

Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District

Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes

September 21, 2026

Location: Plant City Chamber of Commerce, 2504 Walden Woods Drive, Plant City, FL 33566

Board of Supervisors in attendance: *In person:* Terri Parke (Seat 1); Betty Jo Tompkins (Seat 2); Gretchen Hoke (Seat 3); Matt Shivers (Seat 5). *Virtual via MSteams:* Casey Simmons Runkles (Seat 4).

Staff Support: Dr. Joe Walsh (Executive Director); Dawn Chancey (Office Manager); Christopher Saley (Land Conservation Technician); Kylie Chapman (Conservation Technician); Raelyn Burr (Agricultural Policy and Communications Intern).

Item 1-4 Call to Order / Pledge of Allegiance / Introductions: Chair Parke called the meeting to order at 10:01am. Led Pledge of Allegiance; Vice Chair Hoke led the prayer; Chair Parke welcomed attendees and asked for introductions.

Partner Agency and Vendor Representation in Attendance: *In person:* Crenel Francis (NRCS Conservation Easements Acquisition Coordinator); Walter Albarran (USDA/NRCS Area Conservationist); Andrew Kearse (USDA/NRCS District Conservationist); Master Deputy Dan Jones (HCSO Agricultural Unit); *Virtual via teams:* Vanessa Bauzo (FDACS/OAWP Environmental Consultant); Ken Griner (SWFWMD FARMS Environmental Engineer); Simon Bolin (Hillsborough County Agribusiness Development/AEDC); Morgan New (Executive Director, Hillsborough Chapter/Florida Farm Bureau Federation); John Gooding (NRCS/FPAC – Easement Real Estate Specialist); Alessandra Rowe (SWFWMD Agriculture Team Engineer).

Public In Attendance: *In person* – Harold Fry (cattle operator); Brian Shoop (cattle operator); Casey Faust (founder of ContourStack). *Virtual via MSteams:* Michael Miller.

Item 5. Public Comment: None requested at this meeting.

Item 6. Public Correspondence: None at this meeting.

Item 7. Review and Approval of Agenda: Supervisor Hoke motioned to accept the agenda. Supervisor Shivers seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0.

Item 8. Minutes of the August 24th, 2026 Regular Board: Dawn Chancey presented the draft minutes for the August 24th, 2026, Board meeting; Supervisor Shivers made a motion to accept the meeting minutes; Supervisor Hoke seconded the motion; motion carried 5-0.

Item 9. Financial report for August 2026: Dawn Chancey presented the August 2026 Financial report. Vice-Chair Hoke reported that she had reviewed the draft financial report with Dawn prior to the meeting and did not have any further questions.

Dr. Walsh reported that the District has been remiss over the past approximately two and a half years in not reviewing the burn rate for the County's contribution to the Conservation Program, even while the County's contribution is included in the Board's Annual Financial Report to the State and its Annual Audit. Based on recent comments received from the Board of County Commissioners, the District should monitor the use of the County contribution more actively. Dr. Walsh advised that future budget discussions and presentations will include a summary report of the burn rate for the salary and operating components of the District's budget.

Chair Parke called for a motion to accept the August 2026 Financial Report. Supervisor Hoke made the motion; Supervisor Shivers seconded the motion; Motion carried 5-0.

Item 10. Partner Agency Reports:

- *USDA/NRCS – District Conservationist – Andrew Kearse:* Andrew Kearse highlighted several important program dates and deadlines, as follows: October 3 is the end of Sign-Up Round 1 for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP); November 6 is the NRCS internal deadline for field offices to ensure applications are entered into the appropriate funding program projects; February 12, eligibility determinations for EQIP and CSP are to be completed, along with assessments, rankings, and cost estimates. Field offices are expected to receive notification of approvals by February 26. The State Office has established goals of obligating 80% of available funds by May 26 and 100% by June 30.

