

On the Right Track – How a Community Based Land Use Advocacy Organization is Making a Difference in Central Florida

By Jennifer M. Keeler for ELCR

Introduction by Equine Land Conservation Resource - Land use watch groups continue to form in communities across the US in response to the growing concerns related to suburban and rural sprawl. ELCR always recommends that our constituents form some type of community-based organization that can keep an eye on local land use and planning, share information with members, and work both proactively and in response to issues that arise impacting equine land access. There are other grassroots-based organizations that are also working to monitor and influence land use policies at the local level. Existing Organizations that don't focus specifically on equine lands can still be extremely helpful to the equine community's land use needs. Good city planning can result in the protection of agricultural, equine and natural lands. This article provides a good example of community-based organization dedicated to protecting horse lands in central Florida.

Long after the immediate threat of a toll road being built across precious Marion County horse farms has passed, Horse Farms Forever's work to preserve Florida's equine heritage goes on.

Every spring for the last 30 years, many of North America's top equestrians have gathered in Ocala, Fla. for Live Oak International, the country's most prestigious and charismatic combined driving and show jumping competition.



Chester Weber competing with his four-in-hand at the 2016 Live Oak International. Photo by Jennifer M. Keeler

Held on the picturesque grounds of the Weber family's 4,500-acre Live Oak Stud, a Thoroughbred farm and commercial cattle operation located just minutes from downtown Ocala, this annual event is like no other. With incredible horse sport held among the lush green fields and stately live oak trees draped with Spanish moss, all combined with a festive atmosphere and top amenities, Live Oak International attracts the largest spectator turnout in Marion County, Fla.

But just two years ago, the future of both the international equestrian event and the farm itself was in jeopardy. On May 1, 2018, the Florida

Department of Transportation (FDOT) unveiled its proposed route plans for a new toll road called the "Coastal Connector", which would run from the Suncoast Parkway along the western part of the state northeast to Ocala and connect with Interstate 75, paving right through the heart of historic horse farms like Live Oak Stud.

"One of the original proposed paths of the Coastal Connector would have not only gone straight through the grounds of our farm and competition venue, but also split my personal home in half as well," said Chester Weber, co-president of Live Oak International and 17-time National Champion driver. "It was potentially devastating not only to my family, but also to fellow farm owners and our entire local equine industry."

RALLYING CRY

In response, Weber was one of several Ocala-area landowners who rallied together to form a group called Horse Farms Forever (HFF), which immediately took action to lobby against the threat. Their efforts, combined with those of community and local government leaders as well as a tremendous grassroots public campaign, sent the

issue straight to then-Florida Governor Rick Scott's desk. As a result, just four months after first unveiling their plans, the FDOT announced it was abandoning the project.

With the imminent danger of the Coastal Connector now past, HFF leadership needed to decide if and how their organization should move forward. "I felt that it was important to remain vigilant to protect horse farms and that we all needed to do a better job of explaining the importance of the horse industry to our way of life in Marion County," said Weber. His fellow HFF board members agreed, and in the fall of 2018, they voted to continue the organization's work.

"The Coastal Connector really was the wakeup call that Marion County needed to realize the importance of this unique and special area, and if we don't take action it could all be gone in 20 years," explained Busy Shires Byerly, who now serves as HFF's Director of Conservation Strategies. "It was an amazing coalition of the entire community coming together to stop the toll road – the elected officials, the farm owners both large and small, equestrians from all breeds and disciplines – everyone rallied together in one unified effort. After the road was stopped, HFF realized that it wasn't just about one road project: growth issues will continue to affect our farms in the future, and in order to preserve the character and culture of Ocala, we needed to have a seat at the table."



Photo credit Horse Farms Forever

BALANCING ACT

With Ocala proudly proclaimed as "The Horse Capital of the World®," the horse industry's economic impact in the area is estimated at \$2.6 billion or almost 20% of the economy, with over 22,000 jobs directly related to equine industry. Marion County is also home to the largest horse population of any county in the United States with over 80,000 equines residing on almost 200,000 acres dedicated to over 1,200 farms and the horse industry.

