

Restoring and Protecting Lake Worth Lagoon

This 20-mile-long urban estuary is an ecologically sensitive area that touches 13 Palm Beach County municipalities: North Palm Beach, Lake Park, Riviera Beach, Palm Beach Shores, West Palm Beach, Palm Beach, Lake Worth, South Palm Beach, Hypoluxo, Manalapan, Boynton Beach, and Ocean Ridge. Two permanent, man-made inlets – the Lake Worth Inlet and the South Lake Worth Inlet – allow saltwater to mix with freshwater from canals creating a rich environment for marine life to thrive. One can observe seagrass, mangroves, sea turtles, oyster reefs, wading birds, crabs, more than 250 fish species and other marine life from the Atlantic. It is home to one of the world's most sought-after snorkeling and diving spots under the Blue Heron Bridge. It is a nautical highway for boaters cruising the Intracoastal Waterway and home to the Port of Palm Beach, the fourth-busiest container port in Florida. The Lagoon is critically important to Palm Beach County's economy and to its residents' quality of life.

The northern Lagoon waters are clearest, aided by cleansing tidal flows from the Lake Worth Inlet. Water quality declines through the Lagoon's central and southern segments where there is limited flushing and ongoing contributions of nutrient-laden discharges from major drainage canals carrying both agricultural and urban runoff from the expansive watershed.

Sustainable Palm Beach County actively supports PBC ERM's Lake Worth Lagoon Management Plan and is an energetic participant in the Lake Worth Lagoon Initiative. SPBC's activism includes making the case for septic-to-sewer conversion in areas that impact the Lagoon; providing counsel and strategic advice to municipalities wishing to better protect their shorelines; supporting infrastructure projects that have a direct impact on the Lagoon and opposing submerged land development in the Lagoon.

SPBC Board Member Tom Twyford is President of the West Palm Beach Fishing Club. He says, "Human activity over the past century has created challenges in Lake Worth Lagoon, but I'm encouraged that so many see the need to restore and protect this unique urban estuary so important to our County. Using our experience and suasion, we are proud to partner with government and civic agencies to enhance water quality, protecting fish and wildlife."

Keeping voters' intent for the Agricultural Reserve

The Palm Beach County Agricultural Reserve was created in 1999. Taxpayers voted to pass a \$150 million bond program to buy 22,000 acres west of State Road 7 between Clint Moore Road and Lantana Road.

What led to the creation of the Ag Reserve? Two key concerns: loss of agricultural land —farming is an important economic driver in Palm Beach County, bringing in an estimated \$1.4 billion in sales — and loss of environmentally sensitive green space as suburbia pushed westward.

Developers within the reserve had to preserve 60 percent of their holdings while building on the other 40 percent. Developers could trade land within the reserve for permission to build elsewhere in the reserve.

Today, as the amount of land to develop in the Ag Reserve dwindles and the County's population expands, Palm Beach County Commissioners are trying to balance pressures for more development while keeping a promise to voters to promote farming and low-density residential spaces. More than half of the Ag Reserve's land is in preservation — nearly 6,200 acres for conservation and over 6,000 acres for agriculture — and more than 6,000 acres have been approved for residential uses. Of the 22,069 acres that make up the Ag Reserve, 1,779 acres remain for use.

Sustainable Palm Beach County supports the intent of the Ag Reserve and works with public officials, non-profits, and developers to balance home developers' plans with agricultural goals and the public's desire to preserve green space in Palm Beach County.

Advocating for Restored Flow to the Everglades

The Everglades ecosystem — a unique mosaic of sawgrass marshes, freshwater ponds, prairies, and forested uplands — supports the natural assets, culture, and economy of Florida. The Everglades are rich in plant and wildlife communities. Many include endangered species. It is the largest wilderness area east of the Mississippi and the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States.

Development pressures from agriculture, industry, and urban areas have destroyed more than half of the original Everglades. Phosphorus in agricultural and stormwater runoff has degraded water quality in the Everglades since the 1960s, threatening water supplies and plant and animal communities.

Protecting, preserving, and restoring water flow to the Everglades has been a goal of scientists, policy makers, and business leaders for more than three decades. In 2000 Congress passed a strategy called the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) to restore 18,000 square miles of land and water over 16 Florida counties to undo the damage of the past 50 years. The restoration would cover portions of the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee, the Caloosahatchee River, and Florida Bay. It is estimated to take 30 years and cost \$7.8 billion to complete.

Sustainable PBC supports the goals of CERP to increase cleansing water flow to the Everglades; reduce discharges to estuaries and the Lake Worth Lagoon and increase water storage. We work with municipalities and nonprofits who share these goals.

Advising Developers on Best Practices for Land Use

Palm Beach County is one of the nation's fastest growing counties. Sky-high demand for housing causes developers to seek to maximize use of every inch of land. This often puts pressure on municipalities to approve environmentally inappropriate projects which would "kill the golden goose" says Bob Gebbia, former mayor of North Palm Beach and SPBC Board member. "People enjoy living here because of the area's natural beauty. They don't want to live in communities without green space surrounded by clogged roads. SPBC works with developers at the 'sketchbook' stage. We make the case for sustainable land use that sets aside conservation areas for water flow, species habitat and residents' recreational enjoyment. We encourage sustainable transportation options that decrease the number of cars on our roads and encourage walking and biking."

As one example, SPBC worked with the developers of Avenir to restore 2400 acres of natural lands, connecting public lands that run from the Loxahatchee Slough Natural Area and Grassy Waters Preserve to the East and to provide fresh water to the Loxahatchee River.

