

Donations are needed to connect wildlife corridors

Max Chesnes Treasure Coast Newspapers USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

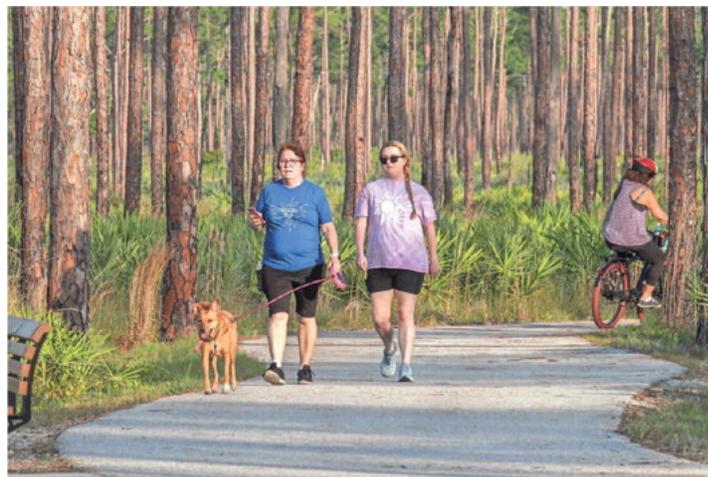
HOBE SOUND – A grassroots initiative to connect nearly 70,000 acres of critical wildlife habitat is gaining traction among Martin County officials and environmentalists who envision a bustling ecological corridor between two Florida state parks.

The Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative, spearheaded by three environment nonprofits, is a multi-year project to acquire and conserve thousands of acres of land threatened by development between Jonathan Dickinson and Atlantic Ridge Preserve state parks.

Through purchasing patches of forsale land located in an ecologically rich area, the group hopes to form a snaking expanse of lush natural space where animals such as bobcats, gopher tortoises and a vast array of birds can roam between parks.

The plan is bold and expansive, said Greg Braun, executive director of Guardians of Martin County and one of eight members on the initiative’s steer-

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Maureen Sullivan, left, and her daughter Grace, of Palm Beach Gardens, enjoy the beauty of Jonathan Dickinson State Park while walking with their dog Athena on Monday between Hobe Sound and Tequesta in Martin County. “We love it, after a long day at work I have to come out here,” Sullivan said. “We always see something new. We either see a deer or gopher turtle, or an alligator, or a stork, it’s so wonderful.” ERIC HASERT/TCPALM

Wildlife

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ing committee. “We’ve got millions of dollars worth of properties that are deserving of this conservation,” Braun told T CPalm last week. “So we’re taking it a bite at a time.” That first bite begins with the group’s initial phase of land acquisition, which hopes to purchase 138 acres along a tw omile tract on the north side of Bridge Road. It’s a crucial piece of land that controls the Eastern and Kitching Creek flow-ways, according a report the initiative published last year. The land’s optimal location would create water management and recreational opportunities, restore hydrology, reduce regional flooding and enhance water quality in the South Fork of the St. Lucie River, according to the initiative. “It’s all an effort to restore the original flow of the waters and really put that system back to normal,” said Barbara Birdsey, another

i Audubon of Martin

County

i Friends of Jonathan Dickinson State Park

i Jupiter Island Historical Society

Raising funds to acquire land

The Atlantic Ridge Ecosystem is ranked as a “low” priority on this year’s recommendation list from Florida Forever, the state’s premier program to buy land for conservation and recreation.

The Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative hopes to change that by raising enough funds to strategically purchase properties and offer them to the state at no cost. That approach would increase the ranking of the overall project, an important step in creating a “meaningful” connection between both parks, Braun said. “A part of our effort here is to raise the interest of the local

initiative committee member. “The importance of it all is really huge. It’s a big undertaking.”

Plan already garnering support

The ambitious initiative is sponsored by the Conservation Fund, the Guardians of Martin County and the Treasured Lands Foundation. It’s already gained a consortium of support among county officials and environmentalists.

The Guardians’ presentation to Martin County commissioners March 9 prompted them to formally endorse the plan and look into next steps for funding properties in the headwaters, according to the meeting’s agenda summary.

The board is “100% supportive” of the initiative, county spokesperson Martha Ann Kneiss told TCPalm. Jupiter Island Mayor Whitney Pidot wrote a letter of support. “The unique beauty of our community and of the entire Treasure Coast, and the preservation of the natural Florida environment, is in large part a result of privately supported conservation initiatives,” she wrote. “Your initiative represents the fine tradition of community leadership in preserving Florida lands, and we thank you for your efforts.”

The plan has also gathered support from local environment groups, including:

- i The Rivers Coalition

- i Martin County’s Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society

communi-ty,” Braun said. “In the perfect world, we would address the obstructions that are currently within that corridor between the park, and we would manage them in a way that restores the hydrology and allows public recreation.”

How to donate

Donations to the Loxa-Lucie Headwaters Initiative can be made on their website (go to conservationfund.org and search Loxa-Lucie) or by contacting committee member Greg Braun by phone at 561-758-3417 or email at dgregbraun@aol.com.

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A bicyclist enjoys the beauty of Jonathan Dickinson State Park on Monday between Hobe Sound and Tequesta in Martin County. ERIC HASERT/TCPALM