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Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP)
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Emily Holbrook (EH): It is June 14th, 2019. I am here with Forest Turbiville, and we are at the County Board of Commissioners—

Forest Turbiville (FT): County Center.

EH: The county center, okay. And we are here to do the oral history interview for the ELAPP collection. Okay, first, if I could just have you say and spell your name for us.

FT: Sure. It's Forest Turbiville: F-o-r-e-s-t T-u-r-b-i-v-i-l-l-e.

EH: Perfect. Thank you. All right, so we're really interested in just preserving the history and the perspectives of people involved in ELAPP and just general conservation in the area. We have a collection currently, and we're just trying to expand it now that, you know, Jan Platt's no longer with us and everything. Sort of where ELAPP is currently and where it's going, and what conservation in the area looks like going forward.

FT: Sure. Absolutely.

EH: So my first question is, how long have you been in the Hillsborough County, Tampa Bay area?

FT: I was born and raised in Hillsborough County.

EH: Wow.

FT: Yeah, 1971, and went to school here—went to Jesuit High School. I graduated in 1989, from there went to a place called New College in Sarasota—back then, it was New College of USF, now

it's New College of Florida—and graduated with a bachelor's in environmental studies, and then came back up to USF in '94 and graduated with my master's in geography in '96. And I actually started here with the county as an intern in 1995, and from there, in 1996, went to the Water Management District. Worked there for seven years with the SWIM [Surface Water Improvement and Management] program, doing habitat-restoration projects all around Tampa Bay, so working very closely with the ELAPP program.

In fact, I'd probably say 80 percent of what I did was working on ELAPP sites, trying to restore those sites. And [I] left the district in 2003 to come here and supervise the ELAPP program and the land-management side of things, and I've been here ever since. So now I'm director of our own department. We call it the Conservation and Environmental Lands Management Department, and we were created in 2014.

EH: So can you tell me what it was like growing up in this area?

FT: It was—it was great. I grew up in South Tampa, Temple Terrace, Carrollwood—three or four different areas around town—so I got to know most of the county, in particular, you know, central-western Hillsborough County. And it wasn't till I came to Hillsborough County government in 1995, that I really got the broader perspective of the county, especially, like, north, east, central, and south. So I was able to see a lot of environmental lands that I was not exposed to growing up in the city, so to speak.

EH: What kind of environmental lands are you talking about?

FT: Well, areas like Balm Boyette—the Balm Boyette Scrub Preserve in central Hillsborough County. Hillsborough River State Park, which is actually a state park, not an ELAPP site. But of course, we manage most of the properties around that as the Wilderness Park. So I was able to see that. Areas along Little Manatee River. So just a lot of areas that I never really thought about going to. I mean, even though it was still in Hillsborough County, when you grow up in the city, you just don't—you don't really think about going beyond your normal everyday pattern sometimes. So seeing the rest of Hillsborough County when I first got on board was, I think, really important because it made me realize how much was still left, environmentally, out there—had not been developed or converted to some other land use. And of course, when you're in the city, most of it has been converted to some kind of housing or commercial development or whatever.

EH: So speaking on, like, the development and things like that, could you maybe speak about some of the changes or seeing the development of the area?

FT: Yeah. I mean, over my time here, I've seen a lot. I mean, I remember when I lived in Carrollwood—Carrollwood basically ended at the post office there at Stall Road and Dale Mabry [Highway]. There was really nothing beyond that. Certainly not Northdale, not New Tampa. Lutz was very small. Town 'n' Country was just starting to get going. Northwest Hillsborough was still very rural. Brandon was just getting started as well. So I mean, there—Tampa was a much smaller city when I was a child, you know, even into my teenage years, and then it seemed like around

probably the late '80s, early '90s, it really started to explode, and you got the city or—not city but the expansion of the New Tampa area, going up Bruce B. Downs and all of that.

And so you've seen a lot of development come in not just within Tampa proper, but also Brandon, [and] more recently, Riverview, Ruskin, Apollo Beach. So in a great sense, with the ELAPP program, it is a—still—a race against time to try to acquire some of these ELAPP-approved parcels before they get developed, especially when development is occurring so rapidly like it has been the last four or five years.

EH: So, what really got you involved in environmentalism and conservation? Why did you decide to major in environmental science?

FT: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, growing up I wanted to be—at some point—a lawyer. I wanted to be a car designer. At one point, I wanted to be an architect. But I think the one common theme there is I always liked putting things together. Whether you're talking mentally or physically, I like to be able to put pieces of the puzzle together, no matter what I'm dealing with. And so back in 1988, there was a big series of wildfires in Yellowstone.¹ You probably have heard about it, at least on TV. And so as I was watching that and, you know, devastating wildfires, over millions of acres within Yellowstone—I don't know, that just sparked something in me, like, wow, you know, that's—of course, at the time, I thought it was a terrible thing, and now it looks sort of like a good thing. And I'll talk to you about that later.

But at the time, I just thought that's terrible. The environment's getting hurt. It's hurting the animals. It's hurting the plant life. Because, of course, you look out and you see all these charred acres—trees are dead. So I really don't know, but that sparked something in me, like, maybe I—maybe that's what I need to be doing. Maybe I need to be working on the side of protecting the environment, instead of thinking about being an architect and developing buildings and things like that. And so that's sort of my first memory. I was probably 16 or 17 years old when that occurred, and so that changed my perspective from wanting to do all those other things that I talked about to going more toward the environment.

Now, I still kind of wanted to be an attorney. My dad was an attorney. So I thought, well, maybe I could be like an environmental lawyer, that might be cool. And so I kind of went into college with that thought process, is that I'll get my degree in environmental studies or conservation biology or whatever it might be, and then become a lawyer. But of course, the more I got into the environmental studies part of it, I really enjoyed it. And I thought to myself, Where can I make the most difference? Is it going to be at the attorney level? I mean, there's tens of thousands of attorneys out there. And it's not that you can't make a difference being an attorney, but where can I make the most difference, especially locally, here in my hometown with just an environmental studies degree, or perhaps a master's degree as well.

