

## LEADING THE WAY

***With exploding population growth in their region, the members of Back Country Horsemen First Coast are working to preserve trail access for future generations of equestrians in northeast Florida***

*By Jennifer M. Keeler for Equine Land Conservation Resource*

"Since conservation happens at the grass roots level, local equine organizations like Back Country Horsemen First Coast (BCHFC), profiled in this article, are key to keeping land open and accessible to horses while educating their communities about the benefits of horses," said ELCR Executive Director Holley Groshek. "We hope that BCHFC's story can be an inspiration to horsemen and women in other communities encouraging them to work together to protect endangered horse lands and protect access for the benefit of future generations."

With a pleasant climate, stunning beaches, sparkling ocean waters, and grand forests of longleaf pine all combined with a rich history dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it's no wonder that St. Augustine, Florida is such a popular place to live. Located in St. Johns County on the Atlantic shore of northern Florida known as the "First Coast," the natural vistas and trails in the area have been treasured by equestrians for generations.

But the same natural splendor that horsemen and women have come to love has also proven to be very attractive to new residents. A strong presence of logistics, insurance, financial and medical industries, all grounded by three large Naval Stations, has contributed to an explosion of population growth in the region.



Lifelong horsewoman Mary Farr of St. Johns, Florida has seen the changes firsthand. "My husband and I are lucky enough to have 44 acres with over three miles of trails on our property," she explained. "We live in an old neighborhood where they started selling lots in the 1960's, with many families now having lived here for three generations. It's a very rustic, eclectic and unique community. Many of the horses are kept in backyards or at boarding stables, and there are several equestrian developments and homeowner's associations with community regulations."

While Farr reports that currently there is no accurate demographic data on the equestrian community in the area, the US Agricultural Census records about 860 horses in the county. But Farr also notes that her region is one of the fastest growing in Florida, if not the country, and open land used in the past for horses and farming is continually being snatched up by developers, bulldozed and built on. "Now we are definitely in a 'horses in suburbia' situation and are fighting development all around us, so many of us have become a pretty vocal and proactive equestrian neighborhood out of necessity."

"Zoning has been very generous to developers in the last decade or more," Farr added. "Thousands of acres are approved for individual mega developments, and these entities can levy their own taxes and use the county fire and police resources. For instance, recently an old family farm near Interstate 95 which totaled more than 3,000 acres was re-zoned and will likely be sold off for high-density housing. This is just one of many examples of the continued growth in our area and how it impacts land loss and trail access for equestrians."

## Not a New Problem

Awareness of the need to preserve land for equestrian use in St. Johns County is not a new endeavor. Farr noted that in the late 1980's, there really wasn't any central area for people to gather and ride, so a group of local horsewomen lobbied county commissioners to establish a horse park.

"At first they were ignored, but they did not give up. As their efforts became more organized, the St. John's County Horse Council (SJCHC) got started," she explained. "They were eventually granted 20 acres in a potato field in the middle of nowhere where a community center and park area were constructed, along with a 25-stall barn and multiple arenas, all built thanks to local fundraising. Three decades later the facility continues to thrive, add new features, and is treasured by local equestrians. Meanwhile, the Horse Council continues to be very proactive and successfully manages and finances the Equestrian Center under the guidance of the local Parks and Recreation Department."

Fortunate to have such a strong equestrian advocacy group, the St. Johns County Horse Council's efforts laid the groundwork for many continuing conservation efforts to this day. But Farr also noted that, while the Horse Council's focus is on the equestrian center, other local horsemen and women like her wanted to expand their efforts and focus specifically on saving trails for equestrian use.

"Essentially we started under the Horse Council umbrella as five equestrians having a conversation with other trail groups including off-road cyclists, hikers and high school track coaches. But it quickly became evident that, as much as trails are supported, the Horse Council did not have the resources and knowledge necessary to focus on the equestrian trail issues. We realized the need to form a separate group to lead those efforts."

## Hitting the Trails

In the process of branching off from the SJCHC, Farr reached out to Truman Prevatt, the Florida representative to the Back Country Horsemen of America (BCHA) Board of Directors, as well as Kathy Thompson, President of the BCH Nature Coast chapter, to discuss starting a local chapter in the St. Johns County area. "Truman and Kathy have been extremely helpful with getting us started and continue to serve as our mentors," Farr explained.



