

To: Nicki Junkins, President LWVVC

Fr: Nancy Vaughn on behalf of the Natural Resources Team

Re: ECHO/Volusia Forever

Dt: 5/20/20

The Natural Resources Team presents to the board the analysis and recommendation regarding the proposal to put Volusia Forever and Volusia ECHO on the 2020 ballot, leaving the ballot language as it is. Approved in 2000, Volusia Forever and ECHO are voter-approved property taxes that have been on the property tax roles since 2001 and are scheduled to sunset in 2021. For each of these programs, property owners pay a maximum of 20 cents per \$1,000 of taxable property value, so a homeowner with a \$150,000 home and a \$50,000 homestead exemption (a taxable value of \$100,000) would pay a maximum of \$40 a year (\$20 each for Volusia Forever and Volusia ECHO).

Volusia Forever has been used to fund land purchases to and improve environmentally sensitive and outdoor recreation lands, and to protect water resources with the goal of managing those lands as conservation stewards in perpetuity. ECHO provides matching grants to finance the acquisition, restoration, construction or improvement of facilities open to the public, including parks and trails, as well as historic and cultural sites and activities.

History:

Over the course of the ECHO program (2001 to 1/6/2020) 215 projects have been awarded with \$73,010,596 ECHO funds awarded with a \$147,177,778 in match commitment. 191 of those projects have been completed as of with \$66,653,637 ECHO funds expended.

Over the course of the Volusia Forever program, the tax has raised more than \$95 million and preserved more than 38,000 acres through purchases or conservation easements, preserving about 30% of the county.

Actions taken this year:

Citizens who agreed to tax themselves to make their community a better and healthier place to live originally were the drivers of these programs. That same citizen groundswell can be seen today as witnessed by a Volusia County Council meeting on 1/9/20 where 20 individuals representing 10 different organizations spoke about the benefits of putting these programs on the ballot in 11/2020. Following that initial council meeting, two separate workshops were held. During the heavily attended workshop on 2/18/20, the council heard from the current ECHO board and the past Volusia Forever board highlighting program successes as well as recommendations for improvement. The council came to the conclusion that while the ballot language should stay the same, some adjustment of the implementation language could take place to improve the programs. i.e. The Volusia Forever program would self-fund its land management costs.

Internal Audit:

At the 2/4/2020 county council meeting the council requested that an internal audit be done reviewing both ECHO and Volusia Forever. The synopsis of that audit follows:

Audit findings for ECHO:

Overall the ECHO program is running efficiently and effectively. Staff is very knowledgeable on the ECHO program and work with the grantees through all stages of the project, from application to completion to monitoring. Some improvements suggested are: ease and clarity of grant application, project readiness, and project size and composition of applicants.

Audit findings for Volusia Forever:

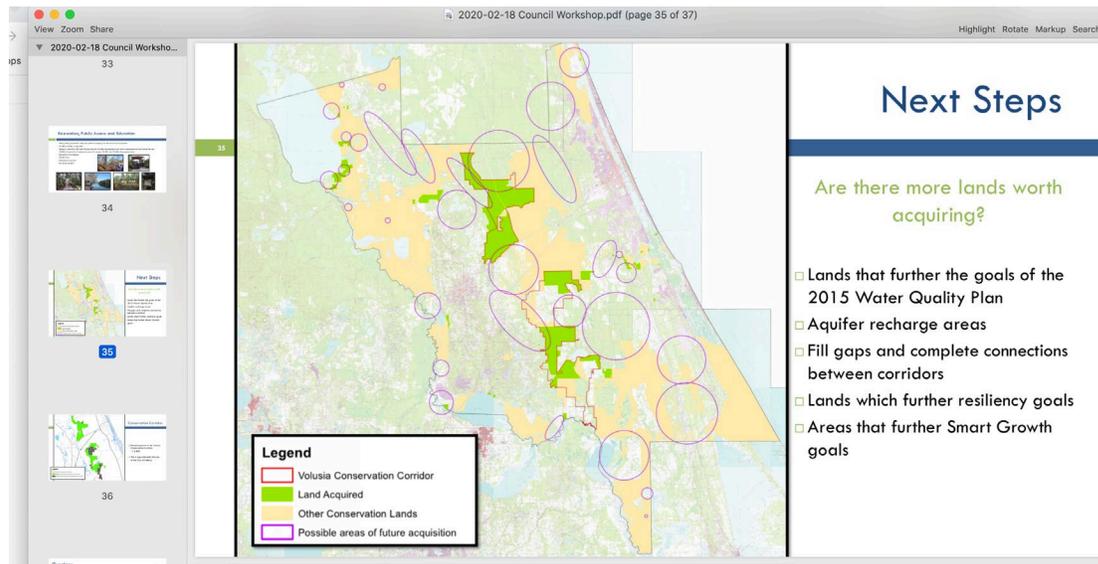
If the Volusia Forever program is renewed the percentage allotted for land management should be increased so it is self-sustaining and funds are not required from the general fund. As more lands are acquired the cost to manage these lands will also increase.

