

Sarasota County Forever

Frequently Asked Questions

Continue the Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Parkland Program

This November, Sarasota County voters will decide whether to continue one of the most successful land and water protection programs in Florida. The questions and answers below explain what the program is, what it has accomplished, what it costs, and how to vote.

About the Program

What is the Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Parkland Program?

Since 2000, Sarasota County's Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) and Neighborhood Parkland Acquisition Program (NPP) have protected the natural areas, clean water, wildlife habitat, and open spaces that make Sarasota County special. These are voter-approved, taxpayer-funded programs that allow the County to purchase and protect environmentally sensitive lands and parkland before they are lost to development.

What has the program accomplished so far?

In just over two decades, the program has delivered real, lasting results:

- More than **42,000 acres** of environmentally sensitive land have been protected — 101 properties safeguarded through land purchases and conservation easements.
- **31 properties (about 143 acres)** have been acquired to expand neighborhood parks and improve connections to trails, waterways, and beaches.
- Protected lands provide **safe habitat for threatened and native species** such as gopher tortoises, Florida scrub-jays, West Indian manatees, bobcats, bald eagles, and migratory birds.
- **32 additional environmentally sensitive areas** across the county have been identified for potential future protection.

Why does continuing the program matter now?

Time is of the essence. Sarasota County is one of the fastest-growing counties in Florida. Once natural land is developed, it is gone for good, and land values are rising fast, putting critical parcels out of reach with every passing year. Continuing the program now allows Sarasota County to protect drinking water sources, conserve natural floodwater storage, and preserve remaining open space *before* those opportunities disappear. It is far less expensive to protect land today than to repair the consequences of losing it tomorrow.

What does the program protect, specifically?

The program focuses on the priorities voters care about most:

- **Clean Water:** Protecting land around our water supply helps prevent pollutants from reaching water sources, thus safeguarding drinking water, and filters pollutants from stormwater before it reaches our beaches and bays.
- **Flood Protection:** Conserving forests and wetlands provides natural floodwater storage that helps protect homes and local businesses from flooding during storms.
- **Wildlife and Natural Areas:** Protected habitat keeps native and threatened species, forests, and natural areas intact for future generations.

- **Parks and Open Space:** Neighborhood parkland and open space give residents places to enjoy the outdoors and help counter overdevelopment that diminishes the quality of life.

Who runs the program, and are partners involved?

Sarasota County administers the program. The County also stretches local dollars further by partnering with respected conservation organizations — including the State of Florida, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, Big Waters Land Trust, Trust for Public Land, and The Nature Conservancy — and by leveraging grants, donations, and conservation easements to acquire and manage land at lower cost to taxpayers.

The Cost — This Is NOT a New Tax

Is this a new tax?

No. This is **not a new tax**. This is a **continuation** of the existing Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Parkland Program funding that Sarasota County voters have already approved twice — first in 1999 and again in 2005. Voting YES simply continues a program that is already in place. It does *not* create a new tax, nor does it raise the existing rate.

If it's not new, how is it funded?

The program is funded by an existing ad valorem (property) tax of **not-to-exceed 0.25 mill** — the same rate that has funded the program for years. Continuing the program keeps that existing rate in place through December 31, 2049. It is a renewal of something voters already said yes to, not the addition of something new.

What will it cost the average homeowner?

For the median Sarasota County homesteaded homeowner, the program costs about **\$51 per year — roughly \$4.25 per month**. That is a small price to preserve and protect clean water and some of the last remaining natural areas in Sarasota County — and it is the same modest amount homeowners are already paying today.

Will continuing the program increase my taxes?

No. Continuing the program keeps the existing, voter-approved rate in place. The measure does not increase the millage rate. The cap remains at **not-to-exceed 0.25 mill** — exactly where it is today.

Accountability and Oversight

How do I know the money will be spent wisely?

The program is built around transparency and public accountability so voters can see exactly where every dollar goes:

- **Citizen oversight** to help guide decisions on land protection.
- The ability to **match local dollars** with federal, state, and private funds — stretching taxpayer money further.

Can the funds be used for anything else?

No. The funds are dedicated to acquiring, protecting, and managing environmentally sensitive lands and parkland — the specific purposes spelled out in the ballot questions. They cannot be diverted to unrelated government spending.

On the Ballot: Why There Are TWO Questions

When you reach this measure on your November ballot, you will see **two related questions**. To fully continue and fund the program, vote **YES on both**.

Why do I have to vote on two questions instead of one?

The two questions do two different jobs, and Florida law requires them to be asked separately:

- **Question 1 continues the program itself** — it extends the existing program and its funding through 2049.
- **Question 2 authorizes bonds** — it gives Sarasota County the ability to act quickly and buy important land before prices rise or it is lost to development.

Think of it this way: Question 1 keeps the program running, and Question 2 enables the program to move quickly when an opportunity to protect a key property arises. Both are needed for the program to work at its best — so it takes a YES vote on both.

What does Question 1 do?

Question 1 continues the existing Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Parkland Program — and its existing funding — for 20 more years, through December 31, 2049. It keeps protecting environmentally sensitive lands and continues acquiring and managing parkland and green space for conservation, flood protection, and public recreation. Again, this is a **continuation of an existing program, not a new tax**.

What does Question 2 do?

Question 2 authorizes Sarasota County to issue bonds — up to \$250 million over the life of the program — so it can secure important land *now*, before rising land values or development put those parcels out of reach. The bonds are paid back from the **same existing not-to-exceed 0.25 mill tax** that funds the program. In other words, bonding lets the County protect more land sooner without raising the rate.

Why does the program need bonding authority?

Land prices in Sarasota County are climbing, and the best parcels often come up for sale only once. Bonding lets the county act immediately to protect a critical property rather than waiting years to save up the funds — by which time the land may be more expensive or already developed. It is a practical tool to make every taxpayer dollar go further.

Voting

When is the election?

The measure is on the ballot in the general election on **Tuesday, November 3, 2026**.

Where will I find these questions on my ballot?

The two questions appear near the bottom of the ballot, below the candidate races. Be sure to keep reading all the way down so you don't miss them — and remember to vote YES on **both** questions.

How should I vote to continue the program?

To continue and fully fund the Environmentally Sensitive Lands and Parkland Program, vote:

- **YES** on Question 1 (continue the program)
- **YES** on Question 2 (authorize the bonds)

Has Sarasota County supported measures like this before?

Yes — repeatedly and overwhelmingly. Voters first approved the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) in 1999. Six years later, in 2005, with 80% of the vote, the program was reauthorized and expanded to include the Neighborhood Parkland Acquisition Program (NPP). More recently, voters approved the Legacy Trail extension in 2018 with about 71% of the vote. Sarasota County has a strong track record of saying YES to protecting its natural resources and quality of life.