"Horses are the most important part of the identity, economy, and quality of life in Ocala," noted Byerly. "And this was actually confirmed via a public survey where visitors to Marion County said the number one thing they liked about the area was the horses. Without horses and horse farms, Ocala is just another town."

But business is also booming in Florida. Almost 100 people relocate to Florida each day, and Marion County has one of the highest growth rates in the nation for a county of its size. With an expanding and thriving warehouse industry (industry giants such as FedEx and Chewy.com are moving in, creating even more jobs), population is expected to increase to 500,000 residents by 2030. The majority of current growth is outside the city limits of Ocala, and this sprawling growth pattern threatens the county's agricultural lands, its rural economy, the region's water quality, wildlife habitat, and Marion County's unique quality of life.

All of this means that even with the Coastal Connector in their rearview mirror, Horse Farms Forever still has plenty to do. "Our mission is to educate, inspire and advocate for the preservation of horse farms. We are focused on a long-term strategy to preserve the character and culture of the horse industry in Marion County to help ensure this unique place is protected for future generations," Byerly explained.

With the high growth rate in Marion County, farmland is constantly threatened by developers seeking exemptions to build both housing and commercial development within the Farmland Preservation Area, which was created by the Marion County Commission in 2005 in northwest Marion County, the heart of the area's signature horse farms. Unfortunately, in recent years more than 2,000 acres within this area has already been lost to urban uses.

So how can Ocala balance the legacy of horse farms with a public need for housing and services for a rapidly growing population? “We agree that growth is good, but most importantly it should be inside the urban growth boundary,” said Byerly. “One of the research tools that we’re working on is a utilization study to show how much vacant land there is inside the county’s urban growth boundary. We believe it is significant – more than many people realize – and we support taking advantage of that space. We want Ocala to have a vibrant downtown and be an exciting place to live.”

MAKING NEW STRIDES



The beauty of Ocala, Florida lies in its unique equine landscape. Photo credit Elma Garcia Cannavino

Community research studies are just one of many valuable projects HFF has in the works, all part of their mission to preserve the Ocala area’s equine heritage and set the stage for a strong strategic plan. Today, working with an eight-person Board of Directors and three staff members, all supported by a plethora of both individual and corporate members, HFF is poised to continue to serve Marion County’s horse industry because there’s always a new threat.

“Currently a private landowner in western Marion County is proposing a new road project called the West Ocala Beltway that is similar to the Coastal Connector, with half of the beltway located in the Farmland Preservation Area. This is just one example of how horse farm preservation is an ongoing issue and that our voices matter and need to be heard.”

Byerly outlined how HFF is hoping to help protect Ocala’s equine identity and economy by learning from the example of other communities like Lexington, Ky., which has successfully faced growth issues impacting horse farms. One of Lexington’s efforts which has been particularly successful is the Rural Land Management Program, which to date has permanently protected 277 farms totaling more than 30,000 acres in Fayette County.

“The goal is to have a similar RLMP as part of the update of Marion County’s 2025 comprehensive plan,” said Byerly. “A Rural Land Management Plan designates how we’re going to plan for the future of agriculture, while at the same time balancing economic development and urban population growth. We need to protect our iconic horse farms and irreplaceable soils.”

Founded by the efforts of local horsemen and women, Horse Farms Forever continues its work protecting horse farms and the equine industry in Florida and now serves as a successful example for other communities. Byerly’s advice for those also facing challenges from urban growth and sprawl? “It takes time to win the battle. It doesn’t happen overnight, so don’t get discouraged because it’s a long-term process,” she said. “You also have to have a broad base of support including landowners, industry organizations, and elected officials.

“It takes dedication because it can be discouraging, but it’s worth it,” Byerly concluded. “I grew up on a horse farm that my family still owns, and what motivates me every day is helping farm families pass their land on to the next generation without having to worry if their beloved family farm will become a housing development.”

Related articles

Community Based Organizations Working for Sustainable Land Use <https://elcr.org/whats-new/new-articles/community-based-organizations-working-for-sustainable-land-use-2/>