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Emily Holbrook (EH): It is July 3rd, 2019. I'm Emily Holbrook, and I am here with Ross Dickerson at the Hillsborough County Conservation Office. And first, if you could just state and then spell your name for us.

Ross Dickerson (RD): Sure. My name is Ross Dickerson. R-o-s-s D-i-c-k-e-r-s-o-n.

EH: Great. And we are here for the new ELAPP oral history interviews. So my first question is how long have you been in the Hillsborough County, Tampa Bay area?

RD: I've been here since 1997. I came down from New York to go to Eckerd College in St. Pete, and I've never looked back.

EH: Okay. Great. Can you tell me a little bit what it's been like living in this area since 1997?

RD: Well, my first four years were over in St. Petersburg, so St. Petersburg was kind of already built out. But I loved being back—I loved being in Florida. I actually came to Florida a lot as a child because my grandparents lived down here. So it's been a wonderful experience living here in Florida. On the Hillsborough County side, ever since moving down to Florida, we've been noticing a lot of growth, so things have really changed on the Hillsborough County side, but all in all, it's been a great experience.

EH: So you said you've seen a lot of changes and growth in the Hillsborough County area. Could you describe that for us?

RD: Sure. So when I started with Hillsborough County in 2001, I remember thinking that there was really nothing out here. You'd have a—you had Brandon, which was developed. Some of the areas in Apollo Beach had some developments, but I remember driving from the Cockroach Bay office up

to the office we're at now in Riverview, and all we would drive through were pastures. Everywhere you would look was pasture. Pasture here, pasture there—you wouldn't see houses, and now, especially in south county, all of those pastures have turned into housing developments.

EH: So you said you came down here for college at Eckerd, and you never looked back. What were—so why did you decide to stay? What was really drawing you to the area?

RD: Really, the weather is definitely a factor. Up in New York, it snows a lot, and that's kind of frustrating in the wintertime. But really what kept me here was I graduated from Eckerd College and I got a job with Hillsborough County. There was only a few months in between graduation and starting here with Hillsborough County. The organization is fantastic. The mission is fantastic, to preserve lands. I knew back at home that would be a difficult job to have up in New York. Even though there are small preservation programs up there, it's not the same down here, and I really just fell in love with the mission and wanted to stay.

EH: So how did you get involved in environmentalism and environmental conservation?

RD: It's kind of a long story. But I grew up—so in New York, I grew up in Nassau County, and if you know Long Island, Long Island is broken up into the five boroughs of the city, then you have Nassau County, and then you move up—move out, towards the end of the island. And I grew up in Nassau County, which didn't have many parks and preserves. So my dad—after I was five and we moved down to Long Island, and it just was a connection. You know, I knew that's what I wanted to do. I actually took some AP bio classes in high school, and I thought I was going to be a marine biologist. And then I came down to Eckerd College and found out that I could get a degree where I stayed out in the woods all the time, and I knew that that was what I was going to do. So that's really what got me started—moving out from heavy urbanized Nassau County out to the island and just feeling that connection with nature.

EH: At Eckerd, did you get an environmental science degree?

RD: I got a degree in environmental studies from Eckerd. Yep.

EH: And what was that first job you got with the county?

RD: I actually started here on what was called the spray crew. So, what we did is we would put on backpacks and take chemicals and we would go out and treat invasive plants on Hillsborough County's property. So it was kind of the initiation phase for everybody at the time. And I actually did—I was two-and-a-half years as a temporary employee here. So that's—I mean that shows I really wanted to stay. So it took a while to get my foot through the real door, but I started on the spray crew. And since then, I worked on the spray crew, then I worked on the maintenance crew, then I was environmental specialist too, where I oversaw the invasive species task force, which was a task force of private and public entities around Tampa Bay that was fighting to control invasive plants on natural lands. And then I was very fortunate to get the job where I am now as the section manager.

EH: And what do you do as the section manager?