So I started reading articles about the ELAPP program in the newspaper. So the media was very important, because if I hadn't read about those articles, you know, talking about the acquisition of

¹ In June 1988, Yellowstone National Park caught fire. Fires continued until November, when winter snows extinguished the remaining flames. By the end, more than 25,000 firefighters were called to help and 1.2 million acres were scorched.

the Balm Boyette Scrub Preserve or other natural areas through the ELAPP program, I may never have even known what the ELAPP program was. So reading those articles back then, in the *Tampa Tribune*, really exposed me to the ELAPP program, and I thought, How cool is that?² You know, I can use my degree to actually help in some way. I didn't really know what way at the time, but in some way to protect what's left of Hillsborough County.

And once I started looking into ELAPP more and more, and I read the annual report and saw which sites were approved for purchase, and started getting interested in the concept of wildlife corridors, island biogeography theory, and things like that, really thought, you know what, I think this is where I can make my difference. And so I decided to intern with Hillsborough County, with the ELAPP program. I did that in the summer of '95, and the rest is history.

EH: So your priority moving back into the Tampa area was to join ELAPP, and to do that?

FT: I was very interested in the USF geography program for my master's degree, and I liked it because it was kind of interdisciplinary. And at the time, USF didn't have a bona fide environmental studies or environmental science program like they do now. I think that came into being around 1998, 1999, somewhere in there. So if you wanted to be an environmental studies major, as opposed to like hardcore biology or hardcore geology or something like that, you went into geography.

And what I liked about geography was it was very multidisciplinary, so I could study soils. I could study biogeography. I could study climatology. All sorts of cool stuff that relates to our environment, and to a certain degree, what I do here every day. So I really liked that, and I did a master's thesis. My master's thesis was actually on a little site here in South Tampa called the South MacDill 48. And it's a 48-acre—I call it “forest fragment”—that's completely surrounded by development in South Tampa, right near MacDill Air Force Base, just north of MacDill.

And I wanted to specifically look at the effects of habitat fragmentation on that parcel, because that parcel had been fragmented for about 70 years but not yet developed. And it was purchased through ELAPP in 1992. So the great thing is, is when I started on my master's thesis in '95, and into 1996, it was already protected, so I could go out there and walk it and do my studies and all that. So that's what I did my master's thesis on, was the negative impacts of development—surrounding development—on a nature preserve. And I looked at soils. I looked at flora. I looked at fauna. I looked at the effects of exclusion of fire, basically, you know, it not having prescribed fire for probably decades, and looked at how those altered both the habitat, the water quality, and the soil chemistry of the site.

EH: Wow, that's amazing.

FT: Yeah, that's pretty cool.

EH: Yeah. So then you've been in the ELAPP ever since?

² The *Tampa Tribune* was a daily newspaper for the Tampa Bay area from 1895 until 2016, when it was sold to the *Tampa Bay Times*.

FT: Ever since. Yeah, ever since. And I did leave for seven years—I went to “swift mud.”³ But like I mentioned, I worked with the SWIM program, which worked very closely with the ELAPP program, and pretty much all the protected sites that you see along Tampa Bay: Cockroach Bay Preserve, Wolf Branch, Fred and Idah Schultz Preserve, Apollo Beach Nature Preserve, the Kitchen [Nature Preserve]. I was either the lead project manager or maybe second to the lead project manager on most of those restoration projects. So I don’t know if you’ve heard of Brandt Henningsen—Dr. Henningsen?

EH: Yeah.

FT: But Brandt and I worked very, very closely, along with Tom Ries, on a lot of those individual restoration projects around Tampa Bay. So it was great experience for me because not only did I get to follow a restoration project from beginning to end, but I also got to learn, like, the contract side of things, the—sort of the, I guess, mid- to upper-level management of those projects, learning how to work with budgets, getting grants, and all that. So it wasn’t just the technical knowledge that I was able to apply to that. It was everything else that I was learning at the same time, which is really helping me now, especially, like, from a budget standpoint as director. You know, you get to learn about all the finances and stuff like that.

EH: So in SWIM, you were heavily involved in ELAPP already?

FT: Yes.

EH: But could you tell me a little bit about then going back into ELAPP, and how you managed to get your way up to director?

FT: Yeah, yeah, it was really cool. So I came in, in 2003, as environmental supervisor over what was then called the Resource Management section, okay? And we only had maybe 18 employees at the time—17, 18 employees—and that was to manage about 38,000 acres of property. That’s a lot.

EH: Wow. That’s a lot.

FT: Yeah, so, you know. And I had never really been a manager before. I’d never managed people, so that was a very new thing to me, you know, to have my own staff and to not just focus on all of, like, the cool things that I love to do. But now you’ve got to manage people, and there’s a lot of pros and there’s some cons with that, too—you’ve got to manage your personnel. And so, I learned that, and I really kind of learned that on the fly. But I think what helped me is just having a positive attitude, and just understanding—just understanding people in general—understanding they’re going to have good days, they’re going to have bad days, this and that.

³ “Swift mud” is the nickname for the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD).

So one of the first things I did when I came in—and again, I had no real experience, I kind of just used my gut on this—is I sat down with each individual, and I said, “All right what are you currently doing here with the organization? What is your primary job? What do you like about it? What do you not like about it, and what would you like to be doing?” And I got great feedback from every single employee, and I realized that we had some people maybe working on grants that hated working on grants, but they really love prescribed fire—they wanted to do that. And I had some people working in the field, who really would have been better working in the office, using the brainpower, so to speak.

So I rearranged things a little bit based on those discussions, and I think we became more efficient over the next two to three years. In 2006, the regional parks manager of what we now call our “conservation parks”—so these are your bigger parks, like Flatwoods Park, Lake Park, Lake Rogers, areas like that—he retired, and so the director at the time decided to merge the regional parks section with ELAPP, okay? So I was doing ELAPP, but now you've got this other big section here, and they're going to merge together. So I thought, well, you know, why not? I'm just going to apply for that new job, which was a higher-level job because now you're managing all the parks as well, and I'm going to see what happens. Well, I applied for it, and I got it.

EH: Nice.

