NATURAL ATTRACTIONS

Our natural attractions have drawn visitors for centuries.

Osceola County is known as a tourist destination, but many folks are not aware that our lakes and woodlands enticed visitors long before theme parks came to town.

These natural areas are still important for tourists, but many locals are not aware of what is in their back yard. Last week, I met a family who had lived in the area for three years but never knew of Lake Tohopekaliga, the lake around which downtown Kissimmee was built.

Natural areas provide homes for birds and wildlife; wood for lumber, paper and mulch; rainwater storage and filtration; and open space and recreation opportunities.

Osceola County has a comprehensive plan that includes keeping designated natural areas. A team of government staff and citizens are working together so you know where those natural areas are and what places are accessible to the public. The greenways and trails planning team is putting together a directory of parks and recreational trails. Contact me at (321) 697-3000 or e-mail me at efoe@osceola.org if you want one when they are printed.

We are fortunate that much of our county is still active in agricultural production and native habitat. Our longtime ranch families have been stewards of the land, providing for huge expanses of diverse natural habitats on their private property. Wildlife has flourished in these areas with woodlands, pastures, groves, wetlands and lakes where there is adequate food, water and space - the basic needs of all animals.

As our towns have grown into cities and residential and business developments have expanded, the natural areas close to town have often been converted to buildings, roads, stormwater ponds and parking lots, not the areas wild things prefer.

Builders and developers are learning to build with nature in mind and are trying some progressive techniques to integrate natural areas with growth. It takes planning, which takes time and money.

The bottom line in business -- profit -- is essential, so customers have to show they are willing to pay for "natural amenities." Home buyers pay a premium for wooded lots or lots next to green space in developments. This translates to economic incentives for leaving natural areas intact.

As developers continue to expand our urban growth areas away from town centers, they purchase property with natural areas. These natural landscapes have value that is evaluated by planners, engineers, architects, landscape architects and environmental regulators. Often times, the natural features can be incorporated into parks, recreational paths and water management planning, reducing some infrastructure costs for land clearing and landscaping. Water filtration and retention are important benefits of leaving natural areas undeveloped.

One strategy for providing open space is to increase density in some areas of the development but leave open space for trees, natural areas and meadows. This leaves wild lands for wildlife and developed areas for people. This is in contrast to dense development everywhere as we see in some parts of Florida. Osceola County is developing a plan for open space, natural areas or greenways as well as recreational pathways, sometimes called linear parks, to connect communities and parks. Land and park development costs money.

On Monday at 7 p.m., the public is invited to hear Will Abberger of the Trust for Public Lands speak on...
funding for parks and greenways. His presentation will be at the Osceola County Courthouse in the County Commission chambers. Developers and private landowners will find out how they can benefit by selling land to meet the county's growing need for parks and recreation land. Residents will get a better understanding of some funding options that will let us enjoy nature and continue to have special places that have brought families to this area for generations.

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Staff Addition

Join me in welcoming Jennifer Welshans, our newest staff member for Osceola County Extension/University of Florida. She will be taking over my responsibilities in consumer and commercial horticulture and working with the Master Gardener program. I will continue to work with natural resources issues, energy and water conservation and environmental education. We both plan to write articles of interest.

Jennifer grew up in Hershey, Pa., and has an undergraduate degree from Pennsylvania State University in agricultural business and horticulture. Her master's degree is in agricultural business from the University of Florida. Yes, another Gator!

Jennifer will be coordinating the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program and is seeking applicants for a program assistant position. Job duties include teaching residents environmentally friendly landscape-care practices through classes and exhibits, recruiting and training volunteers, conducting evaluations and preparing reports. Applications can be picked up at the extension office at 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane at the Osceola Heritage Park.

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Date: June 23rd, 2001