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Joe Guidry (JG): This is Joe Guidry on February twenty-seventh. I'm interviewing Rob Heath at his beautiful house on the Alafia River. Rob, I'd like to ask you, first, when and where were you born and raised?

Robert Heath (RH): I was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana in the (inaudible).

JG: What brought you to Florida?

RH: Well—(inaudible) out to the Southwest, New Mexico, Colorado, loved it out there. And I had also spent some time in Florida and knew that the Florida environment was extremely diverse and very wildlife-friendly. And my wife said she wanted to be in a place cold, so that kind of narrowed it down. We moved over to Gainesville, looked for work, ended up finding work in Tampa and lived here since '78.

JG: Seventy-eight. And when you originally came here, were you working for the state, rather than Hillsborough County?

RH: That's correct. The first job that I found was an outdoor job that involved (inaudible) was with the state park system (inaudible). And I was with the state parks for a while, and then I was also doing part-time work at the Ybor City Museum¹. While I was at that

¹The Ybor City Museum State Park is situated in the former site of Ybor City's Ferlita Bakery, which was established in 1896 by Cuban-Spanish-Italian immigrant Francisco Ferlita. The museum explores the history of the cigar industry and the Latin community in Tampa during the late 19th century and early 20th century.

museum, this fella came in one day and met me and started talking to me, and he was working for the Florida parks department under the bond program that was developing new parks, like Lettuce Lake and (inaudible) and Upper Tampa Bay. And he said, "I'm from California, and I've been here a couple of years, and I'm ready to go back. But I'm going to tell my boss, Joel Jackson, that he should hire you to replace me," and that was that.

JG: So you were hired by Joel to help with the bond (inaudible).

RH: (inaudible) brochures and show guides, and developing educational displays, especially at Upper Tampa Bay, which has a big nature center. Lettuce Lake has a smaller one. And Alderman's Ford Park has an even smaller one. We put displays in all of those facilities, and that was my role in the park development, was the environmental education.

JG: So you really spearheaded those interpretive centers. You were really the one behind

RH: As far as developing them, yes—

JG: Which, they're still there, still? That must be pretty good.

RH: Yes, they are—the buildings are still there. The displays have all changed. Of course, it's been over 20 years, so you'd expect them to evolve over time.

JG: Yeah. Well, that's good. So how did that evolve? Where did you go from there, after?

RH: The bond program was a temporary program, and we were all considered extended temporary employees. We had full benefits, but as far as civil service was concerned, when the bond program ended, our jobs ended. And, of the six or so employees that were administrative parks bond employees, I'm the only one who stayed on with the parks department. They decided they wanted a park naturalist to run these environmental education programs and oversee the nature centers, and I got that job. Another person went with the solid waste department, and Joel Jackson went with the City of Tampa. We had an architect who went off into the private sector.

JG: Had there ever been a naturalist before, at Hillsborough County?

RH: No.

JG: So you created that position, essentially?

RH: There was no need for one. Prior to that, the parks had no real educational aspects to them, no natural history interpretation, until these new parks were built. And the nature center is one of the main reasons, and Upper Tampa Bay is where I had an office. I was responsible for continuing to develop educational programs, in terms of slide shows that rangers could give and developing interpretive literature for the parks to have available to visitors when they came. We even had a summer program called Fun With Nature, and I was in charge of coordinating that and hiring summer temporaries. We had kids that would attend the recreation centers, and, for one week at a time, the rec centers would (inaudible) park and do a four-day nature program with the temporary employees that I trained, using the parks as the facilities. And that was a lot of fun.

JG: Well, yeah. That was really, kind of—you created a whole program.

RH: Yeah, I did that until the ELAPP program started. Then I was perfectly positioned to be involved with that.

JG: Your responsibilities must have grown. (laughs)

RH: Yeah, initially, I was hoping to develop the guidelines that the—recreational program (inaudible). And then, once we started actually trying to acquire sites, somebody had to go out and evaluate the nominations and see how they would rank on the priority list. We called them environmental site sessions. From our preliminary assessments, (inaudible) passed on to the next step of the process (inaudible). We'd get a full site situated. We did that by (inaudible). The staff of USF was (inaudible) at every stage of the process. So I was the environmental site assessment team leader, and I also helped to present the important findings to the selection committee so that they could rank the sites and then recommend that to the board of county commissioners for approval. And then, finally, the (inaudible) to the business part of it, for the acquisition part.