Walter Albarran clarified that EQIP operates under an open enrollment process and producers may submit applications throughout the year. The

deadlines are in place to enable staff to manage workload ~~periods~~ rather than limiting when producers may apply. Applications received after a cutoff will ~~may~~ be considered during a subsequent funding cycle and may be rolled into the next fiscal year, but they do not need to worry about missing a deadline. Additional sign-up periods may also be established if supplemental funding becomes available or in response to emergencies or disasters.

Payment caps of \$50,000 were reported for both high tunnels and synthetic mulching. For FY2027, the Plant City field office is projected to receive an EQIP allocation of approximately \$243,750.

Recent field activity included three high-tunnel visits, with two in Lithia and one in Plant City, as well as visits involving prescribed grazing/herbaceous weed control, [plastic] mulching, and a pending cover crop failure. Applications received or anticipated include irrigation, [plastic] mulching, cover crops, and an energy audit.

The Plant City Field Office currently has (43) existing contracts, (9) contract modifications, and (4) contracts scheduled to expire during calendar year 2026. Andrew noted the NRCS staff internal training schedule.

Andrew gave the Board an NRCS perspective of synthetic mulch, which consists of plastic sheeting placed over planting beds. The practice improves moisture management, irrigation efficiency, weed suppression, and overall plant productivity and health. Information was also provided regarding an online resource that allows producers to locate Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices and schedule virtual appointments.

Dr. Walsh requested that the District receive additional information regarding the outcomes of producer applications, noting that the District is not currently copied on correspondence notifying applicants of funding decisions. He explained that the District receives calls from producers regarding their applications and needs sufficient information to respond appropriately and accurately track program performance within Hillsborough County.

Dr. Walsh emphasized that documenting application outcomes and program performance is becoming increasingly important not just to the funding partners but also to the Conservation Districts as well, and particularly this

District needs to demonstrate measurable results to continue the current level of County funding. He stated that the Board of County Commissioners is requesting stronger performance metrics related to the County's contribution to the District's operating fund.

Walter Albarran advised he would review what information may be shared outside the agency and discussed the possibility of meeting with District representatives to provide appropriate program information.

Dr. Walsh further noted that the proposed Interlocal Agreement with Hillsborough County could establish an important framework for performance reporting and accountability. Based on discussions with other conservation districts in Florida, he indicated that an agreement of this nature is uncommon and this one could potentially serve as a precedent for other conservation districts.

- *FDACS/OAWP Environmental Consultant, Vanessa Bauzo:* Vanessa reported that cost-share applications opened on July 1 and approximately 300 applications [statewide] were received, resulting in the application period closing shortly after opening. FDACS anticipates awarding cost-shares to approximately 200 of those applications, and processing remains underway. On the policy side, FDACS continues to develop the “Enrollment-by-Rule” program for the Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) areas. The proposed rule is intended for agricultural producers with properties of 25 acres or less and would provide an online process allowing eligible producers to complete enrollment independently. The rule language is being revised and additional information will be provided as it is finalized.
- *SWFWMD/FARMS Environmental Engineer Ken Griner:* Ken offered a summary of the SWFWMD-FARMS program, highlighting their favorite cost-share items such as irrigation system weather stations and moisture probes. They also contribute to “tubular recovery ponds”, pump stations, pump filters, and the main line that goes out to the manifolds. They currently have a lot of strawberry projects under funding. As always, if anyone knows of someone wanting to participate in FARMS cost-shares, please send them Ken’s contact information.

- *Hillsborough Agricultural Economics Development – Simon Bolin:* Simon reported that the annual Agricultural Pesticide Collection event will be held on October 21 from 7:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. at the Southeast County Landfill in Lithia. The event is funded through a grant from the Environmental Protection Commission (EPC) Pollution Recovery Fund.

Farmers can dispose of unused herbicides, pesticides, insecticides, and fungicides at no cost. Fertilizers and fumigants will not be accepted.

Item 11. Hillsborough Environmental Lands Management (CELM), Division Manager – Ross Dickerson: Due to a family emergency Ross was not able to attend our meeting this month. We will reschedule his presentation for a later date.

