

Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District

Meeting of the Board of Supervisors

April 20, 2026

Location: UF/IFAS Hillsborough Extension Office, 5339 County Road 579, Seffner, FL

Board Supervisors in attendance: Terri Parke (Seat 1); Betty Jo Tompkins (Seat 2); Gretchen Hoke (Seat 3); Casey Simmons Runkles (Seat 4); Matt Shivers (Seat 5).

Staff Support: Dr Joe Walsh (Executive Director); Dawn Chancey (Office Manager); Emily Bruce (Land Conservation Specialist, *virtual conference hub*); Special Counsel Tom Gonzalez (*virtual conference hub*).

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

Partner Agency and Vendor Representation in Attendance: *In person* - Simon Bolin (Hillsborough County Agribusiness Development/AEDC); Andrew Kears (USDA/NRCS – District Conservationist); Shawn Steed (Hillsborough County Multi-county Environmental Horticulture Production Agent IV); Kimberly Cruz (Hillsborough County Environmental Supervisor; Victoria Durand (Hillsborough Planning Commission – Planner 1); Sofia Garantivas (Hillsborough Planning Commission – Principal Planner); Fatima Elkott (Conscious Community Connectors – Founding Partner); Vanessa Bauzo (FDACS – OAWP Environmental Consultant; *virtual conference hub*); Ken Griner (SWFWMD – Environmental Engineer, FARMS; *virtual conference hub*);

Public in Attendance: Susan Mayo, Hillsborough HCPS Strawberry Crest FFA advisor, with student team members Rocco Cesario, Maddox Eben, Jacob Carey, Aubree Lonmon, Abby Steward, Olivia Semidey, and Emma Fagnan; Chris Saley (EcoRestoreFL; *virtual conference hub*), and Harold “H.” Fry, private citizen.

Item 5. Public Comment: None requested at this meeting.

Item 6 Public Correspondence: None presented at this meeting.

Item 7 Review and Approval of Agenda: Chair Parke motioned to accept the agenda; Supervisor Runkles seconded the motion; motion carried 4-0.

Item 8 Minutes of the March 9th Regular Board: Dawn Chancey presented the draft minutes for the March 9th, 2026, Board meeting; Supervisor Hoke made a motion to accept the meeting minutes; Supervisor Runkles seconded the motion. motion carried 4-0.

Item 9 Financial Report for March 2026: Dawn Chancey informed the Board that the SouthState Bank account experienced a fraudulent ACH transaction during the month of March. An unauthorized ACH withdrawal in the amount of \$3,007.00 was deducted from the account paid to GEICO insurance company and authorized by an unknown person over the phone.

Dr. Walsh discovered the unauthorized transaction when reviewing the downloaded March bank statement. He stated that he was deeply concerned by this breach of security for several reasons 1) he had no knowledge of the Board having ever conducted transactions of this type; 2) our account controls do not allow for transactions to be initiated over the phone, and 3) given the very public issue of SouthState Bank's security problems, he expected a very heightened awareness from the bank's security team that this transaction was out of character for us.

Dawn immediately contacted SouthState Bank and filed a fraud affidavit. SouthState Bank has since returned the full amount to the account, and the reconciliations are expected to appear on the next statement.

Item 10. Request for Motion to Amend Executive Director's Spending

Authority under the Fiscal Controls Document: Dr. Walsh requested that the Board revisit the fiscal controls that were previously reviewed in 2024. He requested that the Board amend the document to reflect the following:

- "MiniFarms" account: The MiniFarms account was closed at the end of 2024. Chair Parke requested a motion to strike any references to the MiniFarms account from the fiscal controls document. Supervisor Hoke moved to strike the MiniFarms account controls language; Supervisor Runkles seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0.
- Executive Director Contracting Authority: requesting that the Executive Director's existing authority to enter into contracts for activities already approved by the Board, be increased from \$5,000 to \$10,000. This change would bring the fiscal controls into sync with those County financial controls that the Conservation District participates in. Supervisor Hoke made the motion to amend the fiscal controls document to authorize

Executive Director to enter into contracts for goods and services, consistent with the Board's annual budget approval process, increasing his authority from \$5,000 to \$10,000. Supervisor Shivers seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0.