FT: Yeah, yeah. So after three years of just managing ELAPP, I now managed the ELAPP program as well as all the conservation parks. And so I was section manager, and then later it changed to the title of division manager, over the regional parks—what we call the Regional Parks/Conservation Services section—the conservation services being all the ELAPP sites, okay? So I was over both. Then, later on, that included marine safety, the Bakas Equestrian Center, and some other things.

So from 2006 to 2014, I was section/division manager over all those functions. And in 2014, our then-director, Jack Carlisle, decided to move to North Carolina, and so there was a vacancy for director of what was then called the Parks, Recreation, and Conservation Department, okay? It was a very big department, okay? So if you can imagine the director of that department was over ELAPP, regional parks, marine safety, Bakas Equestrian Center, 160 non-program parks—meaning neighborhood parks—all recreation centers throughout the county, all the athletic facilities throughout the county, and the therapeutics program.

EH: Wow.

FT: So imagine having to have a director that knows everything about all those different components of your department. It was crazy. The department, in my opinion, and the opinion many others, had just grown so large over the years—which is not necessarily a bad thing—that's good, that your department grows. But in the business world, you know, of looking at company stocks and things like that, whenever a company gets away from their core mission, they call it “diworsification” instead of “diversification,” and that's kind of where I thought our department was, okay?

We're doing a therapeutics program where you're working with handicapped children, which is awesome. That's awesome, under a traditional parks-and-recreation-type program. But yet, you're doing prescribed burning on ELAPP lands. One has absolutely nothing to do with the other, okay? So when Jack Carlisle left, I had the opportunity—just very lucky opportunity—to meet with our new assistant county administrator, Dexter Barge, who's still my boss. And I pitched the idea to him, and I had been thinking about it for many years—I pitched the idea that we need to break the departments in two.

Not that they wouldn't still work together, okay? But that it would allow someone like myself, who's got experience on the conservation parks, ELAPP side of things, more of the natural—how do you say it—the natural lands, the more passive uses, you know, hiking, fishing, bird watching, nature study, things like that. It would allow me to utilize my expertise, and my staff's as well, to focus on that, and then you could have another professional come in as the parks and recreation director, who knows about how to manage youth athletics, recreation centers, therapeutics programs, all those things that you really need a professional to do. And another reason I told him that I felt like it was a good idea to break the department into two is because everything that the director—and, by the way, I was interim director over that one department for a year.

EH: Okay. Yeah.

FT: Okay? So I can speak from experience, too—is that everything was reactive, okay? So you get multiple complaints a day, “This court needs to be resurfaced,” get a complaint over here, complaint over here. So all day long, you're just dealing with nothing but putting fires out—all day long. And it's very—it was very reactive. You could never be proactive on anything. So I told Mr. Barge, I said, “Listen, from the standpoint of being productive and really giving both of these areas the attention they deserve, you really need a director for each one.” Because in my case, being director over ELAPP and conservation parks, now I can focus on how to shape that—how would I even say it—that department, or that entity, that focus of the county.

Because for many, many years, when you looked at the old parks and recreation, or Parks, Recreation, and Conservation Department—typically, whenever we would submit our decision units in the budget process—I'll just give you a quick example, probably back in 2005, 2006. It was right when I was hired as section manager over both regional parks and ELAPP. I think I submitted, probably, 12 decision units for the budget, okay? And that's how we develop our two-year budget. You write a decision unit, you put down what your needs are for that particular area. Say I needed three more positions for a prescribed burning crew or something like that, I would write it out, I'd put the justification—the money that I would need.

Well, the turning point for me, at least mentally, when it came to this department, Parks, Recreation, and Conservation, was when I realized that the director at the time, which was not Jack Carlisle—it was a different director—had put all of the regional parks and all of the ELAPP decision units down at the very bottom of the batch, okay? And the reason he did that is because he was a traditional parks and recreation guy—athletics, recreation. So that was his preference. And so, all of those decision units got ranked at the very top of our priority list, which, of course, then you submit to county administration, and then they rank those along with all the other departments. Well, if you're at the very bottom of the batch of your own department, your chances are almost none that you're going to get funded for anything.

So once I saw that the 12 or 13 decision units that both myself and my staff had worked very, very hard on to put together—put a lot of thought and energy into—once I saw those were between, I think, out of 56 decision units that were submitted by our department, it was between number 43 and 56. I realized at that point something has to change. That was back in 2005, 2006, so I'd been here three or four years. But even then, I knew, at some point, if I ever get the opportunity—and luckily that opportunity came about when Mr. Carlisle left in 2014—if I ever get the opportunity to tell someone that this department needs to be split in two, I am going to take that opportunity.

Well, luckily, talking with Mr. Barge, he felt the same way. He understood the rationale. I put a PowerPoint presentation together for him, which we reviewed together. He presented it to Mr. Merrill, our county administrator, and a couple of others. You know, talking about how the county had grown and this and that, the department had grown with it, the whole “diworsification” thing, you know, this has nothing to do with this. And so he presented that PowerPoint to the county administration. They said, We love it; we think it makes sense. And then, at that point, the decision was made to split the departments. So I was interim director from 2014 to 2015 over the old Parks, Recreation, and Conservation Department while they did a search for a new director for the parks and recreation side with the understanding that once they hired that person, then I would become director of the conservation [and] environmental land side.

EH: And then?

FT: And then it worked out.

EH: Yeah, so then they hired somebody for parks and rec?

FT: Exactly.

EH: And then we have a split.

FT: And we have the split. And here we are four or five years later, and I tell you what, it's working out great. Operationally, it's awesome. I have gotten more decision units approved in the last three years, four years than I had approved in the previous—what—12, 13.

EH: Wow.

FT: Yeah, by a large margin. I mean, probably like, I'd say, a three-to-one margin just in that short period of time.

EH: That's impressive.

FT: Because we're our own department now.

EH: That's amazing.

FT: So when I submit a decision unit, and it says, "This is number one, this is number two, this is number three," that's taken seriously, right? Because it's my own department and I'm on equal footing with all the other departments in the county. I'm not a—relegated to a small section underneath a large department, where the decision units get buried at the very back of the whole packet.

EH: Well, this puts us—a great place for my next question. What are the main goals coming in for ELAPP or your department?