Item 12. NRCS Conservation Easements Acquisition Coordinator, Crenel Francis: Crenel Francis provided an overview of conservation easement opportunities available through USDA/NRCS, distinguishing between the two main funding opportunities - Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE). He explained that NRCS provides funding directly to private landowners under WRP and indirectly in partnership through local governments, state agencies, land trusts, and other eligible entities under the ALE to help preserve agricultural lands.

The purpose of ACEP-ALE is to protect the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing productive agricultural lands from being converted to non-agricultural uses. Additional benefits include preservation of wildlife habitat, open space, and other natural resources.

Unlike the other NRCS funds, individual landowners do not apply directly to NRCS for ALE funding. The overarching purpose of the ALE is to leverage NRCS funds with those of local conservation easement programs. The program requires program management by an eligible institutional partner, such as a state or local government, tribe, nonprofit conservation organization, or land trust. The local partner works with the landowner, submits the application to NRCS, and, if approved, holds the conservation easement. NRCS reviews and ranks the property and provides funding to the eligible entity rather than directly to the landowner.

Crenel explained that participating entities and landowners must satisfy eligibility requirements and complete the necessary documentation, including organizational records, title work, appraisals, surveys, environmental assessments, and other due diligence. Because NRCS funding must be obligated within established timelines, eligibility and documentation issues can affect whether a property can move forward during a particular funding cycle. However, Crenel also noted that the NRCS approval process is simpler under ALE than under WRP, and that the burden of due diligence on the local sponsor is what drives the schedule.

Crenel advised that, as a new participating entity, Hillsborough County CELM would need to complete the applicable NRCS entity eligibility process, including the required CPA-41 documentation. Entity eligibility documentation is generally renewed every five years. He encouraged beginning the process promptly if the County intends to pursue an easement project during the next funding cycle.

Dr. Walsh commented that he had arranged this presentation in concert with the CELM presentation because Hillsborough County had not previously been aware of the NRCS ALE easement funding. He noted that the District and County may have missed a previous opportunity involving a property along the Hillsborough River because the parties were unaware that NRCS funding might have been leveraged with local conservation funds.

Crenel distinguished the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program from the ACEP-ALE as follows. Unlike ALE, WRE allows eligible landowners to apply directly through NRCS without an outside partner.

Under the WRP, the NRCS provides all the funding for the easement, and performs all of the associated due diligence, surveys, environmental reviews, closing costs, restoration, and ongoing management activities. Under the WRP, these NRCS activities drive the contract schedule. NRCS evaluates prospective WRP properties to determine whether wetlands can be successfully and cost-effectively restored without adversely affecting neighboring properties, with such potentially unintended consequences as flooding of neighboring properties being of concern. Preliminary restoration planning considers restoration costs, hydrology, habitat benefits, and potential off-site impacts before a property is approved.

Crenel shifted the conversation to a discussion of cattle grazing as an effective management land management tool. While the ACEP-ALE is intended to promote the continued agricultural use of farmlands the WRP, is an ecological restoration program. So, cattle grazing is promoted as an effective land management tool under the ALE but is usually prohibited under the WRP. Board discussion acknowledged that some agricultural producers may be hesitant to participate with NRCS on conservation easements because of concerns that cattle operations would be restricted. This is a valid stakeholder perception problem that the NRCS recognizes, because the general public is not aware of the difference between the WRP and ACEP-ALE programs. Crenel emphasized the importance of outreach and clear communication regarding allowable agricultural management practices.

Crenel discussed both permanent and 30-year easement options under the WRP and explained that compensation is based on the conservation easement value rather than the unrestricted fee-simple value of the property. For the current program parameters discussed, NRCS may pay up to 80% of the applicable conservation value, subject to a maximum of \$10,500 per acre in Florida. Discussion followed regarding the significant difference between conservation easement values and current development values in Hillsborough County.

