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Sarasota County buys Walton Ranch for conservation corridor

Sarasota County, in partnership with the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD), is purchasing about 3,80 acres known as the Walton Ranch. The acquisition creates a conservation corridor linking environmentally sensitive land in Sarasota County to land in DeSoto County that's protected by SWFWMD.

The conservation easement will cover marshes, pine flatwoods and hardwood hammocks, which will safeguard water supplies and water quality and provide natural flood protection. The purchase also creates an ecological corridor that will provide regional connections for wildlife, including the endangered Florida panther.

The Sarasota County Commission approved a \$23.5 million deal put together with the help of the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, which acted as the acquisition agent. Under the agreement, the county will sell the conservation easement to SWFWMD for \$12.8 million.

The Walton property is one of three ranches listed in the Acquisition and Restoration Council's 'Myakka Ranchlands' Florida Forever program.

This is the seventh time Sarasota County and SWFWMD have partnered to purchase property in support of Sarasota County's voter approved Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Neighborhood Parklands Program.

Sarasota County Environmental Services staff expects to bring the third and final piece of the deal, the neighboring 3,890-acre Longino Ranch property, to the commission on April 27.

"Today's approval by the county commission moves us into the final stages of a process that began in 2000," said Theresa Connor, executive director, Sarasota County Environmental Services. "By working together with the community, the Southwest Florida Water Management District and the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, we are getting closer to our goal of preserving more than 100,000 acres of natural land in Sarasota County while providing opportunities for eco-tourism and nature education that will benefit everyone for generations."

For more information contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 or visit the Sarasota County Environmental Services Web site at www.scgov.net/EnvironmentalServices.

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