JG: Well, you, then, must have seen virtually every piece of land that was proposed for ELAPP?

RH: Yes.

JG: And so, you've seen every ELAPP site, and beyond that, every site—

RH: Up until the time I left the county, I was probably the most familiar—more familiar than any other person with every site, if you put them all together. And I had done a physical visit to every single site that was nominated, unless it was an obvious misfit, something that absolutely couldn't meet the criteria. Like, we had one square block of parcels in the city of Tampa (inaudible).

JG: That must have been amusing(??). Of those, can you say which one you think was (inaudible)?

RH: (inaudible) was riverine² and lacustrine lake³, and it had sand pine scrub⁴. So it had everything in between as far as, you know, from dry to wet. And the habitat quality was about the best because it hadn't been impacted by agriculture. There were some small areas that had been farmed, but the majority of it was in its pristine, natural state. It actually included some mine-reclaimed phosphate land at the east end, which we thought wasn't any good for anything but was included in the ownership, so we bought that, designated it as an acquisition of convenience that we could then sell off if we wanted to. And then, after we had it for a while, we realized that the outdoor recreational potential for that was extremely high, especially for mountain biking and that. We could see the value. So it's like, we've got to hang on to that too.

JG: That's great(??). Any parcel you were really disappointed the county was unable to acquire?

RH: Yeah. Those I try to forget about, but yeah. Yeah, we did lose a few, and it was because the notary was in the development business, and that was the purpose for owning the property, and they were hell-bent on doing that. And there were some that were along the Alafia River, in the tributary of English Creek, that would've been really nice additions to some corridors that we were trying to put together. Going east toward Polk County, there was a branch of the creek that was owned by one of the phosphate

²Riverine corridors are the plots of land directly adjacent to rivers. The protection of these landscapes is crucial to preserving a river's watershed and ecology.

³A lacustrine lake, or lacustrine deposit, is a mass of sedimentary rock formations that form at the bottom of ancient lakes; they are typically formed from the deposits of rivers or streams.

⁴Sand pine scrub is a type of Floridian ecosystem composed of a small archipelago of sandy ridges and limestone areas. Sand pine scrubs are found almost exclusively in central and southern Florida.

companies, and they were like, “No, we need that land because mining phosphate is what we do.” And it had some sandhill habitat⁵, which is very rare in Hillsborough County. And so, that got mined. And some stuff along the south part, same thing. The phosphate companies, they move aggressively along the (inaudible) path of the ocean that they have, until they run out of land that’s got phosphate ore. And if they don’t, then they shut down, and that would be devastating to them. You can offer them the value of the land, and they’ll say, “No because even if we get the value of the land, we don’t have anything to mine, we shut down.” So that was inevitable, there’s nothing that we (inaudible).

JG: Tell me about how you first got involved the (inaudible). You were there right on the front, (inaudible). As it initiated, you were key.

RH: Right, as a parks department employee, you needed an environmental education because, at the time, I was the only person in the department who had a degree in environmental sciences. And they actually used a sub-search(??) classification evolved from the environmental protection commission to hire me as an environmental science (inaudible) because, with a master’s degree, I met the minimum qualifying criteria. And they were looking at the pay grade. And most of the qualifying civil service positions that were in recreation had to do with athletics or maintenance or that sort of thing. I was a bad fit for those. And (inaudible) offered me a management position, offering me a nice position as a specialized staff person focusing on environmental education.

So I got the environmental science position, and then when ELAPP started, they were looking for somebody with an environmental background to help set up a land acquisition program for the preservation program. So I was an existing employee that was a perfect fit for that. Initially, we hired one more person (inaudible) when we acquired the first site. And we had to worry about, not just going through the evaluation process and then the acquisition, but now we had to worry about land management. And, fortunately, that site, that would be the dairy farm right next to the Hillsborough River State Park.

So, after the initial acquisition, we were able to negotiate a lease agreement with the park because they loved having that as an addition because, if we hadn’t bought it, it would’ve eventually been a housing development. And they saw that as a valuable effort (inaudible). And they came in and restored that because they were looking for land to qualify for the restoration department of parks and services (inaudible). Public land (inaudible). And the stuff along the Hillsborough River that was partly swamp land (inaudible). You know, here we are, getting land, figuring out what to do with it afterwards (inaudible). The best way to go with the least amount of effort.