*Mary Farr indicates areas of existing and potential conserved land during meeting with County Extension Agent.*

"Five years ago there were only three local BCHA chapters in Florida, and now it's grown to six with the addition of our Back Country Horsemen First Coast (BCHFC) chapter. Our group has also benefited greatly from our relationship with the Equine Land Conservation Resource (ELCR). Holley Groshek and her staff met with our organization early on in St. Johns County and have been incredibly helpful and supportive, and it means so much that we can pick up the phone and ELCR provides advice and encouragement and always has our back."

With about one-third of the county owned and managed by state forestry and parks agencies and many areas of natural splendor which could be wonderful venues for equestrian use, Farr and her fellow BCHFC members saw plenty of exciting possibilities to blaze new trails. But they quickly learned that some areas and agencies are more hesitant than others to opening up access for horses, and the approval process doesn't always go smoothly.

“The first project we attempted was in a Florida State Forest near the A1A highway and the Atlantic coast. We were perhaps a little naïve,” Farr admitted. “Truman Prevatt helped us wade through the bureaucracy and although we didn’t get the Florida Forestry Service project we had hoped for, it was a valuable learning opportunity. Through both successes and disappointments, we’ve all learned a lot about the various organizations, processes and procedures for obtaining permission, as well as how to best make a convincing case for equestrian use.”

Shortly thereafter, another opportunity presented itself with fellow equestrian and Conservation Lands Manager Heather Venter at the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD). A major extension of the First Coast Expressway was scheduled to move east through Clay County and connect Interstate 10 in northwestern Jacksonville with Interstate 95 south of St. Augustine. This extension of the First Coast Expressway ended up removing the road frontage and both of the main entrances to the Bayard Conservation Area. A popular recreational area with the public, the Bayard Conservation Area consists of more than 10,000 acres located along the western bank of the St. Johns River and contains over ten miles of equestrian trails along with diverse natural systems that provide habitat and feeding areas for a variety of animals and birds.

“Unfortunately, this construction was going to take out two very popular trail heads which provided access to thousands of acres,” Farr said. “Heather Venter came to us and asked if we would be interested in assisting the SJRWMD with the design and implementation of a new entrance and parking area at Bayard near Green Cove Springs.”

As part of the purchase of the former parking areas, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) provided funds to build a bigger trailhead and more extensive parking area for both cars and trucks/trailers at Bayard, which also allowed the SJRWMD to install a native plant garden and picnic area for recreationists.



*New Bayard Parking Area*



*Volunteers spend several days planting native plants as part of the beautiful landscaping design around picnic area.*

“BCHFC members along with the Lake Asbury Riding Association spent several days planting native plants as part of the beautiful landscaping design plan, plus we worked with the local St. Johns Boy Scout Troop 718 (including Eagle Scout Dane McGraw) to place hitching posts, picnic tables and benches,” explained Farr.

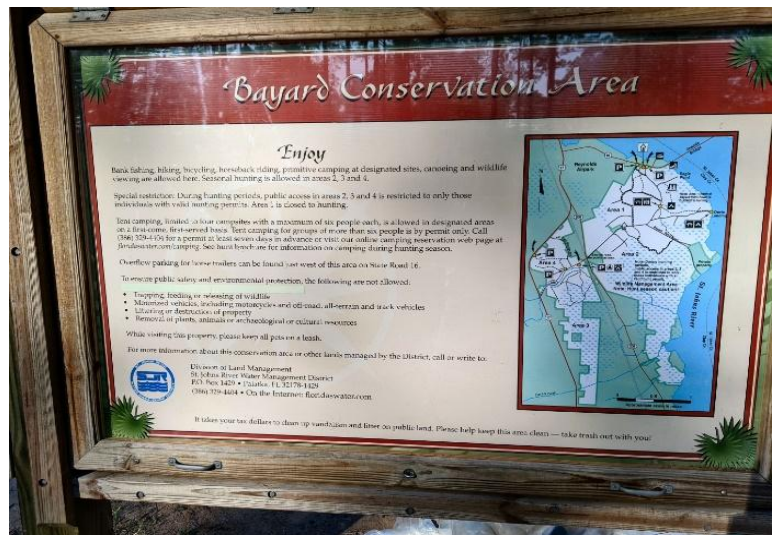
“As a final touch, we are working with the SJRWMD to design a kiosk sign at the trail head to inform users about how this cooperative project came to be, who was involved in the project, trail etiquette, as well as what the BCHFC is and what we do.



