hillsborough County Fair Board.

Supervisor Sullivan: reported she had attended the FL Cattlemen's Association's Annual Meeting in Marco Island and made several contacts. She did not request reimbursement for this activity.

Special Counsel Gonzalez questioned Supervisor Tompkins on her participation in the formation of a new conservation association, with concern that it appeared to be a conflict with the Conservation District's binding participation in the AFCD. He stressed to Supervisor Tompkins that if her participation in any such start-up relied on her position as a Board Supervisor and if she did so without the endorsement of this Board, then her participation could be a conflict of interest with her service as a government official. Supervisor Tompkins asserted that she is not voting on any measures; and her engagement in those activities are not dependent on her position as a Board Supervisor for Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District.

Item 12. Executive Director's Report:

- Held Stakeholder Engagement Kickoff Meeting with Martin Communications.
- Hired Ms. Brooke Saunders as Ag Policy Intern to aid in Strategic Planning – he introduced Ms. Saunders to the Board meeting; Ms. Saunders was asked by Supervisor Tompkins to share a bit on her background and particular interest in this internship.
- Attended Corridor Connect Conference – out the conference he is pursuing several technical items with the subject matter experts he met at the conference: 1) He found a subject matter expert (Tim Sellen, Cherry Lake Tree Farm) on the utility of a perennial peanut cultivar, as a livestock forage alternative to imported hay bales; 2) Tim also is experimenting with the CUPS technology (Citrus Under Protective Screens) specifically for grape fruit; Mr. Sellen asserts that this technique yields the highest quality citrus using precise agricultural inputs while minimizing the amount of fertilizer, water, and pesticides, and that so far it has excluded citrus greening from his grove. Dr. Walsh is planning to have Mr. Sellen make presentations on both opportunities to the Board.
- The Resources of Critical Concern Survey results were delivered to NRCS. The majority of the LWG surveys were collected at the Agi-Tech Conference. The total of paper responses to NRCS LWG survey was 31; with 26 valid responses from Hillsborough County, 1 from Hernando County and 1 from Citrus County. He noted that the team learned quickly that you have to give explicit instructions to each respondent on how to fill out the survey, as it lacks clarity.
- Attended- UF/IFAS Tomato Field Day; a 3-county-Extension Office Small Farms Networking event (Hillsborough/Polk/Manatee), which included Extension agents from throughout the state; he offered kudos to Extension Service for a great event, and noted several follow up contacts that resulted from it. (noting the next item, UF Rachel Biderman's survey).
- Currently aiding UF PhD Candidate Rachel Biderman's efforts in collecting data on Small-Scale Farmer Leadership Survey information. The survey is posted on the HSWCD website and Facebook page. The survey was sent out by email to our technical partners, producers, Supervisors, and others.
- Our remaining Ag-Venture and Envirothon supplies were collected by Mrs. Cassie Miles (Plant City High School) for distribution to teachers at Lopez Exceptional Student Center and Plant City High School.

Item 13. Old Business:

- **Supervisor Tompkins' Qualification to serve office of Supervisor** (*Chair Parke with assistance of Special Counsel Tom Gonzalez and Ex. Dir. Walsh*): The [draft] June 30, 2025, letter to Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Wilton Simpson was presented by Special Counsel to the Board for review. Dr. Walsh was asked to summarize his activities with regard to due diligence on Board Supervisor candidates' qualifications before and after the 2024 Election. With respect to the 2024 election, Dr. Walsh stated that he reviewed official records with the Property Appraiser's Office and on Dept of State's Sunbiz portal, as well as screened the web and what social media he had access to for each of the eight candidates who filed to run for Board Supervisor seats in the summer of 2024. Consequently, he circulated the Chapter 582 qualifications to all candidates who had provided email

addresses to the Supervisor of Elections, as well as to all of our stakeholder groups and the current Board Supervisors. Shortly thereafter he said that five of the eight candidates discontinued the qualification process with the Supervisor of Elections. Later, after concerns were raised by prominent agricultural producers and trade association leaders, Dr. Walsh was asked to report back to the Board and Special Counsel further conversation with the Supervisor of Elections, the FDACS, the Dept of State's Div of Elections and the Commission on Ethics. He stated that he had gotten push back from officials including attorneys at various levels within each Agency as to their responsibilities (lack thereof) in the due diligence process, and that he was left with the general opinion that the appropriate course of action, with respect to the election, was a challenge filed by members of the voting public. There was a pause in public comments on the issue when Mrs. Tompkins' name did not appear on the election Ballot, although some questions were raised by the same constituents as to whether Mrs. Tompkins was "in or out?". By December 2024, Dr. Walsh was put on notice that a member of the public intended to challenge Mrs. Tompkins, and he was asked by the Board Chair (R. Gill) to report back the challenge process. In mid-December, Dr. Walsh was counseled by then County General Counsel Christine Beck that the statute of limitations to file had expired on day 11 after the certification of the ballot. Thereafter, the interested member of the public, Mrs. D Hunt, an equestrian property owner from the Durant/Valrico area, stepped forward through the Board's public comment agenda item at the February 2025 meeting, to raise concerns with Supervisor Tompkins' qualifications to serve office. More recently, the issue of a "false affidavit" being a violation of election law was acknowledged by the "interim" General Counsel for the Division of Elections. Special Counsel and Ex. Dir. Walsh concluded also that there still was an onus on FDACS, in the context that FS 582 mentions a role for the Soil and Water Council in this process, which is appointed through the Commissioner of Agriculture's office. Hence, Special Counsel and Dr. Walsh determined that the best first recipient for a letter from the Board was most likely the Commissioner.

- Supervisor Tompkins responded to the Ex. Director's summary with her assertion that according to the law she has met the qualifications to serve as Supervisor for the Conservation District with her affidavit. At the May Board meeting (May 2025), She had provided her summary of career, stretching back decades and iterated that her activities were appropriate qualification. She concluded by stating that she felt targeted with this inquiry.
- Chair Parke clarified that this inquiry had fallen on the Board as a necessary duty, given the public request for clarification of Mrs. Tompkins' qualification. Chair Parke pointed out that this issue of qualification was a concern for all conservation districts and had been addressed specifically by the 2024 Legislative update to Chapter 582, Florida Statutes. Further, Chair Parke pointed out that each of the other three members of this Board had had to substantiate their own qualifications to serve prior to their appointments to the Board and that Supervisor Tompkins was well aware of that fact before she assumed office.
- Supervisor Hoke moved to have the letter to the FDACS Commissioner, including attachments identified in the letter (Brown Consulting Report; and Supervisor Tompkins work summary) signed as written and sent to Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Wilton Simpson. Supervisor Sullivan seconded the motion. Motion carried 3-1; voting Yea, Chair Parke, Vice Chair Hoke, Supervisor Sullivan; voting Nay, Supervisor Tompkins.

Item 14: Upcoming/Proposed Business Schedule: Upcoming event dates were reviewed.

Adjournment: Chair Parke adjourned the meeting 10:53 AM

Next Board Meeting:

July 21, 2025 @ 10 AM

HSWCD Office 4503 Coronet Rd/Plant City/FL 33566

Contact: soilandwater@hcfl.gov