⁵Sandhill ecosystems are characterized by widely spaced pine trees with a ground cover of various grasses and herbs. Sandhill habitats can be found in north and central Florida.

JG: Did you develop a lot of those partnerships, in ELAPP, that really benefited the environment?

RH: We did. We absolutely did. We were always looking for a ways to leverage what management capacity we had, which was very little at first, but it grew over time, and now it's significant. But we had agreements like that with the City of Tampa. When a project was one that they were interested in, we would say, "We'll buy it, if you guys agree to manage it." And there was one with HCC, Hillsborough Community College, on English Creek, where they had an environmental center on land that they owned, about 100 acres. We tripled the size of that site by buying more land adjacent to it, and allowed them to incorporate it into the nature center and manage the whole thing as a Hillsborough Community College environmental study area.

And we did the same thing with Temple Terrace on a couple of sites along the Hillsborough River. We would buy them; they were adjacent to existing Temple Terrace parks, and they would just expand the boundaries of their parkland and manage it, of course, under a lease agreement. You know, we held the title; they managed it. And there were probably a couple of others, too, that don't come to mind right now (inaudible). Water management district on sites that they also targeted under Save Our Rivers. We would share the costs of the site and (inaudible). If they build on land, they own it (inaudible).

JG: (inaudible) in charge of all this land; other than see that it's managed properly, what was the biggest challenge you faced in that?

RH: It was, probably, conflicts with the adjacent property owners. They came from, in one case—actually, two cases that were really prominent that I can think of, large agricultural operations that had a very negative opinion of anything the county was trying to do because they were upset with wetland regulations, and we didn't have anything to do with that. But we're Hillsborough County, so they were a thorn in our side. They opposed everything we did.

They would say things like, "You're killing all the animals when you burn." One of the most important things you can do to maintain the habitat is prescribed burning⁶, and they didn't like habitat restoration (inaudible). Afterwards, you get more wildlife (inaudible). You may not be seeing the animals because—you can see a lot of animals in an open pasture, but there's not as many animals there as there is in a natural habitat providing cover. Naturally, you (inaudible)—might be able to develop the wetlands sections of their property because, as you can see, we're saying, "This is something you can't touch.

⁶Controlled or prescribed burning is a practice sometimes used for forest management.

You've got to have a buffer, not just protect that wetland area but the buffer around it where you can't plant."

So we had some opposition. And occasionally, on two separate parcels that were in areas that were suburban, that had residential developments next to them, we had neighbors that didn't want to see a fence because it disturbed their view. And yet, they were encroaching with their landscaping and the recreational equipment (inaudible). We were saying, "We've got to have a fence so that we can stop the encroachments." And then, you know, the county commissioner's phones would light up because they didn't want a fence in their backyard.

JG: How did that work out?

RH: You know, it favors—surprisingly enough, one of the strongest advocates (inaudible). Makes perfect sense to me, so, you know, (inaudible).

JG: (inaudible) that's surprising. Although, she was a supporter of EPC⁷ and carried it in the state legislature and everything. Any other—some of the complaints you would hear—it's a very popular program, but some of the points you hear is, "Well, the land's not being managed adequately. We have exotic plants that are going wild." Was that overblown, or was there any truth to that?

RH: It's a double-edged sword. (inaudible) It's like they had to staff ELAPP(??). And the people that manage the regular parks don't have that training in the maintenance of it. So you're asking for funding for site management, and the question is, why do you need it? Because these lands have all these needs, in terms of controlling invasives⁸ [sic], prescribed burning, site security, even in resource-based recreational development, you've got to have trails.

And, at a certain point, volunteers can do so much, and it's not enough. So they turn around, and they say, "Well, we shouldn't be buying these lands if you don't have the capacity to properly manage them." And so, that would work against the acquisition side. And so, if you pushed too hard for more management, they would use that as an argument, if they were so inclined to say that we need to cut back on the acquisition. And my argument against that philosophy would be that, even if you were to have no

⁷EPC stands for Environmental Protection Commission of Hillsborough County.