RD: Well, unfortunately, I sit behind a desk a lot. But as the section manager, I really get to plan out how these lands are being managed ecologically and also for the public. So we—I get to help plan all that stuff out, but the best part of my job is I get to oversee the whole evaluation process for lands that are acquired by ELAPP. So if a land is nominated to the program, I'm the first person to see it, and I oversee all the committees that bring it through the evaluation process, which I love. I love that fact that I get to be the one to go out there with a group of scientists and make the determination of if it's something that we should purchase. And then I get to see it all the way through to purchase. So there's been several properties since I started in this position that not only did I oversee the evaluation, I was also part of the process where we actually ended up purchasing the land and getting to go out there and say, "We now have this."

EH: So how did you get involved in ELAPP to start with?

RD: Really, I just got involved out of college. I started applying to all the local governments and their nature-preserve programs. I came in for—I actually came in for an interview for a higher job than the one I got—I ended up getting—several months prior to me getting a job. So I came in for an interview, and on my way out, one of the people that was on the interview panel said, "If you don't get this job, I'd like to keep your name for a position in the future." And then a couple of months later, he actually called me and said I got a job.

EH: Wow. So it's a little bit of waiting.

RD: Yeah, just a little bit of waiting. I didn't get the job I applied for, but then I got the temp job and just slowly kept working my way up.

EH: Okay. So as a section manager here for the county, you're also, like, the section manager for ELAPP. Is that your main role in ELAPP?

RD: So yeah, my main role in ELAPP is overseeing the evaluation process, and so—and then myself and Forest [Turbiville] oversee the purchasing with the real estate department. So yes. But actually my main role with ELAPP is the evaluation process and then managing the lands that are purchased through the ELAPP program.

EH: Could you speak a little bit more on the evaluation process and what that means, and sort of what you look for when you go out into a new land that's been acquired?

RD: Sure. So one thing that ELAPP is very proud of is that we are a citizen-driven organization. Citizens, landowners, whoever can nominate properties to our program, and once a property is nominated, it goes through the process of—first, it is evaluated by the site-assessment team, and at

that meeting we kind of look at the property using aerial photography, seeing where it connects, and we go through the basic—there's seven different criteria that we look at. Does it have relatively unaltered native flora and fauna? Are there any known archeological sites? There's a bunch of different criteria that we kind of look at, and if it meets a few of those, we put it on to what's called a full site assessment. So the site-assessment team recommends to the site-review team what sites they think should go on for a full site assessment. The site-review team reviews all the findings from the site-assessment team and then approves those full site assessments or denies them, and that has happened in the past too.

And then from there, myself and a few other people go out and actually evaluate the properties. So we had looked at it from the air but now we're actually going out to ground verify what we thought might be there. So we're looking for—we're looking for invasive species, we're looking for native species, we're looking for ground disturbance, just things that we would—we rank it on, based on its—really, what we're doing is we're ranking it on its environmental qualities. So we're looking at all the native things. But there's also sites too that we look at restoration potential, especially if they're near a site and we have partner agencies.

So we go through those criteria on the site, take pictures, write the full report, and then from there at a public meeting in like October or November it goes to the site-selection team, and the site-selection team actually ranks it based on those criteria and approves it into the program. So depending on how high quality environmentally it is, it ranks higher in our program, but it can go all the way down to a D site, which—a D site is pretty much a piece of property that is highly disturbed, needs to be restored, and it will stay on the list until we get a partner that's going to come in there and restore it for us.

EH: So once ELAPP actually acquires a space, what happens to it?

RD: Once we acquire the property, it falls under the ELAPP ordinance, which means that it needs to be protected for its environmental qualities, but also opened up for passive recreation. So as soon as we acquire a property, the first thing we go out there and do is we start looking at the site and develop what's called a land-management plan, and that land-management plan is a plan for the site for all the restoration that needs to be done, all the recreation values that it has, and where we can allow recreation. It looks at the different habitats, the soils. So from there, we kind of plan out that site's future, like what looks good, what needs to be fixed, how do we allow people to come in here and not damage the resource.