Another example yielded a reduced footprint at Love Street in Jupiter. SPBC worked with the Town of Jupiter, the Jupiter Inlet Foundation, and the developer to create an environmentally positive outcome for a retail/restaurant project on the sensitive Jupiter Inlet. We helped to convince the developer and City to significantly reduce the footprint of the project. The revisions mitigated wastewater flow and ensured the rights of commercial fisherman to utilize the docks.

Advocating for Restoration of the Kennedy Bunker on Peanut Island

Peanut Island, widely known as a snorkeling and fun-in-the-sun weekend oasis, is also the site of the Cold War-era John F. Kennedy bunker. It was built in 1961 as a top-secret nuclear bomb shelter for President Kennedy in case of an attack while he was visiting his "winter White House" on the north end of Palm Beach. It was closed to the public in 2017 and the environs fell into disrepair.

Thanks to a multi-agency collaboration, in January 2022 Palm Beach County officials agreed to terms that would see the County take over the bunker and other historical properties such as a WW II Coast Guard station on portion of Peanut Island.

In January 2022, Palm Beach County Commissioners approved a 30-year lease with the Port of Palm Beach for \$10 a year, following what Parks Director Eric Call described as a "long and trying period" to negotiate lease details.

Sustainable Palm Beach County recognized that returning these parcels to the County would ensure that the public would regain access to this historic designation. **It** worked tirelessly to help bring various agencies to the table to make the transfer happen.

Sustainable PBC chair Karen Marcus notes, "Part of our mission is to take every opportunity to preserve land and to expand recreational and cultural opportunities of PBC residents and visitors. We could not let this site – known the world over in history books —become overgrown and fall into disrepair. We are proud to have played an organizational and communications role in supporting the County to take on management of the site. When it reopens, it will be a must-visit site in our era."

Sustainable Palm Beach County Board member Chris Staneszewski says the agreement with the County also includes managing, maintaining, and renovating the former Coast Guard station built in 1936 and its boathouse. "These six acres of Peanut Island will be used for recreational and educational purposes. This area, along with the 36 acres the County leases from the port and manages as park, **will** be a popular destination for boaters, snorkelers, and anglers.

Supporting Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM)

In 2021, the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) reached the final stages of writing the new Lake Okeechobee management plan. This determines how much excess lake water is released to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and the Lake Worth Lagoon for the next decade or more, and where other water must go — to the Everglades, farm irrigation and drinking water supply. SPBC has worked with PBC officials, the SFWMD and ACE along with elected officials to ensure that the waterways are protected from Lake O discharges. SPBC advocated for the model that was ultimately chosen by ACE to manage outflows from the lake.

Improving County Water Infrastructure

SPBC worked with the Board of County Commissioners and county staff to allocate over \$70 million for water infrastructure projects from the federal American Rescue Plan funds that the county received. "We had to move quickly," says Karen Marcus. "We are fortunate to have Rob Robbins, former director of ERM, on our Board. He was able to apply his deep knowledge of what was possible, practical and what the County needed to help us advocate for shovel-ready projects that would improve the County's water infrastructure."

Protecting Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area Shoreline

The Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area (*JILONA*) was designated by Congress in May 2008 to "protect, conserve, and enhance the unique and nationally important historic, natural, cultural, scientific, educational, scenic, and recreational values of the Federal land surrounding the Lighthouse for the benefit of present generations and future generations for the people in the United States."

The site has 25 special status species, cultural evidence of 5,000 years of human occupation and a north-side hiking trail to a lagoon overlook through three Florida habitats. JILONA is part of the Bureau of Land Management's National Conservation Lands. It is one of only three Outstanding Natural Areas (ONA) in the country.

The dunes on the Indian River and Loxahatchee River that protect the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse ONA have undergone tremendous erosion in recent years. Sustainable Palm County board member, Chip Block, Vice Mayor of Jupiter Inlet Colony, has worked with the BLM, nearby towns and other agencies and organizations over the past decade to advance plans that would protect the dunes and ensure the safety of site visitors. The BLM announced in January 2022 a scoping package and resource management plan amendment for the *Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area*. Block says, “The Lighthouse and surrounding areas are iconic to all of PBC. Having the Federal Government designate the area as an Outstanding Natural Area is an important milestone in preserving and protecting the area. SPBC will continue to work with BLM to ensure this legacy for posterity.”

Promoting recreational safety at Jupiter Narrows

SPBC is working with neighboring towns, homeowner associations, and Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission to create a slow-wake zone in the area north of the 707 Bridge to protect people who fish, kayak, paddleboard, snorkel, and swim here. A slow-wake zone would also protect marine life, especially turtles and manatees, and seagrass in the ICW. “We hope to be successful in creating the zone despite some opposition from boaters,” says SPBC board member and North County resident Tony Bennett.

Influencing policy and educating the public

SPBC board members attend meetings and workshops of the Board of County Commissioners and many municipal Commission meetings when topics concerning the County’s sustainable growth are on the agenda. They also speak often on sustainability to home-owner and environmental organizations.

SPBC Board members are active in the area’s not-for-profit organizations whose goals support SPBC’s mission. These include — West Palm Beach Fishing Club, Friends of MacArthur Beach State Park, Loxahatchee River Historical Association, Loggerhead Marinelifelife Center, Jupiter Inlet Foundation, Lake Worth Waterkeepers.

Board members Karen Marcus and Tim Hulihan are frequent contributors to the Guest Essay section of the Palm Beach Post and the Sun Sentinel.