⁸An invasive species is any living organism—plant, fungus, bacteria, or animal—that is not native to a specific ecosystem and causes harm to its environment, ecosystem, or surrounding human community as it spreads.

management, you're buying tracts of lands to keep them from being turned into housing developments.

And you're only buying the part of the land that has high environmental value, that's made it past our rigorous qualifying process and gone through the selection process and been vetted and ranked and Class A, or whatever, really important to buy. You buy that and do nothing to manage it, you're better off than if you lost it for development because it provides all these values, what we call ecosystem services. Like air quality, flood protection, water quality, groundwater recharge, and recreation.

If you can still go on these sites, and they have existing roads, and you're not putting in a Florida trail system, they're still reasonable for recreational value. Some of them provide outlets for fishing in the bay, and they're just fantastic (inaudible). And there's not that much in Hillsborough County. You know, we had to be really picky. And that's why some of the larger sites are only in the couple of thousand acres, not tens and twenties of thousands like you might find in some place like Volusia County, where they have a much smaller population, so.

pause in recording

JG: So we were talking about the management, running the (inaudible)—commissioners and so forth, that it's been such a popular program and that it was supported overwhelmingly by the public?

RH: We weren't sure, at first, how successful we were going to be. And that built a lot of caution when the citizens got together to try to formulate the first (inaudible) referendum. How much to ask for, how long they can go for. And so, that's why they came up with a four-year referendum for up to 20,000 dollars, a quarter mil [sic] inside the ten-mil [sic] cap. That said, they would expire after three years of successful land acquisition. We had built up a track record, but we've got to extend this.

What do we do now? And then some people would say, "Well, let's just stick with what works for another four years. You're going to get"—(inaudible) were outvoted. But the track record was the important thing (inaudible). Promised that we were going to not use condemnation. We never did, never have. It's a voluntary program. Landowners were not forced to participate. And some other aspects of the program that were promoted from the beginning were demonstrated, and it was not just—we kept our promise, but we've showed how successful it was.

And the one, single factor that, I think, demonstrated how broad the appeal was, was that, during those first four years, we had a seven-member board that included two opposites. At one end, on the far right, was Jim Sulvey(??), and at the other end—what you might call the far left—was Jan Platt⁹. And the only thing they were voted together on were ELAPP issues. And we had these unanimous seven-member board decisions, in most cases, with ELAPP. Especially after (inaudible) got elected, and we didn't have Hayden Port [sic] on the board; she was a naysayer. But Jim Sulvey(??) and Jan Platt hardly ever agreed on anything, but they agreed on ELAPP issues.

JG: That's great. Were there any critics, early on? Any opposition that had a strong voice?

RH: You know, the only people who voiced opposition early on, I think, would be people in the agriculture community, who just had philosophical difficulties with the idea of the government buying land. And one of the things that people in that group would say was that we need these vacant parcels of land because we are losing our agricultural lands to development, and these natural areas are potential, future agricultural lands that we can expand into when we lose our existing agricultural lands to these housing developments. And, you know, in a sense, that's true.

JG: But we're losing out natural lands.

RH: Yes. The natural lands would disappear all that much faster. And, looking at the enormous, overwhelming public support for protecting these natural areas from development—whether it's residential or agricultural development, people don't want to see these lands disappear.

JG: Well, you've been in Hillsborough County a long time. What were some of the changes that you saw that made you feel like ELAPP was essential?

RH: There was an early nomination. This was before I was very familiar with the outlying parts of the county. And it was a tract of land on, uh—I don't want to give(??) it away(??)—a tract of land on Balm Boyette Road that was a big chunk of sand pine scrub. Then I went out there, and I looked at it, and I said, "This is fantastic. I didn't know anything like this was out here." And it was way out in the middle of nowhere.

This one road that went through it was a paved road, but it was real rough. It was, like, obviously, not heavily traveled, didn't have a center line or anything like that. This is terrific that we can find something like this before development comes anywhere near it

⁹An interview with Jan Platt is available as part of the ELAPP Oral History Project collection.

because, you know, it's going to be relatively easy to acquire. And then it got on the list, and it went from the 500 acres that this guy had nominated, which was a patch of scrub, to a full tract, which was 5,000 acres, which included multiple patches of scrub, plus pine flat woods, plus wetlands, and then that piece that was mined for phosphate.