FT: The major goals for ELAPP? Well, major goals for ELAPP and my department in general is to, number one, manage what we currently have. Make sure we have adequate staff and resources to manage what we currently have. I wanted to provide this to you. This is an audit that we just went through for the ELAPP program, and it's a pretty interesting read. Audits are not a bad thing. I welcome audits. That particular audit has looked at our operations in general and what we need—well, what we're—it shows what you're doing well and also areas for improvement.

And one of the areas for improvement is that we need to be burning more of our properties—doing more prescribed burns. And right now, our goal is 3,700 acres per year. That's about 10 percent of the burnable acreage on all of our ELAPP sites. Well, the auditors came in, and they said, That's a good goal, that's nice, but you really need to be at 9,200 acres per year in order to meet your ecological and fire-safety objectives.

EH: Wow.

FT: So I was like, "Heck yeah. I agree. We need to be doing more burning. But if I'm going to do more burning, here's what I need in the budget to make that happen." So I got with staff. I said, "Listen, if we're going to do this, what do we need?" So we came up with a decision unit for a prescribed-burn team. And that will consist of six individuals [and] additional brush-truck equipment to ensure that we meet that new success criteria of 9,200 acres per year. And while the budget has not come out yet—doesn't formally come out for a couple of weeks—I got a pretty good indication that that's been approved.

EH: Awesome.

FT: Yeah. And the reality is it probably—I say "probably"—I'd give it less than a 50/50 chance of being approved without that audit.

EH: Wow.

FT: So the audit was extremely important. And the reason it's important is because it is an independent group. We had an independent consultant come on board to evaluate the program. So this wasn't internal staff doing it, because we can say all day long that we need more people. I mean, every department says they need more people, we need more resources. But when it comes from an independent consultant, backed up by the University of Florida, and then by our own internal auditor, that carries weight. So it—in our case—it's going to work out very well.

EH: That's great.

FT: Yeah.

EH: So you've, like, put prescribed burning as a major decision, something that really has to happen. How do you—what is that decision-making process like? How do you prioritize certain things over other ones?

FT: Well, in terms of prescribed burning, each ELAPP site is broken into individual burn units. And we have a tracking system to where we track how often an area has been burned, you know, what date it was burned, how much burned, what were the results. And so that's kind of how we do it. But having a prescribed—a dedicated prescribed-burn team is going to allow us to focus and be more productive in terms of the—I'll say the “cycle” or the “rotation” of how often we burn properties.

So each habitat has its own individual burn cycle. So, like, pine flatwoods would be anywhere from one to three years, okay? Well, just because of lack of personnel, lack of resources, there might be some areas that we're not getting to for four to five years, right? But in order for these areas to really, again, maintain their ecological characteristics, and from a public-safety perspective, we really want to try to get that down for pine flatwoods systems, from, you know, anywhere from three to five years, down to one to two years.

And so with the extra resources and personnel that we're now going to have, we think we can achieve that for not only all of our sites but all of the different habitats that are within each site, whether it's pine flatwoods, whether it's scrub, whether it's sandhill, whether it's depression marsh. We've got everything mapped out on each site—all the different habitats—and we want to make sure that we are burning all of these habitats in line with what the ecological recommendations are, the state recommendations are, and all that. So just want to make sure we don't fall behind.

EH: Yeah.

FT: Which, in the past, we've fallen behind in certain areas, again, just due to a lack of resources—management-wise. Because when we first started the ELAPP program back in '87, everything was

focused on land acquisition, which it should have been. Land acquisition should always be the priority, by the way. That's my thought process, okay? Buy it first, manage it later.

You'll hear some people who aren't real fans of land acquisition by the government or acquiring environmentally sensitive parcels—you'll hear the opposite argument sometimes. "Well, we shouldn't buy that. We don't have enough people to manage it." Well, here's the problem, if you don't buy it, more than likely it's going to be developed. Once it's developed, you never have the chance to manage it, okay? So if we have to buy it and wait five years to manage it, there's certain tools that we can use in the interim—whether it's a cattle lease, whether it's some mechanical treatment, whatever. We can get by for several years without going into the hardcore management of the site, if we don't have the personnel. But once it's gone—i.e., turned it into a housing development, commercial development, mine, what have you—it's pretty much gone forever.

So that's my thought process, is to buy first, manage later. And that's the mode that we were in, probably from 1987 through, I'd say—right about the time I got here—I'd say early 2000s. That's the mode that we were in, only because we had to be in that mode. We had a program—we had to get these parcels when they were available. We couldn't worry about—do we have exactly the right amount of people to manage these properties? If we don't—if the developers get ready to do something—and I'll use, like, the Bell Creek Preserve as an example, in Brandon, or even Golden Aster Scrub [Nature Preserve], which is adjacent to the interstate—if we didn't get those properties immediately, they were going to be developed within six months to a year. So we don't—you know, we're just going to buy it. We'll do the best that we can for the time being, and then if we get additional resources later on to manage, we'll worry about it then. But once you lose it, it's gone forever. So that's my perspective.

EH: So you said you were in, like, the acquisition mode for quite a while?

FT: Mm-hm.

EH: What mode are you in now?

FT: Well, it's interesting. Right now, it looks like we're going to get another \$45 million for acquisition.

EH: Wow.

FT: Yeah, yeah.

EH: That's amazing.

FT: Starting later this year. So we are back in the acquisition mode and—but I think, for the last five to seven years, we've really been focusing more on land management—managing what we

currently have. And we've been able to bump up our personnel, our budget, our resources, and all of that. Especially since we've become another department, we've really been able to do that. So I'd say, probably—we had the last bond issue for acquisition in 2009. That was \$60 million. We just spent the last of that a couple of months ago, so we're getting another 45 million for acquisition, which is great because there's a lot of stuff.

As you see on this map right here, there's still a lot of stuff to acquire, and especially in terms of making wildlife corridors and linkages. That's our major focus now, is to make sure that whatever we've currently bought, as much as we can, to try to link existing preserves to other preserves, so they don't become isolated forest fragments like that South MacDill property down in South Tampa.

EH: That little green space right there?

FT: That little green space that I told you about earlier. That's not what we want for all these different sites. So I'd say, yeah, certainly the last five or six years it's been very management-oriented, but now we're getting back into the acquisition phase, and so I'm very hopeful that we'll have a balance of both moving forward.