[Discussion of this topic was not restricted to Board members, and the cattle operators in the room participated equally]. Discussion noted that rapidly increasing land values and development pressure can make conservation easement programs less financially competitive with offers from developers. Dr. Walsh emphasized that Hillsborough County has traditionally spent substantial funds for land conservation, but that combining County resources with NRCS funding could potentially provide a stronger opportunity to preserve agricultural land than either program operating independently.

Crenel concluded by reiterating that ALE and WRP are national conservation programs with different participation requirements and land-use objectives. The ALE is focused on maintaining agricultural lands in production, while WRP is focused primarily on wetland restoration and protection.

Item 13. Vacation and Management Leave: Dr. Walsh provided Hillsborough County HR department's explanation of Hillsborough County Management Leave

policy (under Policy # 8.1). He reminded the Board that Hillsborough County was expecting this Board to make a policy determination as to whether and how it wanted to apply the management leave policy, and today's Board action is to make those two decisions. Dr. Walsh provided verbatim HR Assistant Director Kurt Wilkening's explanation of how the County applies the policy to its own employees.

Dr. Walsh recommended that the Board adopt the County's general policy as written rather than establishing separate provisions. Based on the recommendation provided by Kurt Wilkening, eligible employees with less than five years of County service would receive five Management Leave days per calendar year; employees with more than five years but less than ten years of service would receive three Management Leave days per calendar year; and thereafter employees with ten or more years of service would no longer receive additional Management Leave days.

Discussion followed regarding which District positions would qualify under the policy. Dr. Walsh noted that the County's general policy appears to apply to unclassified exempt positions, rather than exclusively to positions that directly supervise employees and budgets. The Board discussed applying the County's standard eligibility provisions to the District's qualifying positions.

It was further clarified that Management Leave is provided on a calendar-year, use-it-or-lose-it basis. Unused Management Leave does not accumulate and has no cash value or payout upon separation from employment.

Chair Parke called for a Motion to Adopt Hillsborough County BOCC Management Leave for eligible unclassified management positions of Executive Director, Office Manager and Land Conservation Technician, based on hiring date, and retroactively effective to January 1st, 2026 with the following details:

- Less than 5 years of County service: 5 Management Leave days per calendar year
- 5 years but less than 10 years of County service: 3 Management Leave days per calendar year
- 10 years or more of County service: No Management Leave

Supervisor Hoke seconded the motion; Motion carried 5-0.

Item 14. Hillsborough BOCC Resolution Inter-Local Agreement with District:

Dr. Walsh reported that a preliminary draft of the proposed Interlocal Agreement with Hillsborough County had been provided to the Board for review. He emphasized that the document was a first draft and would require additional review and revisions by the Board, Special Counsel, and Hillsborough County before being finalized. Dr. Walsh stated that the County has requested that the agreement include specific performance standards and measurable metrics for services provided by the District.

Dr. Walsh explained that, while preparing the document, he consulted the District's Strategic Plan to help guide the development of appropriate performance-measures presents challenges because many of the District's programs and services depend upon voluntary participation by agricultural producers and funding or resources provided by outside agencies. He noted that the District does not control funding provided through agencies such as NRCS and other state or regional partners and therefore cannot guarantee specific levels of service such as numbers of farms, properties, or acres served. However, measurable customer-service standards, such as response times and providing customers with certainty of an outcome, such as a service determination or appropriate referral, could be incorporated into the agreement.

Discussion followed regarding language in the draft identifying the District as an independent governmental subdivision with its own statutory responsibilities, governing board, personnel, programs, authorities, and obligations. Dr. Walsh explained that the intent of this language is to distinguish the District's statutory responsibilities from the County's authority to require accountability for County funds provided to the District. Board members expressed concern regarding certain provisions and agreed that the document requires a detailed review before a final version is developed.