- **Acceptance of ACH/Credit Card Payments:** allow district's bank accounts to receive and disburse funds by ACH and credit card, in addition to checks. Discussion: Reducing or eliminating reliance on paper checks will reduce the District's financial risks. FDACS' cost-share contracts already require reimbursements to producers to be done by ACH, and the district was found in violation of its cost-share contract in 2023 for failing to execute payments/reconciliations in a timely fashion using this method of payment. In addition, most of the District's administrative business already is conducted using either a county-issued credit card or the county's formal procurement system and every payment is processed with delegations to different operators from initiation by a District staff member, initial approval by the Executive Director and additional approvals in County Administration. Although occasionally necessary, paper checks do not provide the same level of security and timeliness in reconciliation that ACH workflows provide. Dr. Walsh noted that he had discovered numerous signed but not issued paper checks going back nearly ten years in the office papers in 2024, and these missing checks had been referenced as contributing to "material weakness" in the District's audits for the last several years up until the 2025 audit. Supervisor Hoke made the Motion to amend the fiscal controls document to allow the District to conduct business using ACH and credit card transactions. Supervisor Runkles seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0. This amendment will also require revisions to page 3, which currently prohibits credit and debit cards.
- **Borrowing and Line of Credit / Credit Cards:** The Board currently has no credit card for district business other than for the County component of the budget. Chair Parke and staff reported difficulty in reconciling personal and county-paid travel transactions from the recent Tallahassee trip, suggesting that a district credit card issued separately from the county credit card could prevent future complications. Preference expressed for a credit card over a debit card, due to fraud protections. The card would be used only for legitimate district business and managed by staff, not Board members. Usage would be reported monthly on a separate financial spreadsheet.

Supervisor Hoke made the motion to authorize the Board to obtain a district credit card, with responsibility assigned to designated staff. Supervisor Shivers seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0.

Item 11. Request for Motion to change banking services from South State

Bank to Bank of Tampa: Dr. Walsh requested a Motion to discontinue all banking services with SouthState Bank and to transition the district's accounts and related banking activities to Bank of Tampa. Dr. Walsh noted several issues of dissatisfaction with SouthState's customer service and protection, such as slow response to requests for assistance with both records and reconciliations; the recent news in the media that SouthState's records had been sold on the black market, and the recent fraudulent charge against the Board's primary bank account. Bank of Tampa offers branch locations that are equally convenient to Board members and staff, a more local community-focused banking relationship, and apparently stronger transactional controls compared to SouthState. Supervisor Shivers made the Motion to move all external bank accounts from SouthState Bank to Bank of Tampa; motion was seconded by Supervisor Runkles; motion passed 4-1; Supervisor Tompkins voted nay.

Item 12 Partner Agency Reports:

- *USDA/NRCS, District Conservationist Andrew Kearse:*
 - Andrew reported adjustments to the NRCS' timeline funding process timelines. The State Conservation Office indicated that several previously scheduled dates would be difficult to meet based on revised federal guidance and internal notifications
 - CSP Assessment Rankings: Originally scheduled for April 15th, now extended to May 15th.
 - EQIP Assessment Rankings: Initially projected to be completed by April 12th, with an adjustment following additional communication from the State Office. Some documentation and notifications were delayed, resulting in loss of processing time.
 - Field visits for the NCS Program are in progress: Six were completed last week and additional assessments are expected this week, with remaining applications on schedule to be completed shortly.

