



Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District

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BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Terri Parke, Seat 1
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Vacant, Seat 4
Aly Sullivan, Seat 5

Executive Director

Joseph Walsh, Ph.D.

April 21, 2025

Honorable Wilton Simpson
Florida Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services
407 S. Calhoun St
Mail Station 12
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0800

RE: Proposed Dissolution of HSWCD under Senate Bill 986 and House Bill 973

Dear Commissioner Simpson -

The Board of Supervisors, Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District, humbly requests your active support in having our Conservation District removed from the dissolution lists proposed in Senate Bill 2025-986 and House Bill 2025-973.

Prior to accepting my appointment to this Board in January 2025, I reviewed the Conservation District's records going back ten years. I am fully aware that prior to the 2022 legislative changes to Florida Statute Chapter 582, this Board had not properly exercised its responsibilities, both in terms of governmental accountability practices and in failing to actively focus its energy in promoting sustainable land management practices on rural working lands. However, the 2022 legislative changes created an opportunity that the agricultural sector in Hillsborough County quickly recognized and our community took active steps to realign our Conservation District with the needs of agriculture.

Thanks to the efforts of the Hillsborough Chapter of the Florida Cattlemen's Association and the Florida Strawberry Growers Association, agriculture is maintaining a quorum on our Board. Through the 2022-2024 efforts of Chair Ryan Gill, Vice Chair Adam Young, Treasurer Myke Morris and Supervisor Bear McCullough and now followed by Vice Chair Gretchen Hoke (Rain Frog Ranch), Aly Sullivan (Circle J Farms), and me (Parkesdale Farms), we have kept an intensive schedule of cleaning house, engaging our agricultural stakeholders and identifying technical services of need within our District. Since January 2023, our Board's accomplishments have included:

- Clearing the cloud over our financial liabilities with our partners at FDACS, Hillsborough County, and the USDA,
- Addressing the material weaknesses that were previously identified in our FY2021, 2022, and 2023 annual audits,
- More closely aligning our budget approval process and fiscal controls with those of Hillsborough County Administration,
- Recently acquiring a standalone brick-and-mortar location for our day-to-day operations through a five-year lease agreement with Hillsborough County, and
- Reorganizing our budget and realigning our staff resources to focus on competency in government agency and technical skills in agricultural land and natural resources management.

In considering comments we are hearing about a proposal to transfer administrative oversight of FDACS cost-share activities for Hillsborough County to another conservation district, which would coincide with the proposed dissolution, I wish to point out the following:

- Hillsborough County is reportedly the 3rd highest dollar-grossing agricultural county in the State of Florida.
- We are the epicenter for the Winter Strawberry crop in the US, and home to the Florida Strawberry Growers Association.
- We have healthy cow/calf-, sod and plant nursery sectors along with specialty crops.
- There are no conservation districts near Hillsborough County, which share this Conservation District's interests in the strawberry industry.
- Notably, Pasco, Pinellas and Polk counties, whose conservation districts were previously dissolved, are contiguous with Hillsborough County, share in our agricultural economic base and contribute surface water quality to the watershed of the Tampa Bay National Estuary.
- The presence of Port Tampa Bay in Hillsborough County is the key reason why other significant commercial owners of rural lands are headquartered in Hillsborough County and why they propose to be significant rural working landowners and operators for the foreseeable future.

Further, independent of the realignment of FDACS resources away from Hillsborough County, which became apparent in 2024, the USDA's ability to deliver services already has been impacted by federal efforts to reduce services in Fiscal Year 2025. Together, these actions already are creating a reduction in technical services to the agricultural sector in our region. However, our Soil and Water Conservation District has stable financial support from Hillsborough County, based on mutual interest in our agricultural economy; the County's combined salary and operational support of the District for FY

2025 is \$450,539. Considering our relationship with Hillsborough County, this conservation district stands poised to pick up the slack inferred by the realignment of FDACS and USDA-NRCS resources. We had already been in talks with managers at USDA, FDACS and Hillsborough County about further integrating our resources with their operations, when bills SB 986 and HB 973 were introduced.

In closing, this Conservation District has found renewed purpose in the current version of Florida Statute 582 and needs some time to prove such to our constituents. Hence, I am asking that you give serious consideration to weighing in with your contacts in the Legislature, to remove Hillsborough County Soil and Water Conservation District from the respective dissolution lists.

Respectfully Yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Terri Parke".

Terri L. Parke
Chair, Board of Supervisors

TLP/jtw