Interested citizens met recently at an Environmental Forum hosted by UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension. The forum provided updates on issues as well as networking opportunities for citizens. One common concern was staying informed on upcoming meetings and environmental issues.

There are a lot of things happening in our fast growing county. Staying informed requires more than just interest. It is a matter of knowing who knows what and figuring out the alphabet soup of acronyms.

Larry Rosen, President of Kissimmee Valley Audubon Society (KVAS), spoke of his role in providing a communication link for other Audubon members. He often emails residents and visitors who ask about what to see and do in our area or want to get an update on some recent growth issue. He has established a welcomed email service to alert interested individuals, not just Audubon members, about environmental issues. Many signed up at the recent Discover Osceola event where participants were invited to learn more about our county services and organizations. More information on KVAS is available here.

Julia Recker, Osceola County Parks and Recreation Department Director, discussed Community Vision’s (CV) recently published Community Report Card 2004. The glossy publication shares information about Osceola County and comments on a variety of indicators of quality of life in our community including several pages about our environment.

Recker announced that the County, cities and the School Board are working jointly on plans for an update to the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. That document will serve as the basis for the recreation element or chapter of the comprehensive plan. During July, the County Parks and Recreation Department, with the assistance of CV, will host a series of early evening meetings and invites the public to feast on ice cream sundaes while providing input on park needs. They are considering organized sports and active recreation parks as well as passive recreation with areas for hiking, biking, horseback riding, and wildlife watching. Your ideas are welcome. Contact Recker’s staff for dates and times at 407-343-7173 or email to jrec@osceola.org.

The acreage in conservation lands will increase in the next few years due to voter support for the SAVE Osceola initiative. The ordinance passed last fall when 67% of the voters weighing in on the issue agreed to approve bonds for environmental land acquisition and management.

Dan Jones and Rod Schultz of the new Real Estate Office for Osceola County reported on progress since the initiative was passed. The new Environmental Lands Coordinator position has been advertised on the Osceola.org website and it was announced that several candidates were interviewed and under consideration. In addition, applications are available for volunteer committee members that will make recommendations on what lands meet the selection criteria for purchase. Citizens interested in the environment are encouraged to apply. Contact Dan Jones at 407-343-2615 or at djon@osceola.org for a copy of the application and the ordinance pertaining to SAVE Osceola. According to Jones, the selection process should conclude with Board of County Commissioner review and appointments at a Board workshop in July.

Max Forgey, Deputy Director for Planning announced some staggering growth numbers for Osceola County. Osceola County had almost a 31% increase in population since 2000 with a population of 225,816 residents in 2004. That does not include the short term visitors and winter residents that are also a part of our community needing County services.

Forgey invited interested individuals to participate in the upcoming discussion regarding a large scale development, considered a development of regional impact (DRI) on Friday, June 17 in St. Cloud. This is one of 4 DRI’s along the east side of Lake Tohopekaliga under consideration and review by the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council (ECFRPC). The discussion begins with a tour, followed by a presentation on current
plans and opportunity for citizen input, concerns and idea sharing. Contact Forgey at mfor2@osceola.org or call 343-3100 for time and location.

Forgey also explained the comprehensive plan and E.A.R.(Evaluation and Appraisal Report) based amendment process. A consultant working with the county will be scheduling a series of public workshops over the next few months to provide input into many elements (chapters) of the Comp plan that are under review prior to approval by the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) for re-submittal to the Department of Community Affairs (DCA). Meetings will target input from environmental supporters as well as the agricultural community and the Chamber of Commerce’s Growth Management Task Force (GMTF). Citizens are urged to become involved. Contact Forgey for a schedule of meetings.

Pete Edwards, Executive Director for the new Great Outdoor Days organization spoke of the tremendous interest in the environment and discussed plans for the upcoming festival scheduled at Osceola Heritage Park November 11 –13, 2005. Edwards is working with a variety of local businesses and groups to make this an opportunity for environmental awareness for all festival participants. Plans include fishing tournaments, kids fishing derby, outdoor expo with many exhibitors as well as music concerts. The environmental community has a chance to share important environmental messages by participating in the festival. Contact Edwards with ideas and questions at 407-944-2206 or email to pedwards@floridakiss.com

Learning the environmental alphabet can spell success for preserving our quality of life.

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