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LEE COUNTY CONSERVATION 20/20 PROGRAM BUYS 136 ACRES IN THE DENSITY REDUCTION/GROUNDWATER RESOURCE AREA

Today, the Lee County Conservation 20/20 Program acquired another 136 acres in the Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource Area (DR/GR), the area from which the County collects the majority of its drinking water from groundwater. This purchase is the second and last part of a phased acquisition of 428 acres labeled in the attached maps as parcel "249". The County made the first purchase of 292 acres on November 20, 2009. The phased acquisition was necessary due to limited funds. The property is located in the City of Bonita Springs just east of I-75 and north of Liberty Youth Ranch.

Keeping this land as open space protects a groundwater recharge area, maintains natural flood protection for a significant upstream drainage area, and preserves a natural wetland system that purifies surface waters. It creates the opportunity to reconnect to Spring Creek, which was cut off in the 70's by the construction of I-75. The reconnection would allow water from eastern Bonita to be routed through this site into Spring Creek. This would reduce the potential flooding of Lightner Creek and the Imperial River while simultaneously improving water quality being discharged from eastern Bonita. These waters would also increase groundwater recharge, rehydrate the onsite wetlands and restore the water flow of Spring Creek.

In public ownership, this site will likely become a popular bird and wildlife viewing area for tourists and residents alike. Exotic birds such as woodstorks and roseate spoonbills forage in the vast wetlands. The property has a variety of scenic plant communities to hike through, including pine flatwoods, live oak hammocks; freshwater marshes, and cypress and other wetland forests. The large size and diversity of habitats is very beneficial to wildlife, including wide ranging species such as the black bear and panther.

The sellers wanted \$16,880,000 for 428 acres. The Division of County Lands, the agency that negotiates the purchase of properties for Lee County, was able to purchase the land for \$8,565,000 in a phased acquisition of \$6,500,000 for 292 acres in 2009 and \$2,065,000 for 136 acres in 2010. Funds used to acquire this property included a donation of \$2,255 collected at a September 2009 Seminar on the Health of Estero Bay and its Watershed sponsored by the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary; Florida Gulf Coast University Progressive Student Alliance and Environmental Association; Responsible Growth Management Coalition; Estero Bay Agency on Bay Management; and Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council.

The Conservation 20/20 program buys environmentally important lands for preservation. It is funded by a property tax, which was approved by referendum in 1996. It is 50 cents for every \$1,000 of taxable property value. Since the first purchase in 1997, the County's Conservation 20/20 program has made 104 land purchases, and the land inventory now stands at 22,956 acres.