PALM BEACH COUNTY’S CHANGING LANDSCAPE: HISTORICAL TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTION OF THE AGRICULTURAL RESERVE

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Abstract. Similar to the rest of Florida, agricultural land in Palm Beach County is disappearing at rapid rates. However, despite the large and fast growing population Palm Beach County remains as a leader in Florida agriculture. Several ballot-based and otherwise initiatives have been approved to preserve agricultural lands.

Since the early part of the 20th century, Palm Beach County has had its roots in production agriculture. Even today, with over 1.3 million people residing in the county and an average of 72 new residents arriving every day, Palm Beach County still remains one of the top counties in the production of agricultural goods in the United States.

In 1980, an area of approximately 21,000 acres in southern Palm Beach County was formally designated as the Agricultural Reserve. This area has traditionally been dedicated to high-value vegetable crops—tomato (Lycopersicon esculentum L.), bell pepper (Capsicum annuum L.), summer squash (Cucurbita pepo L.), eggplant (Solanum melongena L), and Chinese vegetables—and plant nurseries that specialize in containerized plants, foliage, and bedding plants. Clustering of new development and land use densities were established to prevent premature development within the Agricultural Reserve with an emphasis on the preservation of agriculture in this area that was quickly becoming surrounded by development and urban encroachment from the coastal communities. By the late 1990s, as urban pressure and land-use issues became county-wide concerns, Palm Beach County developed a Master Plan recommending that the county purchase lands within the Agricultural Reserve suitable for agricultural purposes and to make these lands available to individuals willing to continue farming through a lease program. The program is relatively simple: Step 1: offer first refusal option, with considerations, to the owner or current lessee; Step 2: extend priority to beginning farmers; Step 3: extend priority to farmers presently farming in the Agricultural Reserve; Step 4: Open bid process on all properties. Once the lessee is determined, the land goes into, or continues, with normal production under the oversight of the South Florida Water Management District and the Palm Beach County Soil and Water Conservation District, which develops a Best Management Plan for each individual property.

To move forward with the land acquisition program, a $150 million bond referendum, with $50 million to be used for purchase and protection of environmentally sensitive lands throughout the county, and $100 million to be used of purchase of land within the Agricultural Reserve, was created. In March 1999, the bond issue was approved by the voters by a two to one margin. By mid-2005 approximately 8,100 acres had been purchased and are currently in agricultural production (peppers, tomatoes, nursery, etc.) within the Agricultural Reserve; the remainder is divided amongst water retention, buffer zones, conservation, and development. It is with optimism from the concerned parties—agricultural, water and land management, development—that this area stays in agriculture for generations to come.

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