EH: So are those critical linkages how you decide what lands to acquire first? Is that how you prioritize lands?

FT: Yeah, we currently have a system—a ranking system of A, B, C, and D—with A being the most important sites, and D being the least important. We got—I think we only have one class D site. We only have a few class C sites on the list. Most of what you see on that map is class A and class B, so that's what we tend to focus on. Obviously, connecting existing preserves is very, very important to prevent that habitat fragmentation effect, to allow for wildlife movement. And it's like I tell people that aren't necessarily environmentally oriented, “This isn't as much for wildlife as it is for us. This is for us as people—as human beings.”

You know, I'll give you an example of connecting sites. We try to connect our sites together as much as we can because we want someone to be able to go from, say, the Balm Boyette Scrub Preserve—we want them to be able to hike all the way down to Little Manatee corridor if they want to. From a recreational perspective, that's important. You don't want to hike to a certain point, and then you get stopped by some huge 3,000-home development, and then you're like, “All right, where do I go from here? Oh, I guess I got to go back and get in my car and drive six miles down to the next preserve.” So as much as possible, we do try to connect. Yeah, like I said, not just for ecological purposes, but also for recreational purposes as well.

I think, moving forward, we're going to be more into conservation easements, as opposed to pure acquisition. We're working on a couple of deals right now that hopefully will pan out. You never know, because ELAPP is a voluntary program. But we're working a couple of very large deals right now up in northeast Hillsborough, near the Hillsborough River, to try to connect our Lower Green Swamp Preserve and Blackwater Creek Preserve with flatwoods—which is here, all of this property here—want to be able to connect that, going all the way to the county line. And then to the

northeast of here is actually district property, “swift mud” property, which is the Upper Hillsborough Preserve and Green Swamp, and that's about 140,000 acres.

EH: Wow.

FT: So we want to be able to connect everything from this point over, up to that. And that preserve is for wide-ranging species, too. Again, what we try to look for is landscape-scale-type properties, you know, 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 acres. That's really what you want to target if there's much left. And, honestly, there's really not too much left in Hillsborough County outside of what Mosaic owns down in the southeast region of the county.⁴ Of course, a lot of that's been mined.

But whenever you have the opportunity to get a large, intact piece of property that's primarily natural habitat—not too disturbed—you have to try to take advantage of it. So that's what we're trying to do in northeast Hillsborough with Blackwater Creek and what we call the Cone Ranch addition, and solidify all of those preserves up in the northeast, so that you can literally get out of your car at Bruce B. Downs, here in New Tampa, walk through Flatwoods Park, take it all the way up to Hillsborough River State Park, take it all the way up through Blackwater Creek, through Lower Green Swamp Preserve, out of Hillsborough County to upper Hillsborough, and then all the way up to the Green Swamp. You could do that hike if you wanted to. I'm saying not saying that you would or that you could do that in a day, but theoretically, somebody could go from literally the center of New Tampa, in a very urban area, to—all the way up to Sumter and Lake County if they wanted to.

EH: So, what is the acquisition process actually like? Because you said it was voluntary.

FT: It's a voluntary program, yeah.

EH: So, what is the actual, like, getting the land and then going into management—what is that process like?

FT: Well, we have a nomination form, so either the landowner—actually, anybody can nominate a piece of property. You don't have to be the owner. It could even be staff—staff can nominate property. And so, what you see on the map here is pretty much everything that's been nominated and approved. There's not much left, beyond what you see here. I mean, everything in the central city has been developed, and so we're kind of reaching the end of the nomination phase. In fact, June 30th is going to be the last day for all of our traditional ELAPP nominations. So it's going to kind of end that kind of historic nomination process that's been out there for 32 years.

And the reason why we're sort of ending that portion of it is because, the last decade or so, a lot of the nominations that we're getting are just little tiny fragments—two acres here, three acres here. They don't really qualify for the program. And like I said, much of Hillsborough County—the white

⁴ Mosaic is the world's largest combined producer of potash and phosphates, which are then turned into fertilizers, among other things. According to a May 2018 *Tampa Bay Times* report, Mosaic owns 290,000 acres in Polk, Manatee, Hardee, DeSoto, and Hillsborough counties, as well as the rights to mine other Florida properties.

in between that you see here on the map—has all been developed or is in some state of heavy disturbance. People will still have an opportunity, twice a year, to nominate to the program through the general committee meetings, so we're not eliminating the nomination process entirely. But as far as that formal annual nomination process goes, June 30th of this year, 2019, will be the last day to essentially nominate a piece of property to the program.

EH: So it sounds like ELAPP is at a big point of maybe change or adjustment in that way. So, what do you see as the future of ELAPP?

FT: Well, I see the future of ELAPP—I think of it short-term. So when I say “short-term,” I'm talking the next 10 to 20 years. I know that sounds long-term, but you'll see my thinking pattern here in a minute. So next 10 to 20 years—short-term—will be finishing out acquisition. So back in 2008, the voters approved a \$200 million referendum—ELAPP referendum. So far, we've spent approximately 60 million of that 200, so we have 140 million left. And that's not—that's not money that's in the bank, that's 140 million of authorization by the voters to go back and issue more bonds, okay? So that 45 million that I told you about earlier, that will be another bond issue, okay?

It could potentially be more than that. We'll know within the next month if it's going to be 45 or maybe as high as 75. I'm hoping 75. Cross my fingers. But we'll see. So let's just say it's 45 million, so now that takes you from 140 million down to 95 million, so you still got 95 million of authorization from the voters. So that's why I say 10 to 20 years for the acquisition component. But of course, during the acquisition phases, every day we're still managing our ELAPP sites. I mean, business goes on as usual.

And, in fact, it's kind of cool. Just this week, at my urging—at my request for the last couple of years, and it finally happened, the ELAPP acquisition manager is now moving from the real estate department to directly under me, which I personally felt like should happen probably since the beginning. But that's not how it was decided, and that's fair. I mean, '87 was a different time. It was a new program. I'm not being critical, but just from my observations over the last 16 years, I felt like the ELAPP—and that's the person's title: ELAPP acquisition manager—that should fall under the ELAPP program director. Because one of the issues that we've seen, in particular, in the last five to seven years, is that ELAPP manager position—acquisition manager position—has been working on a lot of other county-related business that has nothing to do with ELAPP: buying fire stations, or buying property for fire stations, buying, I don't know, areas for road improvements, buying areas for libraries.