And that's a public process, so we have public meetings where people can provide their input too as to what they would like to see on the site, and then the management plan gets approved and we start managing it. And when we start managing it, we do all types of stuff, from restoration, prescribed fire, invasive species control, both plants and animals, maintaining public recreation lands. So it really falls into the maintenance of the Environmental Lands Management section, which is what I'm over.

EH: Let's talk a little bit more about ELAPP. What do you see as the main goals of ELAPP?

RD: The main goals of ELAPP—they're not really shifting, but they are kind of shifting. So the past main goal of ELAPP is to get as much land preserved as possible, and Hillsborough County citizens and ELAPP—I mean, they've done a fantastic job. Over 63,000 acres have been preserved here in Hillsborough County, which is amazing. We're the largest local preservation program in the state of Florida. So they did a really good job for the last 32 years of the program. And the goal is not really shifting to not wanting to get more land, but the goal now is trying to ensure the sustainability of these lands by making ecological connections between the land.

So there's a few pieces of property out there that—there are huge pieces of property that probably won't be influenced by outside development, but there's also properties in there that, as development continues to grow in Hillsborough County, those sites are going to be boxed in. And when those sites get boxed in, you can't do prescribed fire. It gets hard to manage those properties, so they call—they become what we call “sinks” in environmental language. It's an area where animals are, but they can't spread out and go to different areas to increase populations. So what we're trying to do now is we're trying to find those last valuable corridors and focus the remaining ELAPP dollars on purchasing those corridors.

EH: Yeah, we've talked to a couple of other people, like Jack and Forest, who both sort of said, Oh, you know, it's—we're running out of land to really acquire, everything else is city, and now ELAPP is much more on the management and hunt-for-those-small-pieces side.

RD: That's correct. Yeah, trying to buy those last valuable piece of properties that make the connection so that we know that everything we've done over the last 33 years will continue to survive into the future.

EH: Yeah. Do you know, or do you have any specific areas that you can recall that you think are the most important?

RD: We actually do. We have a map that is available that—it's our strategic-acquisition map, and the map was actually developed based on what we know here in Hillsborough County. But we also partnered with the University of Florida, and they came in and actually did an assessment of Hillsborough County using conservation land modeling that they've done for the state of Florida, and they helped us identify those last remaining corridors based on aquifer recharge and species of special concerns, like where they need to go, things like that. So as they went through the process and the modeling, it became clear that certain areas of Hillsborough County are still highly valuable and that we need to focus our money.

One of the biggest areas is the northeast corner of Hillsborough County connecting what's known as the Lower Green Swamp to Hillsborough River. That's one of the last—last pieces of property that are highly underdeveloped. So it's a lot of open space out there. But then there's a lot of pieces of property too in central and south Florida, or south Hillsborough County, that are valuable too because they connect us to larger regional preserves in other counties. So from the study, we found that the northeast, the southeast, and then certain areas in central—east-central Hillsborough County are very valuable to make these connections.

EH: So we started doing this a lot because we knew that a lot of the founders of the ELAPP program, like Jan Platt and some others, have since passed, and we're really interested in seeing how things have changed. Have you noticed a change in the program or anything over time, something like that, since you've been involved for so long?

RD: One great thing about the program is that it always has high support from our county commissioners. We're one of those programs that they definitely like here in Hillsborough County. We don't—we may not always get support from the citizens, but one of the most unique things, and I don't know if this has been mentioned already, but one of the most unique things about our program is we had to go for a referendum in 2008–2009, and that's of course when the housing crisis had hit. Nobody wanted to spend extra money. We went out there for a referendum for \$200 million in bond funds, and 79 percent of the citizens of Hillsborough County said they wanted those funds. So almost 80 percent of the citizens of Hillsborough County asked us to continue taxing them to buy more property.