Dr. Walsh also shared comments received from Special Counsel Tom Gonzalez. Mr. Gonzalez indicated that the County's immediate request appears to be for performance standards by which the District can be evaluated for the activities it currently provides, rather than a draft for a full Interlocal Agreement within the initial 30-day timeframe. Mr. Gonzalez's comments specified that because the

County is funding a separate governmental entity, the BOCC is seeking measurable information regarding the services being provided with those funds.

The Board discussed establishing measurable and achievable performance standards while recognizing that the District cannot guarantee outcomes that depend upon outside contracts it does not have management control of, and that depend entirely on voluntary private landowner participation. On the other hand, Dr. Walsh said that tracking the number of Board-sponsored events and staff presentations can easily have performance standards. Members agreed that additional time should be devoted specifically to reviewing the proposed agreement.

Board Supervisors agreed to schedule a workshop/working session dedicated to this topic within the next two weeks. Board members were asked to come prepared to share recommendations for consideration during the workshop.

Item 15. Supervisor Announcements:

Chair Parke:

- Attended the 2027 Corridor Connect Summit Committee Meeting
- Attended the AFCDD Meeting in Gainesville, FL
- Attended the 3rd round of the I-4 Urban Expansion Meeting
- Attended the Payment for EcoSystem Services webinar
- Attended the Working Lands and Landowner Leadership Planning Committee Meeting
- Attended the Florida Growth Management webinar
- Attended the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau Annual Meeting

Supervisor Hoke:

- Participated in two 1,000 Friends of Florida webinars focused on growth, land use, and conservation, as well as an educational webinar on mealybugs and their impacts.
- Attended the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau Annual Meeting.
- Attended a recent agricultural press conference, where conversations with elected officials and agricultural leaders about preserving working lands while protecting private property rights and ensuring landowners are not financially penalized for keeping their land in agriculture.
- Continued working with the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation, particularly around working lands, landowner engagement, and strengthening partnerships between agriculture and conservation.

- Continued working on the wildlife connectivity in the SR60 and Turkey Creek Road area. There is an opportunity to reconnect thousands of acres of conservation lands currently fragmented by roadways, including Sydney Dover and Edward Medard. With roadway improvements planned, this is an important opportunity to explore wildlife crossings, potentially including equestrian connectivity between existing trail systems.
- Communicating with FDOT and private landowner representatives and working to bring County Environmental Lands and other appropriate partners to the table.
- Continues to focus on finding opportunities where agriculture, conservation, private landowners, and local government can work together for Hillsborough County.

Supervisor Tompkins:

- Attended AFCD Annual Meeting in Gainesville
- Distributed conservation materials at the 4-H Open House at the Florida State Fairgrounds
- Participated in the committee for the annual Timberly Trust Labor Day picnic and distributed conservation materials at the event.
- Attended the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau Annual meeting and distributed conservation materials
- Continued work as the vice chair of the 2026 Harvest Awards for the Hillsborough County Fair scheduled for October 20th, 2026.
- Continued to prepare conservation activities for the Hillsborough County Fair which includes the annual plant auction, rain barrel decorating contest.
- Continued working awarding mini grants on a monthly basis with the Water Conservation Coalition.

Supervisor Runkles:

- Attended the AEDC Meeting on September 3rd, 2026
- Attended the Working Lands meeting webinar
- Attended Hillsborough Farm Bureau Annual Meeting
- Also wanted to remind everyone that the Farm Bureau will be sponsoring the elected officials lamb showmanship at the Hillsborough County Fair on November 6th at 7:00pm.

Supervisor Shivers:

- Nothing to report this month.

Item 16. Executive Director's Report:

***Land Conservation Specialist Introduction:** Dr. Walsh welcomed Chris Saley to the District and introduced him as a new senior-level, non-supervisory staff member. He explained that Mr. Saley's position supports the leadership development model outlined in the District's Strategic Plan and will include responsibilities related to business development, project management, and technical services.