That was our flagship, virtually, the flagship tract of land, the Balm Boyette scrub. As soon as it got on the approved list, we found out that it was owned by a huge corporation that was a pipeline corporation called the Williams Company, and it was under a DRI¹⁰ application process. It was being submitted to the Department of Community Affairs as this huge DRI development. It would've had tens of thousands of homes, and we had no idea because it was early in the process. And so, it became a nightmare.

And it kind of caused a lot of grey areas that you had to be careful which hat you were wearing because there was the development approval process that was ongoing at the planning commission and the county planning department and the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council. They were all evaluating this DRI application. And the county's acquisition effort, which was through a real estate department, that was a voluntary process. They didn't have to even talk to us if they were dead set on getting the DRI approving developing it.

But their DRI application was horrible. It just completely glossed over all the environmental resources, and they didn't even submit plant surveys because they said they didn't have to, even though that was in the comprehensive plan guidelines for a DRI. And it had a large population of Florida golden asters¹¹, which was on the federally endangered species list. And so, we were feeding the information to the planners because we had done surveys, and we knew what was out there.

And they were using their consultants to say there wasn't anything out there. I was accused of (inaudible). I'm just getting information, you know? (inaudible) They had a couple of contentious hearings with the Hillsborough County Planning Commission. And, after about two years of going back and forth, they withdrew their DRI and negotiated with the county and the state of Florida. By that time, (inaudible). Thirty-some million, they sold it for 16 million [dollars] (inaudible).

¹⁰DRI stands for development of regional impact, which is any large-scale development that affects more than one county. Common DRI categories are airports, hotels, and residential developments. DRI applications are processed and evaluated by regional planning councils, such as the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council.

¹¹The Florida golden aster is a perennial herb with leaves that are covered in dense, white, short-wooly hairs and can sometimes bloom small yellow flowers. The species is categorized as endangered by the *Federal Register*.

JG: Of course, now, you wouldn't have the state in on that planning oversight. The state has gotten rid of that—

RH: There's no department of community of affairs, no comprehensive planning, no nothing.

JG: You have no backup now.

RH: Yeah.

JG: You would never be able to, probably, stop it.

RH: All the county has is a checkbook.

JG: Yeah. So that's amazing. What do you see as the biggest challenge to ELAPP in the future, going forward?

RH: Uh, (inaudible) trying to figure out how to (inaudible) and consolidate what they've got so that it's able to really protect the resources long-term. And the main threat is impacts of adjacent land use and the ability to do the management that you need to do. And it's not easy to prescribe burns when you're in a populated area, so some of these areas that were out in the middle of nowhere are now surrounded by development. And, no matter how much effort you put into educating your local community on the importance of prescribed burning, in Florida, not a day goes by that you don't have new residents moving in that don't have that information.

And so, you're constantly dealing with the negative perception and resistance to one of your most important management tools, which is prescribed burning. And there's a lot of pressure for inappropriate recreational uses. There was a tract of land on Morris Bridge Road, which was county-owned, but it wasn't owned by ELAPP; it was owned by, I think, another agency—the water department, who knows what? Anyway, it's a nice piece of land, and the county was looking for replacing athletic facilities that were not good enough. They weren't big enough.

JG: Yeah, I remember that.

RH: And it was in the New Tampa area. And they wanted places to have soccer and baseball and so forth, and they targeted that site. And there was a proposal to protect it but swap it with an existing SWFMD¹²-owned site called Oakridge, out on the North end of Morris Bridge Road, near Pasco County. The idea was to swap. And it was like, well, that would set a dangerous precedent; that you can take an existing preserve that the county acquired with joint funds with SWFMD, that's undergone restoration, like replacing the trails, and it's on the river; it connects to River State Park on the other side.

You want to swap that with this land because it would serve better for recreational facilities. You want to use preserved lands for soccer fields. It's resource-based recreation, like fishing, hiking, camping, horseback riding, mountain biking, not ball fields. We don't do that. And there was this big, contentious back-and-forth. And the county eventually decided they weren't going to do that.

They found another site on state-owned land along the bypass canal, which was just much more conveniently located to more people, and developed the soccer facilities there. And they ended up adding that 60-acre tract—that was the contentious one—to ELAPP. I think they reimbursed whatever agency owned it. So, now, we've got additional conservation land, didn't give anything up, didn't do a land swap, didn't violate the promises that we made to the people when the program was founded, and have soccer fields too.