I think that we didn't do as well as we could have during the years, because—the years of the downturn—because it is hard to raise people's taxes, and I understand that. But we have always had support from our county commissioners and our senior county staff to continue the ELAPP program and trying to get as much land as possible.

EH: Why do you think you've had such good support from the local government?

RD: I think it's great for the local government to say that they're number one when it comes to local preservation. But I also think that just the Tampa Bay region in general has a very high knowledge of environmental issues. They're very supportive of environmental programs, and I think that that carries a lot of weight when your constituents want you—are telling you that they want you to tax them for these properties. They understand the value of nature and how it really provides a benefit to the citizens.

EH: So speaking more, I guess, on the citizens, you know, you've said that ELAPP has been historically pretty popular with voters. Why do you think voters are so for ELAPP and environmental conservation in the area?

RD: I think one of the main reasons that they're so for it is because a lot of the people here in Hillsborough County still remember Hillsborough County before it started growing all these rooftops, and they want to keep that in Hillsborough County. They want to have these corridors that they can go out and escape the development or downtown and just get lost in the woods, and I think that people are just very supportive. I think people understand that trees provide oxygen and shelter the earth and cool off the earth and filter our water. People here are—they're very knowledgeable about environmental issues, and I think that's why we get such good support from them.

EH: And you've been involved for over a couple of different statewide administrative shifts and changes. What's the state support been like for this program?

RD: When I first got here, the state support was very strong. We would get a lot of money from the state. We would buy properties with ELAPP dollars, and then the state would pay us back up to 50 percent of what we paid. And there was a lot of support. There was a lot of the joint projects that we purchased with the state. We have projects with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, DEP [Department of Environmental Protection], Florida Communities Trust.¹ So we have a lot of programs from P2000 and all of those when state was really pumping money out to buy these properties.² Unfortunately, the last 10 years, the state hasn't been as involved. They—all their programs that buy land didn't get their funding to purchase the land. So for the last 10 years, Hillsborough County has been pretty much on their own to go out and buy these properties.

EH: And what about current—since we just now—now we have a brand new administration. Do you think things might change? Have you gotten any idea of what—

RD: We're very hopeful that things might change. The new administration seems to be much more involved in environmental issues with what they're doing to try to control algae blooms and stuff like that. So we're hoping that the new administration will start filtering out this money to get more properties.

EH: And you said the administration's been concerned with some of those other environmental issues, like algae bloom and things. Does ELAPP concern itself with other environmental issues outside of conservation?

RD: We—I mean—we do. A lot of the restorations that we do on our properties—we are ready for global warming and sea-level rise. So we do think—we do think about all that, a lot of that stuff. Most of our coastal restorations have a component where they filter some kind of water before it gets out to the bay. So when we do restoration out there, we are filtering water to try to help improve the bay. And as we move upland, too, we do it along the rivers, too. There's usually a component to our restoration somehow that helps filter water either that's heading down to the aquifer or that's going out into the river. So yes we are. We are aware of that. And also just with carbon—every restoration that we do, we are helping reduce the amount of carbon that's in the air just from the trees that we plant.

EH: Okay. And what do you see as the future of the ELAPP program?

RD: I see the ELAPP program—so I see the ELAPP program, which is the purchasing program, I see them, just based on what we've heard from the board over the last couple of meetings, I see there being a big push to get as much land as possible before it all gets lost to development. So I think in the next couple of years, we're gonna be trying really hard to get those last remaining corridors. So I see a bright future in trying to make these connections over the next five to 10 years.

EH: And what about for environmental conservation in Florida in general?

¹ According to the Florida Communities Trust website, the state program “provide[s] funding to local governments and eligible nonprofit organizations to acquire land for parks, open space, greenways and projects supporting Florida's seafood harvesting and aquaculture industries.”