- A major project – Big Cat Mitigation/Restoration is currently underway and represents one of the district’s largest ongoing efforts. Its timeline and capacity requirements will continue to impact scheduling and staff workload.
- Local Working Group: This event is scheduled for May 4th.
 - Survey and draft agenda were prepared and shared
 - Attendance and farmer participation are critical, as farmers provide direct feedback on program effectiveness and local conservation needs.
 - Information from this meeting will be communicated back to the community following standard procedures.
- *FDACS, OAWP Environmental Consultant – Vanessa Bauzo:*
 - Field personnel continue to process enrollments for the Spring Coast mail-out area. Based on recent discussions with field staff managers, all FY 2026 cost-share funds allocated to the Southwest Florida operational area have now been fully utilized. New (FY2027) cost-share funding is expected to become available at the start of the new departmental fiscal year beginning July 1st, 2026. Traditionally, cost-share funding was allocated through agreements with SWCDs, although the funds can be awarded throughout a region or even reallocated statewide, the program aims to utilize each region’s allocation within that region. Additionally, funding priority is consistently given to producers located within BMAP areas.
 - For the purposes of this update, the area referenced aligns with the geographic boundaries of SWFWMD, not specifically the Springs Coast BMAPs or any particular/individual BMAP region.
 - FCED Report: Agricultural Irrigation Demand: The office is finalizing the FCED report, which evaluates agricultural irrigation demand throughout Florida. The report includes statewide irrigated and unirrigated agricultural acreage and provides projected acreage and water-use estimates through the year 2050, presented in five-year increments. The Commissioner’s Office is expected to release the report in June or July 2026.
 - Freeze Relief Grant Program: Due to the recent freeze events affecting producers, the Commissioner’s Office is developing a new grant program modeled on the 2023-2024 hurricane relief program. The grant is intended to assist producers heavily impacted by freeze damage. There are no specifics

available at this time, but further information will be shared with the board as soon as it becomes available.

- *SWFWMD – Environmental Engineer, FARMS – Ken Griner:*
 - Ken advised that Jeff Whealton, Agricultural Programs Manager, could not participate in today’s meeting.
 - Ken offered a summary of the SWFWMD-FARMS program, highlighting their favorite cost-share items such as irrigation system weather stations and moisture probes. They also contribute to tubular recovery ponds, the pump stations the pump filters, and the main line that goes out to the manifolds. They currently have a lot of strawberry projects under funding. As always, if anyone knows of someone wanting to participate in FARMS cost-shares, please send them Ken’s contact information.
- *Hillsborough County Agribusiness Development/AEDC/Cooperative Extension Service – Simon Bolin:*
 - The most recent Military Ag Tour took place on April 3rd with the highlight visit being to Sam Astin’s Blueberry Farm.
 - Continuing to support the Special Forces internship program for military veterans and servicemembers who are transitioning out of service with a plan to remain in the Tampa area. After completing a two-year internship, the program provides further assistance in securing employment in the agriculture industry. Currently 65% of graduates are still in the jobs they obtained after finishing the program.

Item 13. Hillsborough Planning Commission: I-4 Urban Expansion Area Study

Sofia Garantivas and Fatima Elkott provided a short presentation on the County Planning Commission’s I-4 Urban Expansion Area (UEA) Planning Study, followed by question and answer. Board and Dr. Walsh go on record mentioning the “Agricultural Conservation Area” concept as a desirable planning tool, consistent with efforts in other Florida Counties (Marion, Volusia, Brevard).

Item 14. Strawberry Crest FFA Presentation: Rural & Family Lands Protection Program:

Strawberry Crest FFA students made a presentation on Florida's Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, using role play as a panel of affected stakeholders. This presentation served as a dry run ahead of the team's entry in group competition at the FFA State Convention in Orlando, Florida scheduled for June 15th – June 19th, 2026.

Item 15: Supervisor Announcements:

Chair Parke:

- Served as an interview panel member for the four interviews conducted for hiring the District's Soil and Water Conservation Technician position.
- Attended the Blue Green Algae Task Force meeting (*video conference*).
- Attended the FDEP SW District/Temple Terrace office's annual open house in person.
- Spoke at the Plant City Republican Women's meeting regarding Soil and Water Conservation District duties
- Attended the Hillsborough Count Cattlemen's Quarterly Meeting and Dinner
- Attended one of the townhall meetings for the Planning Commission's I-4 Urban Expansion Study.