As shown in the audit these programs are functioning well and need only minimal adjustments. At the county council meeting on 5/19/20 the council is scheduled to review the findings of the audit.

Future of ECHO/Volusia Forever:

ECHO: As of 2/11/20 The ECHO board met and approved 12 ECHO projects, which the county council approved on 3/4/20.

Volusia Forever: In anticipation of the possibility that the Volusia Forever tax could return to the ballot, county staff identified around 213 acres that could be future acquisition targets.



Correlation to LWVVC and LWVFL positions:

Both ECHO and Volusia Forever correlate to our League positions speaking to protecting natural habitats, water resources, and quality of life.

Local Government: The League of Women Voters of Volusia County is concerned about the negative consequences of rapid growth throughout the region. These positions address the goals and processes of comprehensive planning and require coordination among the governments of Volusia County. In order to preserve the quality of life in Volusia County:

- *LWVVC supports Volusia County and the municipalities within its borders working together to protect the environment while providing reasonable use of the land and restricting the use of wetland mitigation.*
- *LWVVC supports buffering of environmentally sensitive land and water bodies and encourages developing open, recreational, and green spaces to enhance and maintain quality of life within the county and its municipalities.*

- *LWVVC supports giving public interest priority regarding the conservation of our natural habitats in Volusia County.*

[revised position, adopted April 6, 2013 and re-adopted May 14, 2016]

LWVFL from Study and Action 2019 - 2021

National Resources in Florida

Promote an environment beneficial to life through the protection and wise management of natural resources in the public interest by recognizing the inter relationship of air quality, energy, land use, waste management and water resources. Land Use Promote resource conservation, stewardship and long-range planning, with the responsibility for managing natural resources shared by all levels of government.

Public Participation

Promote public understanding and participation in decision making as essential elements of responsible and responsive management of our natural resources. (LWVUS)

Part of the novel connection between ECHO and Volusia Forever is the intentional engagement of Volusia County residents to their environment. People need encouragement to explore the natural beauty of our county, and ECHO projects do just that, whether through the inter-county trail system or exploring the coastal wonders of The Marine Discovery Center. Volusia Forever gives them the land; ECHO gives them the means to enjoy it. Interest in preserving our beautiful environment is encouraged by access and experiencing it firsthand.

As a county, we entered this year already facing some tough budgetary headwinds; anticipating that the election results regarding Amendment 10 will be implemented will arguably cost the county millions. Additionally, the cost of the pandemic response has not yet been calculated but is also expected to be in the millions.

The designated funding of ECHO and Volusia Forever is what makes sure that there is funding for environmental and community enhancing projects which would arguably be the first on the chopping block during lean financial times. If we don't get the items on the ballot, they will come off the property tax roles and it will be infinitely harder to get them on again.

It appears that currently the Volusia County Council is poised to add these to the ballot and is interested in educational outreach to the voters.

In summary, the factors that recommend League support putting these items on the 2020 ballot are:

- ECHO projects would not be funded during lean economic times
- ECHO projects are community enhancing projects that connect citizens to each other and their natural environment
- Volusia Forever would continue to protect environmentally sensitive land, protect water resources, and increase outdoor recreational opportunities.
- Volusia Forever supports the County's Comprehensive and Resiliency Plans.
- The County Council has undertaken an internal audit on both ECHO and Volusia Forever with positive findings.
- Allowing voters self-determination via ballot choice is tantamount to what the League embodies.

Based on thoughtful consideration of the information provided in this paper, the LWVVC Natural Resources Action Team recommends that the LWVVC Board send the following letter of support to the Volusia County Council to put both ECHO and Volusia Forever on the November 2020 ballot.

The Volusia County Council
123 W. Indiana Avenue
DeLand, FL 32720

5/20/20

The Board of the League of Women Voters of Volusia County is writing to show our support for the placement of the ECHO and Volusia Forever programs on the November 2020 ballot for renewal.

We greatly appreciate the time and effort that the council has spent over the last months in consideration of these programs and their implementation. It shows a profound respect for your electorate and the greater good of the county.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Nicki Junkins, President
League of Women Voters of Volusia County