Dr. Walsh highlighted Mr. Saley's diverse professional background and qualifications, including a master's degree from the University of Florida, experience as a wildland firefighter, and credentials related to ecological restoration. He is also a licensed FAA drone operator and has experience with right-of-way, greenways, and trails projects.

Additionally, Mr. Saley has agricultural experience, having previously assisted with the management of a farm in the Ocala area. Dr. Walsh stated that the District looks forward to utilizing his varied skills and experience in support of its conservation programs and future business development efforts.

***Sarah Spatola – Executive Director Turfgrass Producers of Florida:** Dr. Walsh reported that the District has established a stronger connection with Florida's sod-growing industry through Sarah Spatola, Executive Director of Turfgrass Producers of Florida. He explained that Ms. Spatola recently participated as an alternate representative on the Agricultural Water and Green Industry Advisory Committee, providing an opportunity to establish a working relationship.

Dr. Walsh noted that Turfgrass Producers of Florida is particularly valuable as an outreach partner because its membership consists only of turfgrass producers, providing the District with a direct communication channel to agricultural producers within the industry.

Dr. Walsh also discussed with Ms. Spatola the industry's current knowledge and concerns regarding the emerging pasture mealybug crisis. The District plans to continue developing this relationship to strengthen communication, advocacy, and information sharing with turfgrass producers.

*Grant Applications: Dr. Walsh reported on the District's efforts to pursue grant funding. that grant application effort continues to focus on the District's proposed No-Till Drill and Roller Crimper equipment purchases. While the District has not yet been successful with its recent applications, each submission has provided valuable experience in understanding grant requirements, formatting, and the overall application process.

He emphasized that staff continue to research and apply for appropriate funding opportunities.

In addition, Dr. Walsh reported that Jim Frankowiak (ITFM) is assisting with identifying contacts at Publix and Mosaic to explore potential Corporate community funding opportunities. The District will continue pursuing both grant funding and private donations to acquire the equipment.

Dr. Walsh encouraged the Board to continue to outreach for donations, noting that the sooner the equipment can be purchased and placed into service, the sooner the District can begin documenting utilization and demonstrating a return on investment (ROI) for the equipment initiative.

*Plant City McIntosh Preserve Executed MOU: Dr. Walsh reported that the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the City of Plant City for McIntosh Preserve has been fully executed. The District is now awaiting the City to schedule a project kickoff meeting, which will be coordinated through the City's Public Utilities Department.

Dr. Walsh explained that, as discussions progressed, the District learned that the City is undertaking a larger infrastructure project at McIntosh Preserve involving flood control, surface water management, groundwater recharge, and water conveyance. Because these improvements could directly affect future ecological and land-management recommendations, the District will participate in the larger City-managed project as a technical service provider rather than developing recommendations independently.

Supervisor Tompkins inquired whether the District's participation could create financial obligations or restrictions associated with the use of Hillsborough County funding. Dr. Walsh clarified that the District's contribution is expected to consist

primarily of staff services provided as an in-kind contribution, rather than a direct financial commitment.

In response to Board Supervisor Tompkins' remarks, Dr. Walsh stated that Hillsborough County (CELM) had been consulted early on, as they had been one of the original partners to the acquisition and conservation plan for MacIntosh, and the District has committed to both the City and CELM staff to act as the coordinating lead for additional consultations. County representatives (CELM) provided technical input and view the McIntosh Preserve project as an opportunity for the District to gain experience providing these services before undertaking in-kind work in support of other County-managed projects.

Item 17. Upcoming/Proposed Business of the District:

- October 5th – 8th, 2026: Florida State Fair Ag-Ventures
- October 12th, 2026: Hillsborough Farm Bureau Board Meeting:
 - Dr. Walsh is speaking
- October 19th, 2026: Regular Board Meeting
 - Execution of BOCC Budget for FY2027
- November 16th, 2026: Regular Board Meeting
- November 17th, 2026: AEDC Meeting
- December 21st, 2026: Regular Board Meeting:
 - This meeting date might change as it's the week of Christmas