Supervisor Hoke:

- Attended the Hillsborough County Cattlemen's Quarterly Meeting and Dinner.
- Participated in the 1000 Friends of Florida webinar "Mind the Gaps" curriculum, focused on practical tools for land use, conservation, and corridor-compatible planning. Supervisor Hoke has started sharing these resources with our stakeholders and is looking for additional ways to get them out more broadly. Reminded everyone of her mantra "We work better together, and knowledge is power."
- Supported a Florida Women Landowners event at Braze Ranch; the venue is a regenerative agricultural operation that runs cattle, works closely with FDACS and NRCS and recently converted a former bar off 301 into a

Farmstand Direct market. It was a strong example of how agriculture and conservation can work together. Supervisor Hoke wants the Board to follow this example by sponsoring/organizing farm site visits or a working group to highlight producers doing that kind of work.

- Looking ahead, the Corridor Connect+ Live on May 20th. Supervisor Hoke will be working with Horse Farms Forever and the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation on this first event.

Supervisor Tompkins:

- Attended 2 meetings with Tampa Bay Beekeepers Association
- Participated (capacity as a Board Director) in the Hillsborough County Fair's Executive Board planning meetings for 2026 County Fair; mentioned the planned inclusion of conservation exhibits, youth horticulture exhibits and harvest awards.
- Continuing to manage the Florida Conservation Coalition's youth mini-grants awards, including to Boy Scout Troup 610 for its conservation project on Kings Avenue and held a recognition ceremony for John Humphreys of Boy Scout Troup 109 for his conservation project in south Hillsborough county.
- Participated in meetings of the Hillsborough 4-H Foundation; Preserving Brandon; Timberly Trust; and Rotary Brandon South Eco Club.
- Attended Hillsborough County Cattlemen's quarterly meeting and dinner.

Supervisor Runkles:

- Hillsborough Chapter-Florida Farm Bureau, Kaylee Poppell has announced her intention to resign over next couple of months; the FFB is searching for its next Executive Director, so please send any qualified candidates our way. Also accepting nominations for the CARES Act to recognize environmental stewardship. We can accept nominations from the county level. Nominations are open for a few more weeks.
- Attended one of the I-4 Urban Expansion Study Town hall meetings.
- While on vacation in Greece also got to participate in a whirlwind tour of local ag conservation and other farm operations. Met with a family over there that has taken part of their operation from olive groves to bees and

made a huge investment in agritourism. Agritourism is a great opportunity to expand income streams here as well and she wants it on the record to make the public aware it's a really good experience.

Supervisor Shivers:

- Assisted in conducting the District's 4 interviews to fill the District's Soil and Water Conservation Technician position.
- Attended the Hillsborough County Cattlemen's Quarterly Meeting and Dinner

Item 14. Executive Director's Report:

- a. SWFWMD Response to our letter of inquiry on dry well complaint letters; last month the Board directed Dr. Walsh to formally contact the SWFWMD to request greater transparency about the process they use in determining who to assign drywell mitigations to, among our Strawberry growers, relating potential liability when neighboring wells dry up, particularly during freeze events. This concern arose because the community experienced both a severe dry season and a major freeze; growers asked more than one member of our Board to help to get clearer information about how liability is determined. Dr. Walsh sent the letter to April Breton, Bureau Chief for Water Use permits, followed by a conversation with Ms. Breton/April; April said that every grower with a freeze protection reservation is notified of the procedures involved but also indicated that she is in discussions with FSGA to facilitate a stakeholder engagement (tentatively summer time frame this year) and committed to including our agency in further communications on the subject. Copy of the email response is included for your review.
- b. Office Painting quotes/vendor selection: Dawn Chancey and Dr. Walsh ("Staff") presented five quotes received for painting the office. Awarding the project has been delayed by our current financial controls, and Board action is requested today to formalize the vendor selection. Federico Painting is being recommended by staff, with both strong recommendations from other users of that vendor, as well as the competitiveness of their bid. Federico Panting's bid also distinguished itself by offering the highest level of detail in their proposed scope of work.

The separate bids each for the interior work and exterior work are \$9,800 and \$6,500 respectively, and total proposed cost for painting both the interior and exterior areas being \$16,300.

Supervisor Hoke called for the Motion to award Federico's Painting the interior areas of the office. Supervisor Runkles seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0.

Supervisor Hoke then called for a Motion to award Federico's Painting the exterior of the office as a separate project. Supervisor Shivers seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0.