² “P2000” refers to the state’s Preservation 2000 program, which supplemented local funding for environmental land-acquisition agencies during the 1990s.

RD: I think that Florida is a very progressive state when it comes to environmental issues. And I think—I really think that with the people continuing to push the administration to focus on these environmental issues in the state of Florida, especially when it comes to the water crises that we always see in the state of Florida, I think that it's going to continue to progress forward and get better as we move forward.

EH: Why—to you—why are things like environmental conservation and the ELAPP program so important?

RD: It's, well, the best—it's very important, because, number one, humans are part of the ecosystem, and we rely on ecosystems for us to survive. I think a lot of people do forget that. But environmental conservation—just by purchasing a piece of property, you're purchasing the trees that provide us our oxygen to breathe. You're purchasing the lands that help filter our water that we rely on to drink. By purchasing these lands and continuing to expand our open space, we actually—ELAPP has reduced people's flood mitigation on their properties. ELAPP plays a huge role in flood mitigation because the water can spread out rather than trying to put it into a retention pond. So ELAPP helps with that.

And it's just really important for people to be able to escape and go out to the woods to relax. There's a lot of new scientific data out there that says that people going out to the woods actually receive a calming feeling, and they're using this more and more over drugs to help people fight anxiety and other issues. So it's—we're part of the ecosystem, and people need to be out there in the woods every once in a while.

EH: Do you ever get—like, you work for the County Conservation Commission and things like that, so do you ever get calls or messages from citizens over different concerns?

RD: We do. Actually, yeah, we do get calls from people when they start seeing an area that is being developed. They try to get us to swoop in and try to save the area. Unfortunately, that's not how ELAPP works. But we also get calls from citizens that—like, if you look at a housing development, a lot of times there's what's called a homeowners association. And in those homeowners association, there's areas called CDD, which is, like, community development districts, which are areas that were set aside within the community for preservation. So wooded areas. And we get calls all the time, since we're conservation, that people are cutting down trees in the community develop portion and they want us to come in and stop that and everything. So we have a lot of people in Hillsborough County watching for people that are destroying the environment, and they call us all the time.

EH: So how do you respond to those calls?

RD: Most of the time—usually we'll give them—because when the Hillsborough County, the property appraiser, you can find out who whoever owns the property, and so we'll let them know who owns it. We'll let them know if it's in their CDD, if it's their HOA. And we also put them in

contact with the proper regulatory agency. So if they're wetland violations, we put them in contact with EPC [Environmental Protection Commission]. If they're upland violations, we put him in contact with our natural resources development team and people who go out and actually enforce the law. So it's great—people call us all the time. They don't like when you cut down trees. Even us, if we cut down trees on our property to maintain a trail or something, they call me to let me know that my crew's out there cutting down trees.

EH: And you're like, "Yes I know. I told them to do it."

RD: Yes, and I have to explain the benefits of why we're cutting down those trees.

EH: Okay. Oh wow, that's interesting. If you had to convince someone that environmental efforts or conservation efforts are so important, how would you do that? What would you tell them?

RD: Well, one thing that I am trying to get out to people—and I do presentations all the time—are the benefits of what's called "ecosystem services." So people—when we—the environment is providing us with services on a regular basis. It's taking in carbon. It's providing us oxygen. It's providing us clean drinking water. It provides us shading of the earth, which, I know as of today it's hot as heck outside. Trees provide shading of the earth. And it provides stormwater retention through open space and everything like that. So when I go out and talk to people and explain to them the fact that, on an annual basis—there's different people when you talk to them. There's the people that love the environment and you can tell them anything and they're going to support you.

But there's other people that look at this as a financial thing, and they say, Well, why should we buy that when if we let it go to development it will start giving us tax revenue and the county can grow and everything like that? But when I can show them—we did a study with the Environmental Protection Agency to show these ecosystem services, and I can show them that our environmental lands, just ELAPP alone, is providing just under a hundred million dollars a year in ecosystem services. So if you were to get rid of all of the Hillsborough County lands, you would have to build enough stormwater retention ponds to take on all the water that our properties are taking. You'd have to figure out a way to start cooling the earth that our properties are doing. You'd have to figure out a way to build a machine that pumps out fresh oxygen, which our properties are doing.