The new trailhead and parking area at Bayard Conservation Area opened to the public last spring and was a huge success. Since that was our first big project, we set the bar pretty high for ourselves!"

## Making Connections

Even though last year's activities inevitably slowed down for the BCHFC because of COVID-19, Farr reports that the group has grown to approximately 30 dues-paying members with many other people willing to volunteer and actively support their efforts, all of which means that they're looking forward to getting things going again and doing more to advocate for equestrian trail use in the region.



*New Bayard Kiosk*

"A formal membership drive is part of our 2021 plans," Farr noted. "In the past our members have hosted barbeque fundraisers and a recruitment party with great success. Our members staff a booth at local horse-related events to spread the word about what we do, and we also seek out partnerships with other off-road trail groups and have found some success in these efforts."

"Our focus remains on not only helping to save trails and trail access, but also to obtain easements through private property as well as build new trails. For instance, something we're currently looking into is the possibility of retrofitting some paved bicycle paths on the historic Bartram Trail for horses. Through community outreach and education, we've reached out to local bicyclists and so far it's been a positive, cooperative effort."

But perhaps BCHFC's most important mission has simply been bringing awareness: to get their name and purpose as an equine trail advocacy group out to government agencies, landowners and equestrian and other wilderness trail users on the First Coast. Members actively promote BCHFC to local officials, and the group was recently awarded a Proclamation of Support by the St. Johns County Commissioners.



*It is important to track volunteer hours.*

"We believe in the value of personal contact and making new friendships," Farr said. "While land conservation can be an emotional, highly-charged issue, I also think it's so important to be polite and kind. There are plenty of people who berate the County Commissioners for every problem or unaddressed issue, but that's not our approach. Even the Commissioners who do not agree with us respond to a respectful presentation of concerns along with suggestions to improve the situation and offers to help to get the job done. I always stress that BCHFC is NOT a riding club; although we all ride, we are a volunteer organization which offers free labor and the ability to apply for grant money to finance projects."

“As a result, BCHFC has been asked to act in advisory roles and recently has received requests for assistance to keep horses on multi-use trail projects in the area,” Farr continued. “One of our members is now on the Board of a State Park in our area; another member is on the Advisory Committee for upgrades to the trailhead at a State/County managed conservation area. Upcoming projects include participation on the Julington-Durbin Land Management Advisory Group; consulting with St. Johns County to establish new equestrian trails at McCullough Creek; and joining other equestrians for a multi-use trail project at Jennings State Forest. We appreciate that, instead of being adversaries, government agencies are now thinking of us in that we can be of assistance.”

### **Don't Take It For Granted**

Farr is quick to emphasize that it takes a huge team effort to make their work possible. “No one person can do this; it takes a village, and there’s no way we would be able to do what we do without the critical support of our members,” she said. “What advice would I have for others who may want to organize and address equestrian use concerns in their area? Talk to as many people as you can. Find organizations and/or individuals to mentor you. Keep a mailing list and write a good newsletter that people look forward to reading. Handle your finances professionally and submit all government reports completely and on time. Use social media and a website to network with horse groups and other trail user groups. We’re so lucky to have incredible members who volunteer their time, energy, and expertise to address all of these areas.”



*Team work is needed to achieve success.*

“Despite our successes so far, the bottom line is that our lands are NOT safe,” Farr concluded. “Florida has always been famous for its developments and taking its fragile natural resources for granted. It is important for all land managers, county governments and every citizen to act as steward of the lands. Even as growth continues there is hope with recent elections resulting in Commissioners with platforms that include better growth management, but only the future will tell. In the meantime, we’ll be here for the horsemen.”