

Examples of Land Conservation Programs and Tips for Starting One in Your Community

1. Land Acquisition and Conservation Easement Programs

Land acquisition allows local governments to purchase land outright (fee simple ownership) from willing sellers for conservation purposes. This approach is particularly effective in flood-prone areas, where preserving natural landscapes can reduce flood risks and protect communities. Once acquired, lands can be maintained in their existing state or restored to enhance their natural water storage capacity, such as converting developed areas back into wetlands or open floodplains. These efforts not only improve flood resilience but also provide co-benefits like habitat restoration and water quality enhancement.

Alternatively, local governments can protect critical conservation values while leaving the property in private ownership through conservation easements. These voluntary, legally binding agreements between landowners and a government agency or land trust limit certain uses of the land to safeguard its conservation values. Conservation easements enable landowners to retain ownership and continue using their land for low-impact purposes, such as agriculture or recreation, while permanently preventing development that could compromise the land's ecological functions. This flexible tool provides a cost-effective way to protect flood-prone and ecologically sensitive areas.

- **Example:** In Alachua County, Florida, the Alachua County Forever program was established in 2000 when a bond referendum was approved by voters. Additional referenda have continued its funding over the years. The program acquires and manages environmentally significant lands, including wetlands and floodplains, protecting them from development. The program has conserved over 20,000 acres, leveraging almost 50% of the funds from matching funds or partner contributions. These lands contribute to flood protection and natural resource conservation while providing recreational opportunities and quality of life improvements.

2. Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Programs

A Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program allows property owners in flood-prone or environmentally sensitive areas to transfer their development rights to properties in designated growth areas. This system helps prevent development in high-risk zones while allowing landowners to benefit financially. It also encourages more sustainable, denser development in safer areas, balancing growth and conservation.

- **Example:** Sarasota County operates a TDR program that protects critical lands, including flood-prone areas and wetlands, by allowing developers to build in more appropriate areas in exchange for conserving vulnerable lands. This program has helped the county manage growth while ensuring flood resilience.

3. Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) Programs

Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) programs offer financial incentives to landowners who conserve their land or restore natural ecosystems. These programs recognize the value of ecosystem services like flood mitigation, water filtration, and habitat protection, compensating landowners for maintaining these benefits.

- **Example:** In Collier County, Florida, the Rural Land Stewardship Area program incentivizes landowners to preserve wetlands, forests, and other sensitive areas by offering credits that can

be sold or traded, rewarding landowners for conservation while allowing limited development in designated areas. The program has some identified weaknesses but could serve as a good model with appropriate adjustments to the credit system, protections for critical habitats, and limitations on allowed infrastructure.

- **Example:** The South Florida Water Management District operates a PES program that provides water storage, water quality improvements, and habitat benefits on private lands in the Northern Everglades.

How Advocates Can Approach Local Governments to Start a Program

For communities where no formal land conservation program currently exists, advocates can play an important role in initiating these efforts and building support. Here are steps advocates can take to encourage the development of land conservation programs:

1. **Educate Local Decision-Makers:** Advocates should begin by educating local government officials about the importance of land conservation for flood protection, resilience, and environmental health. Presenting data on how wetlands and floodplains reduce flood risks and provide economic benefits (such as avoided costs from flood damage) can help officials understand the long-term value of conservation.
2. **Highlight Successful Models:** Pointing to successful examples of land conservation programs in other Florida counties or municipalities can provide a roadmap for local governments. Case studies from nearby areas, such as Alachua County's conservation easement program or Sarasota County's TDR program, can demonstrate how these initiatives work and how they can be adapted to the specific needs of the community.
3. **Build Community Support:** It's essential to involve the community by showing how land conservation aligns with local priorities—such as protecting water quality, providing recreational spaces, and preserving natural beauty. Engaging stakeholders like homeowners, developers, other environmental groups, and businesses can help build a coalition of support that makes it easier to gain approval for a conservation program.
4. **Leverage Funding Opportunities:** Advocates should explore and promote funding sources that can support a land conservation program. Grant opportunities can be found at protectingfloridatogether.gov and in Appendix B of this report. Most of these options require only a 25% to 50% cost share from local government, allowing for larger projects than would be possible with local funding alone.