So on an annual basis, our ELAPP properties are giving us just under a hundred million dollars. And when you think about what we've spent on ELAPP, which is about \$280 million over 33 years, our preserves are paying for themselves every two and a half years through ecosystem services. And that gets a lot of people to understand the value of these properties. It's not just looking at it because it's pretty and green. It's actually providing us with health benefits and services that we need to survive.

EH: Okay. And you said that you do presentations all the time everywhere. What types of presentations do you do? Where do you do them?

RD: I do presentations everywhere. Over the last couple of months, I've talked to the Sierra Club, the Sun City Sportsmen Club, because they want—they like hunting. So you go down and talk to them about hunting. But I always talk about ecosystem services. That's my number-one thing. I've talked to the Tampa Women's Club. I've talked to the Keystone Civic Association. I'm happy to go talk to anybody, actually. Always carry a thumb drive with me. I always have a presentation just in case anybody wants to see it.

EH: “Hold on, let me pull up this PowerPoint.”

RD: I do. I have a portable projector, too. But I talk to everybody, and it's great because some of the situations I walk into, you know that you're walking into where they're going to fight you on everything that you say. But when you start explaining the value to them based on what you know that they're looking for, everybody starts to understand the value of nature, even if it's just—like, I talked about my childhood connection with nature, or as a financial person understanding that my nature preserve next to your development makes all of those houses around my nature preserve go through the roof when it comes to buying property. So I give presentations to anybody that wants one.

EH: Okay. So you, like, tailor the message a little bit to the right people?

RD: Of course. Absolutely. Absolutely.

EH: Do they request that you come and talk to them?

RD: They do. All of these are on request. I don't—I never, like, reach out and ask people to do presentations. These are all based on requests. And usually when—usually when I have something new when I go talk to somebody, if they notice something new, the next day the phone is off the hook with people wanting me to come talk to them. So I'm actually—I have presentations through the end of 2020 already booked.

EH: Wow. Any, like, interesting standout places where you're just like, “Wow, I never thought I'd go do a presentation for these people.”

RD: Well, I mean, the Sun City Sportsmen Club was a weird one. And then I have one with the Sun City Men's Club, who I'm going to go talk to. And some of these—like, last time I talked to the Sun City Men's Club, there was 350 people there. So it's big presentations. But yeah, I mean—but then I also get, like, Sierra Club and all of them that you would think that would want me to come. And actually, I was fortunate enough to speak at the Sustainability Summit a couple of months ago here in Hillsborough County. So I went and presented all of the things that we're doing through—with ecosystem services and carbon sequestration projects that we're doing in Hillsborough County on a national platform that was here in Tampa.

EH: Wow. So what's the Sustainability Summit for the people who might not—

RD: The Sustainability Summit was—so people from all over the nation and, I think, actually, from outside of the US came down to talk about ways to help sustain the environment moving forward. So there was a lot of information on, like, solar power, different crops that are being grown here in Hillsborough County now because—to try to sustain the environment, but also what we do too, talking about—my program was talking about how to preserve environmental lands in an urbanizing county and the need to connect corridors and stuff like that, such as sustaining natural lands in an area that is quickly being developed.

EH: Did you see a lot of interest from other people doing stuff in urban environments?

RD: Yes, in fact, I have a few e-mails that I received last week where they want—I've been—so since these presentations and since what we are doing here in Tampa, I—we've applied for and we're being flown up to New York in October to talk about everything that we're doing here in Tampa. I'm working with the University of Florida IFAS [Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences] center to come up with programs that they're going to use through the university, going out to all over the state of Florida. So yeah, we get a lot of interest in what we do.