JG: Yeah, I remember when all that was happening. That could have easily gone the other way.

RH: Yeah that would have set a real bad precedent.

JG: Was there anything else I should've asked you that I didn't, about the development of ELAPP? I'm sure you're very—you should be very proud of everything.

RH: Yeah, I think I can elaborate on that really good question you asked about us going forward (inaudible). Dealing with the adverse impacts of these adjacent lands (inaudible). And there was also the need to make connections between existing tracts, and, in many cases, you don't have anything there that qualifies because of its habitat value; it only qualifies because it makes connections. And so, that's a new area to go into. And the idea that they were looking at there, which is a really good one, was lessen the fee. Because

¹²SWFMD is the Southwest Florida Water Management District, a regional agency of Southwest Florida responsible for planning and regulating the consumption of water resources, the use and protection of wetlands, and other water-related activities.

you don't need these lands to be owned outright as preservation lands if they don't have the values.

They can continue to be what they are, which could be relatively intensive agriculture, like citrus groves or croplands. Or they could be low-intensity agriculture, like rangeland or even improved pasture. But those form much better connections than housing developments, which are complete barriers. So broaden the qualifying criteria to include lands like that, but only at a lessened fee, so that you're just buying the development rights. And somebody else continues to own them and operate them as whatever they're using them for now, just continue that use.

JG: Everybody wins on that.

RH: Exactly. The county doesn't have to manage it.

JG: Is there still quite a bit of land that could be acquired by ELAPP, any major parcels? Or do you think the program pretty has much gathered everything that's possible?

RH: It's harder and harder to find relatively large sites that qualify outright, and they've either been lost to development or mining, whatever. That's the point of development. Or they've been broken up and partially developed, so they're not as good as they used to be. Or they're just completely gone. So you're not going to find any more Balm Boyette Scrubs (inaudible), Cockroach Bay Islands, or, you know, the Lower Hillsborough, which used to be called the Cone Ranch. That's an interesting one, 12,000 acres. It was owned by the water department. Now, finally, it's under conservation because they figured out that it wouldn't make a good well field anyway.

JG: Yeah, and they were trying to say they couldn't sell it for less than market value and that whole—

RH: Yeah, yeah because they were an enterprise or whatever. Strange stuff. So there's no big prizes that I'm aware of that are still out there. IMC, which became Mosaic¹³, has a lot of stuff in the southeast part of the county that they're supposedly going to mine, restore, and then either keep and own in perpetuity. Or they could, theoretically, turn it over to the state or county as restored land that is valuable because it's a corridor along that river.

¹³The Mosaic Company is a crop nutrition company that resulted from a merger between IMC Global, a mining and production company, and the crop nutrition division of Cargill, an international food conglomerate.

JG: I mean, they can do pretty decent stuff, in terms of wetlands restoration.

RH: Yeah, looking back at some of the stuff that was never reclaimed and you think, “Oh yeah.” I’ll take the reclaimed stuff any day, even though it’s not like—

JG: It’s not as good as having it natural, but it’s still got a—a lot of the ducks seem to love it, you know?

RH: It can support the wildlife populations and very well serve as a corridor, which, as you develop, you may not have as many listed species, like (inaudible). This is an interesting thing, you know. We used to have numerous, little, tiny populations of scrub jays in the county. Now there are two, and one may be only one bird.

JG: Really?

RH: At the Golden Astor Scrub we have a scrub jay that we’re aware of, and then there’s another one down along Little Manatee [River] that’s on private land. And all the other ones have blinked out.

JG: Didn’t there used to be some at Flatwoods Park, up there at, uh—?

RH: I’m not sure about Flatwoods. It’s possible that there were. But they used to turn up every now and then at any site that had large areas of scrub, but there are so many factors involved with maintaining the populations of scrub jays. I know, at Little Manatee River State Park, for instance, you’d see them when you were hiking on the trail there. Perfect habitat.

JG: Yeah.

RH: But not sufficient, for some reason, to maintain a viable population (inaudible) golden asters. Unless they are relocating from other parts of the state where there’s populations that are equally endangered that are not being managed. I think they were trying to do that a while ago (inaudible).