And those are all important things, okay? From a county perspective, those are all very important things. But my concern over the last four or five years is that about 50 percent of that position's time has been spent on doing non-ELAPP-related acquisitions. And I think to some degree that's hurt the acquisition part of the program for years. So as some things have changed here within the county, organization-wise—again, everything is timing. So just recently, I took the opportunity once again to say, “I really think this needs to happen.” And again, I think management—upper-level management—took a really good look at that, and they said, Okay, yeah, you're right. That needs to happen. So as of four days ago, the ELAPP acquisition manager is now reporting directly to me.

EH: Wow.

FT: Yeah, which is great because he's going to be able to focus 100 percent now on ELAPP, moving forward. And it's important because—and this is the argument that I made—once we get that 45 million, it has to be spent within the three-year period. Bonds have to be spent within three years. So I can't have that ELAPP acquisition manager only spending half of his time, or sometimes less, on ELAPP acquisitions. I need that person full-time, and maybe even another real property specialist or something working with him so we can get this done. And so we as a county, especially if we're going to issues 45 million in bonds, we need to be very cognizant of spending that within that three-year period.

And so, I have—I've talked to all my superiors, and just said, “Hey, look, if you can give me that position and maybe I can reclass another position to help Kurt out”—Kurt Gremley—“we can get this done.” There's no doubt in my mind that we could spend that 45 million. There's really not much doubt in my mind that we could spend 75 million in three years. There are so many large tracts out there and so many willing owners now, that I know we can get it done.

In fact, there's one acquisition that we're working on right now that could be as much as 40 million. So that's the other argument I made, for the 75 million, I said, “Look, if we spend 40 million on one, well that means we only have \$5 million left. We don't want to have to keep going back to the board every year for more and more bonds, so let's go ahead and make it as high as we possibly can. If we can do 75 million, let's do 75. That would get us through three years.” So instead of buying just one large property, now we can not only buy that, but we can buy that connection, that connection, and that connection and keep things rolling. Again, time is of the essence.

EH: Always.

FT: That's what I imparted to the board several weeks ago, during my presentation, is that, you know—and I told them this, just very bluntly, I said, “If you don't get one thing out of this presentation, at least understand that time is of the essence when it comes to the acquisition component of this program. Don't buy it now? It's going to be gone.” And we've seen it happen. I mean, look at all the white.

EH: Yeah.

FT: That's what we've lost.

EH: Yeah. So if we could speak about maybe just Florida at large for a second, where do you see environmental conservation in Florida going forward? Do you think there are certain priorities that it is taking or should take?

FT: That's a great question. Well, back in 1990, Governor [Robert] Martinez and the legislature instituted the Preservation 2000 program.⁵ It was very successful. Between 1990 and 2000, more or less—1999. When Governor [Jeb] Bush came in, he instituted the Florida Forever program, which was very similar.⁶ Again, \$300 million a year for, what, nine, 10 years, okay? Then we had another administration come in. Granted, there was an economic downturn—2007, 2008.⁷ Okay, those things happen from time to time. But at that point, in 2009, 2010, the program was defunded for several years, okay? So no longer was it \$300 million a year, it was, in some cases, zero per year. In other cases, it might have been a minimal amount—10, 20 million here, something. But statewide, I mean, that's like a—it's a drop in the bucket.

So there were some other programs that came about later, I think Save Our Springs or something, and that's 50 million a year. But again, that's not geared so much for land acquisition, that's more like getting rid of septic tanks and things like that. So between 2009 and 2018, we, Hillsborough County, had no joint funding from the state. And that was pretty much because that Florida Forever program was defunded. Prior to that, one-third of our acquisition costs were covered by the state.

So we would make applications to the Florida Communities Trust program, through DEP [Department of Environmental Protection], to the [Southwest Florida] Water Management District. And a lot of the lands that you see on here are either owned by the Water Management District, with 50 percent participation by us, and we lease them back, or we have agreements with Florida Communities Trust Program to receive, in some cases, up to 60 percent reimbursement for the acquisition cost.

So I call that the heydays of ELAPP, you know, between 1987 and 2009, that's when we were like rocking 'n' rolling with joint funding, things were going great, and then all of a sudden, a new administration comes in, "Sorry, it's not a priority." The program's done [makes sound]. Well, in response to that, in 2013, a group of—well, a bunch of environmental groups, Audubon and others, got together, and they said, Look, this just isn't right, you know. I mean, there are so many more lands on the DEP list—and you can go online and see how big that list is, statewide—there are so many lands out there that still need to be acquired—critical pieces, critical connections, things like that, that it's just not right for something like Florida Forever/P-2000 to be cut completely.

So that's when you got Amendment 1. I don't know if you've heard of Amendment 1, back in 2014? And the language on the ballot was, Do you, the voter, approve one-third of the state's doc [documentary] stamp tax going toward land preservation and acquisition?⁸ And so, it was worded—I can't remember the exact verbiage, but of course, the attorneys and everybody are playing on that language now saying, Well, it could mean this, or it could mean that, or it could mean that. Well, I

⁵ Preservation 2000 supplemented the funds that land-acquisition agencies could use to purchase lands. This supplemental funding was to be provided for 10 years, concluding in 2000.

⁶ Florida Forever replaced the Preservation 2000 programs and included additional aims, such as water resource development, increased public access, public lands management and maintenance, and increased protection of land by acquisition of conservation easements.

⁷ The Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, making it the longest recession in the United States since the Great Depression.