- c. Recognition of the Keel & Curley Conservation Collection: Dr. Walsh is asking the Board to consider supporting Keel & Curley's debut of its seasonal "Conservation Collection" of specialty wine offerings on our website and FaceBook page. Dr. Walsh wants to recognize Keel and Curley's leadership as an agricultural producer that supports natural resources conservation, but also recognized there might be some hesitancy with the type of product involved. Dr. Walsh pointed out that Keel & Curley's products are a locally produced agricultural product, largely based on locally grown grapes, using sustainable low intensity growing practices consistent with organic principles, and this particular product financially supports Florida-centric conservation initiatives with a **\$2 per bottle** donation to Florida wildlife conservation projects administered by recognized organizations. The promotion would be limited to public awareness and would not involve any financial participation/transactions of any kind for the District.

- **Alignment with District Mission and Priorities:**

The product is a local Hillsborough agricultural product, from a farm that implements a high standard for soil and water sustainability practices, consistent with organic and regenerative soil principles, which are the highest standard for agricultural best management practices. The Winery is donating **\$2 per bottle** of its limited-edition "Conservation Collection" to support Florida wildlife conservation projects, which also are tied to conservation of private agricultural lands in Florida. All of these aspects align with the District's values and priorities.

- **Concerns Regarding Alcohol Promotion:**

There was some hesitation from staff to promote an alcoholic

beverage, without the express permission of the Board, hence today's request for Board consideration.

- **Potential Precedent:**

Supervisor Tompkins raised a concern that posting this initiative could open a floodgate expectation for the District to promote any/all other legal agricultural products or commercial ventures, potentially placing the District in an untenable or unmanageable position.

- **Limiting Criteria and Disclaimers:**

Dr. Walsh acknowledged Supervisor Tompkins' concern, as it had been raised before, and stated that this particular request created an opportunity for the Board to set a standard, and in this case a very high standard, for the types of promotions that would be posted to our social media. Criteria he offered for consideration:

- Locally owned and operated agricultural producer
- Opportunity to highlight an agricultural operation that adheres to best management practices and goes above and beyond
- Does not create an appearance that the Board ignores marginal performance with regard to any human safety or food safety practices, "agricultural best management practices," or wildlife/wildlife habitat considerations
- Product or service also promotes in a very substantial way natural resources conservation efforts locally and/or within Florida
- Promotion of the product or service does not create a financial or ethical conflict for the Board, its programs or its staff

- **No Financial Involvement:**

It was clarified that the District would neither receive nor process any funds from the initiative and that any promotional activity would be limited to a social-awareness message.

- d. April 10th, 2026, Hillsborough County Cattlemen's Dinner. Dr. Walsh was an invited speaker and polled/promoted the Board's farm equipment capital campaign. We received only 27 votes that night, but the split between the cattle chute and the no-till drill was 17/10. No one has reached out thus far to ask how to deliver a donation.
- e. Social Media Report – March, 2026: Dawn Chancey reported that the communications and outreach report for 2026 had not been recently

updated; accordingly, it was completed and placed in the back of the binder for Board review. The updated metrics reflect continued growth across multiple engagement platforms:

- Website activity: Approximately 78,000 website clicks, indicating a continued upward trend in traffic.
 - Subscribers: The website subscriber list has increased to 61 subscribers, following a previously stagnant period.
 - Phone inquiries: The office received four phone calls in March, representing a relatively high monthly volume.
 - Facebook engagement: Social media performance also shows growth, with 6,926 page views and 726 followers, both reflecting increases over prior reporting periods.
- f. Conservation Tech Update: our new Soil and Water Conservation Technician, Kylie Chapman will be starting with the District on or by April 27th, 2026.
- g. Plant City Leadership Class Ribbon Cutting at Solaris Healthcare; Dr Walsh's leadership Class will be graduating soon, and the ribbon cutting of its legacy community service project is scheduled for this Thursday, April 23rd, at 4 pm; all are welcome to attend.

Item 15: Upcoming Events:

- May 4th, 2026, Annual NRCS/Hillsborough-Pinellas Local Working Group
- May 5th – 6th, 2026: FSGA AgriTech Tradeshow

Meeting Adjourned at 11:15am.