JG: Well, it must have been interesting to be a naturalist in a rapidly growing county like Hillsborough. It would be easy to become discouraged, if not embittered, but you seem to manage to not do that. How was it, working there? I mean, to some degree, you've got to feel a great deal of satisfaction at what your county was able to do.

RH: Yes, actually, yeah. It was a great. And one of the reasons that I left was (inaudible) —aspects of the community, mostly in the agricultural (inaudible). And we were getting less support from our own administration for a variety of reasons. And it was things like, well, “Why can't that site be used for more intensive agriculture use? Why can't you lease it to that guy who wants to grow strawberries?” That kind of thing. And the first 15 years of the program, it was like, no way, that's ridiculous.

That would violate our first basic tenet. That particular site that you want to grow strawberries on, that is a restoration site (inaudible) weak spot in the Alafia River Corridor. We need to get habitat in there, which we were. If you want to undo that, then let some guy have it because he's got (inaudible). That sort of thing kept coming up more and more, and I finally said, “I think I'd rather do this from the private sector side.” So I retired and started a nonprofit, and my intent was to be an advocate for the county, which I didn't think we were getting enough of from the private sector, especially in the environmental community because people didn't have enough knowledge of these issues.

And I thought I would come in from that direction and support the program. And I did that for a few years, but then the administration changed, and the parks department got an idiot in charge. He didn't last long because the board kicked him out. They realized he was an idiot. But that kind of shot my effort down. I said, “I'm just going to go off and do other nonprofit stuff.” And so, I started partnering with Florida Audubon¹⁴, and a friend of mine who has another nonprofit called Wildlands Conservation¹⁵, which does a lot of interesting work with gopher tortoises and mitigation banks¹⁶. It's working with that. And this kind of took me away from the ELAPP stuff, which was a shame—

JG: Well, are those pressures still on the department?

RH: No.

¹⁴The National Audubon Society is an organization devoted to conserving and protecting birds, other wildlife, and natural habitats through its local chapters.

¹⁵Wildlands Conservation is a non-profit organization that focuses on conservation planning, land management, land protection, research, banking, education and outreach. The organization works on conservation projects throughout the state.

¹⁶Mitigation banks are protected or restored wetlands whose ecological purpose is to offset or compensate for expected adverse impacts to similar, nearby ecosystems.

JG: So that was a prior administration that wanted to lease out—

RH: It took over 10 years, but now the ELAPP program is like a model for what I would want it to be, if I was still there. With a really strong management program, and they've branched out into a really good public outreach program, doing a lot of ecotourism-type activities, encouraging people to go hiking with the annual ELAPP calendar photo contest, things like that.

They've got people who are not just trying to do the basic necessities like we always were, with site security and exotic control and prescribed burning and putting out brushfires, literally and figuratively. Well, actually we're not trying to put out those kinds of brushfires, we're trying to start them. But the program, now, is more independent. They've got (inaudible)—department under conservation services that functions independently of recreation and athletics, which is the way it should be.

JG: That's great. Well, Rob, is there anything else you'd like to add to that? I don't want to—

RH: I'm thinking. Not really. I've thought, a couple of times, I need to do a farewell tour and go out and hit these sites that I haven't seen in a number of years and walk the trails. And I don't have much time left. I've got about four weeks left.

JG: Well, let me know when you do it. Maybe I can go with you. I'd love to go, at least, on some of those top, uh—

RH: It's starting to get hot. I need to do it soon. You know, one site I haven't done is, since I did the original session, is that Lake Gandy all the way up in the northwest part of the county. And they've got a trails system there; it's geared towards horses. But I think it connects to a part of the Brooker Creek side on the Pinellas County side. And I haven't been back to Cypress Creek. I don't know if you've ever hiked in there, off of Van Dyke Road.

JG: Oh, you know, I haven't.

RH: And, let's see some of the other ones. That's not Cypress Creek; that's Cypress Creek Headwaters for some reason. The one that sails west toward Lake Tarpon. So that's part of the Pinellas County Watershed. But the Cypress Creek site, that's a new camp over at—

JG: I've been there.

RH: And supposedly, there's a trail system in there that people are using, but the county's website gives you a bad link, and you can't really see how wide of a trail that is(??). I've got to talk to them about that.

JG: Well, give me a call when you go to do this.

RH: Yeah.

end of interview