⁸ The official ballot summary of Amendment 1 was as follows: "Funds the Land Acquisition Trust Fund to acquire, restore, improve, and manage conservation lands including wetlands and forests; fish and wildlife habitat; lands protecting water resources and drinking water sources, including the Everglades, and the water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams; beaches and shores; outdoor recreational lands; working farms and ranches; and historic or geologic sites, by dedicating 33 percent of net revenues from the existing excise tax on documents for 20 years."

think a judge, last year, ruled that it was primarily to be for acquisition and management of these lands.⁹

So Amendment 1 passed, I want to say, by 75 percent in 2014. But the way the money is distributed now is, instead of it going primarily toward land acquisition like it did for so many years, now they're putting it toward staff costs, operating costs. It's sort of like the lottery. Remember the Florida Lottery? How it was supposed to help schools, and then it was like a shell game? Okay, so the same game is being played with Amendment 1 money, okay? And I don't know how the whole thing is going to end up, you know. I still think it's probably going to go through the courts for several years.

But again, the intent of Amendment 1 was to essentially continue the Florida Forever program. And it's, like, All right, if the current administration is not going to do it, we're going to allow the voters to tell them and future administrations, This is what we want. We want one-third of the doc stamp tax to be placed toward permanent preservation of environmental lands throughout the state. And believe me, there's a huge list—a couple million acres.

So that has yet to be fully realized. So when you ask me a question about the state and where it's going, I will tell you that if they can—if there's a favorable ruling in terms of the acquisition component for the Amendment 1 initiative, and we can get back, gosh, even to \$300 million a year, which is what it was in 1990—[it] really should be double that. I think one-third of the doc stamp tax is between 6[00] and \$800 million a year. But, gosh, even if you could just get back to 300 million, at least you're back to a viable program that can partner with counties like Hillsborough that have money, okay, on a lot of different projects, and get some really good things done.

So I think my answer to that question is: we're going to have to wait and see, both from a political standpoint as well as a legal standpoint when it comes to Amendment 1 monies, as to how those are going to be allocated in the future, and if they're going to be allowed to be allocated toward straight land acquisition and management, or if they're going to be allowed to just continue funding positions and personnel, and this and that. Which I don't personally think was the intent of the voters.

EH: Yeah.

FT: The intent of the voters was to follow the language that was on the ballot, which was quite clear: to purchase environmentally sensitive lands, forested lands, wetlands, uplands, this and that. And you can go back and read the language. To me, and I think any commonsense individual, it's extremely clear what the purpose was.

EH: Yeah, absolutely. So speaking on that, in Hillsborough County, ELAPP—and even statewide—conservation and preservation has been historically very popular with voters. Why do you think Floridians are so supportive of these types of programs? Why do you think Floridians want these programs?

⁹ In June 2018, Leon County Circuit Judge Charles Dodson ruled that the state improperly diverted Amendment 1 funds to expenses such as staffing.

FT: Well, I think, you know, it's a couple of different things. I think you have people that were born here, that grew up here, and they've seen the changes that are happening. They're seeing areas in, you know, we'll just say eastern Hillsborough County, that are being converted to higher intensity land uses. Whether it's residential development, commercial, whatever, and they see those changes—some see it in a positive way. I mean, I guess it all depends on your outlook.

Some people would say, Well, that's good for the economy, and to a certain degree it is. I mean, it's beneficial economically, from the tax-base perspective, to have that development. But you have other people who were born and raised here that look at that, and they feel like they're losing something. They feel like they're losing not just a piece of the environment, but maybe a piece of the culture or the heritage, whether it's a cattle pasture or a farm or a piece of natural land that they used to walk through with trails and things like that.

I mean, I think from a local perspective, people are, like, Wait a minute. We're okay with some development, but wait, enough's enough. We're starting to lose the character of the entire county. We're starting to lose the north part of the county that I remember growing up, you know, the open pastures, the areas where you could go hike, ride a horse, whatever. The large areas that used to be rural are now becoming just like the center of the city of Tampa. And so, I think you have that perspective, and then you also have the people that are just moving down here as well. I think Hillsborough County is—I want to say it's in the top 10 now, of counties, throughout the United States in terms of growth. It's huge, especially in the Riverview and Apollo Beach, Ruskin area.

And so you'll get people that moved down, and of course, they're moving down into the new houses, right, that are being built. But then again, after they're here for a few years, and they see more development happening, they're like, Wait a minute, when I moved down here, that was wide open space and I really liked driving by that every day, and now it's a, you know, a new mall or whatever, and I just—that's not why I moved down here. And, Oh, by the way, there's another, you know, 40,000 cars on the highway and I can't even get to work. So at some point, it's like, what is the endgame here? I think, ultimately, that's what we have to look at: What's the endgame?

It would be just really cool to go back in time, like 100 years, when this was just sort of a blank slate—maybe 150 years, this was a blank slate—and say, “All right, here's how we did it in 2019, okay? We have a second chance. How can we do it differently now? We know we're still going to have people. We know we're still going to develop, but how can we do it differently this time? Can we cluster developments, leave wide-open natural areas, have higher densities within those clustered areas?” Granted, people aren't going to be able to have half-acre, two-acre lots, five-acre lots, but that's okay. Still going to have a good quality of life.

I think it's difficult now, in a sense, because—from an ELAPP perspective—because we have to work with what's there and, more importantly, what's not there. And so in an urban county like this, it's like putting the pieces of the puzzle together. And so that's where we're at, you know, we're working on this acquisition right now, okay? Very complicated deal that—I don't know if we're going to make it happen. We're going to try. But that's one of those areas where we're trying to put the pieces together—the green that you see on both sides.

EH: Yeah.

FT: If we're able to do it, that's huge—that's huge. Down there, you see lots of little pieces that have yet to be acquired. If we're able to get a few of those parcels to connect up existing preserves, that's great. They'll be protected forever.

EH: Great.

FT: And so anyway, yeah, I think it's two different perspectives. I think you have perspectives from people who've been here their whole lives and they—I think most of them see development, and the consequences that come with it, you know, whether it's environmental, more traffic, what have you. I think a lot of those folks see that as maybe not the greatest thing in the world. You've got new people coming down here that had been coming down here for years now—we'll just say somebody who moved here 10 years ago, and moved to Riverview, okay? Well, Riverview 10 years ago is not the Riverview of today. The Riverview of today is like Brandon was 10 years ago, and they're probably, like, Wait a minute. I moved here because I kind of like the rural nature, but I like to be close to the city. Well, now you're in the middle of a mini-city that has developed over the last decade. So I think there's probably two different perspectives there.

EH: So, what would you consider perhaps your greatest accomplishment, or one you're particularly proud of in ELAPP?

FT: Wow. Well, that's a tough one. That's a tough one because I love the entire program. I love every element of it. I think my biggest accomplishment was when we split the departments, putting ELAPP and our conservation parks on equal footing with other departments throughout the county, in particular, from a funding standpoint—a land-management standpoint. As I mentioned, prior to that, we were sort of the stepchildren of the old department, and now we're on equal footing. So if I had to pick one thing, I would say that I'm most proud of that.

EH: So, like, my final question for you really is, do you have any memorable moments in ELAPP that you would like to share with us?

FT: Memorable moments? Oh yeah, wow. Well, one really cool moment was—we did a little television special upstairs. It was a Hillsborough County Television special. It runs on HTV. It's not seen by thousands of people, but this was about 12 years ago—10, 12 years ago. And it was really cool. I got to sit on a little panel. It was myself, Jan Platt, and Governor Martinez. And it was for—to try to drum up support for the 2008 referendum. And so the whole HTV special that day—it was the 30-minute program—was all about the ELAPP program and about supporting the 2008 referendum and all that. So it was really cool to just sit there with someone like Jan Platt, you know, Governor Martinez. And here's, like, Forest Turbiville sitting next to them and just like—it was very cool, though, and it turned out great.

And ironically enough, I mean, toward the end of the show, I mean, the moderator was, like, asking me every question, and I was answering, and I kind of felt bad. I'm like, Wait a minute. Ask these people over here, you know. These—I don't want to, like, offend them and—but it turned out pretty good. And ironically enough, I hadn't watched it in years, and I pulled it out the other day. I was going through some old DVDs, and I pulled it out. And my son's 14, so I showed it to him. And of course, this was back in, what, 2007, 2008? So a little less gray hair, you know, looked like—he's like, "Dad, that was you?" He's like, "You're a young man." I'm like, "Yeah, son. That was the _____(??)."

So that was really cool to show that to my son. And it was cool because it was the start of that whole push for the 2008 referendum, which we're still in right now, financially, from an acquisition standpoint. So that was cool from more of, like, the administration standpoint. Had a lot of cool moments working in the field when I first started back in the mid '90s. Yeah, there was one memorable moment working at Cockroach Bay, and I was on the spray crew back then—the spray crew being me and one other person. We were both in our early, mid-20s. And I'll never forget—we were in an area spraying cogongrass, which is an exotic. And of course, you have a backpack on your back, and you're having to look down and spray, and this and that. We're trying to be really careful with it, because you don't want to hit, like, the native plants and stuff like that.

So anyway, we were in a—kind of thick wooded area—and he bent down to spray. And when he did that, a indigo snake, which was like eight-foot long—now it's not poisonous, but of course you don't know that at the time, it looks like a cobra—stood up like that. And it must have been six-feet tall, and met him in the face, like that, and he fell back. And I'm looking at him like—and I saw the snake, and I'm like, "My God, what was that? Was that a cobra?" And I didn't—I don't even think I knew about indigo snakes back then. I may have. But anyway, it looked like a cobra because they fan out a little bit. And he's like, "I don't know what that was," and he was crazy, he goes, "but I'm going to go find it."

So he rips off his backpack, and he's running through the woods, and you could see the snake going through. And of course, the vegetation was like this high. All you could see is the top of the vegetation moving. Anyway, after about 10 minutes, he finds it, and he grabs it like that. Not to hurt it, but just to, like—so he could see it. And he grabs it, and he shows it to me, he goes, "Look, I found it." And I was like, "Oh my gosh." And then we realized, at that time, it was an indigo snake because it's got the turquoise bottom. And unbeknownst to him, it—he had scared it so much, that it had just eaten a red rat snake, and the rat snake was still alive.

EH: Oh no.

FT: So it regurgitates the red rat snake, which is still alive, and it's probably like, What's happening? So anyway, I'm like, "Jason, just let the snake go, okay. We've tortured this poor thing enough," so he lets it go, and it moves on. But that's just the—that was one of many funny experiences in the field that I had early on as a—when I was actually still a student at USF, so, yeah, it's good, though.

And I think the one cool thing about this job is that—and I encourage this for everybody that comes on board—it doesn't matter if you have no degree, an AA, a BA or BS, a master's degree, or even a

PhD. When you come into an organization, it's just very important to just get your foot in the door. It doesn't matter what you're doing, I mean, I was six months away from my master's degree, out there spraying Brazilian pepper. And I knew that I didn't want to do that forever, but I wanted to show my boss and their boss that, hey, look, this guy is willing to go out there and work. Maybe not the perfect job in the world, but willing to go out there and work, and continue to study and things like that, and just basically show the initiative that you have a passion for the job and that you care.

And so I encourage everybody to—no matter what their degree status is—to come in, get your foot in the door, even if it's not exactly what you want to do, get introduced to the job, to the people, and then from there take every promotional opportunity that there is, that you think—that you're interested in—and just go for it. I mean, really, at the end of the day, just go for it. Sometimes you'll be successful. Sometimes you may not. But, like, never quit. Just—if you have a goal in mind, just keep reaching for it.

I mean, there were times when I was in my mid, late-30s, where I'm like, Man, am I ever going to be director? I don't know. I really don't know, and maybe this is just where I need to be at, you know, section manager, maybe. And I would be okay with that. As long as I was still doing anything ELAPP-related, I'd be fine with it. But you start to wonder sometimes. Is it actually going to happen? And then, at age 42, things just—and again, timing's everything—things happened the way they did. The old director left. His boss, who is very open-minded, came to me, said, “Look, you've been here a long time”—at that point, been here, what's that, almost 20 years, back in 2014—“and you've seen the good, the bad, and everything else. What is your perspective? What is your vision for this department moving forward?” And that was my opportunity to say, “Hey, look, here's what I've seen, and here's where I think we need to go.” So it's turned out great.

EH: Nice. Well, that's the last of my questions, unless you have any final thoughts or anything else?

FT: Oh cool. No, no.

EH: Awesome.

End of interview.