EH: If someone wanted to get more involved in sort of the efforts that are going on in the county, how would they go about doing that?

RD: Well, if they want to come volunteer with us, they can go through our website. We have a volunteer page that they can go and sign up, and then also, all of our meetings are put on the website, so they can check that out. And one great thing about the ELAPP teams, especially the ELAPP General Committee, which meets twice a year: anybody can be on our General Committee. They're not appointed by the county commissioners or anything like that. As long as you—I think it's as long as you attend two meetings in a row, you become part of the ELAPP General Committee.

So our ELAPP General Committee has 30-plus people on it that all come and want to listen to what we're doing. We bring environmental issues to them, like if there's a request on our site that people want to do certain things on our sites, we bring it to them. So it's a citizen-based committee that has a lot of power in Hillsborough County and is not appointed by the county commissioners. And then once you're on the ELAPP General Committee, you can start participating on our site-review teams, our site-assessment teams, and our site-selection teams.

EH: So this is a little bit out there, but I see you have a degree on your wall up here we can talk about. So when did you get your master's?

RD: So I got my master's a few years ago. So I took about a 14-year break from school, and I decided that, you know, I really wanted to go back, because here on the environmental-lands side we deal a lot with the environment. You know, we deal with passive recreation and everything like that. And I really wanted to branch out and learn about people and the environment and all of that. So all of these things that I'm talking about now, like ecosystem services and stuff like that, I

wanted to learn about that. So I went back to college to get my master's in park and resource management.

EH: Okay.

RD: So the focus of that degree was not just on the resource itself but on how to have the resource allow people to come into that resource without damaging the resource and then making those connections between people and the environment that are—that they may not always realize, but then you can work on getting them back to the understanding that we are a part of the environment. So it was it was great to go back. It was tough with two kids and a full-time job, but it was great to go back.

EH: You went to Slippery Rock?

RD: Slippery Rock, yeah.

EH: Did you do it online?

RD: I did.

EH: Did you have to write a master's thesis?

RD: I did not.

EH: Oh, you didn't. Okay.

RD: I did not. I actually had to do an internship. So as part of my internship, which of course was my job, I had to think outside of my daily duties. So as part of the internship, I actually worked with people from the other side of the department in the regional parks section to learn that business about people, because they're the opposite of us. They have the parks and they mow. But their daily thing is dealing with people, people, people. So I learned about that from them.

And then I set up a committee around Tampa Bay of all the environmental land managers to try to start focusing our efforts not just in Hillsborough County, but since the environment should be based more on like watersheds and stuff like that, it doesn't stop at the hard county boundary that we set. I started working with all of the managers from Polk, Pasco, Pinellas, Manatee, and Sarasota to start trying to manage our lands together, rather—rather [than] just based on where our boundaries are. And it went it went pretty well. It has kind of fallen off, but it was going very well for a time there.

EH: So, what were you guys doing? Like, how do you manage lands together?

RD: So we were, well, the biggest thing that we were looking at is we were all kind of looking at where we have property, where they have property, and trying to make those connections outside of our boundaries. So them trying to connect into Hillsborough and us trying to connect to connect out to make sure that those corridors are continuous—don't just stop at that county boundary. We also looked at different invasive projects that we're doing within our county and their counties and tried to make sure that we focused in certain areas. So it was really starting to look at managing these lands on a regional basis rather than just on a county-by-county basis.

EH: You said it [has] sort of fallen apart a little bit.

RD: I think everybody got a little too busy, but it was great because for about a year, we would get together quarterly and we would go tour. So we started it off, and we brought them to our properties and we showed them some of our restoration success and failures, and then we would go to the different counties and do the same thing. So we started a dialogue of restoration, so, “Hey, what are you guys doing that's working? What's not working? How do we fix this?” So not only did it help on the regional area, but it also—now we have, we still continue to have a connection about restoration and different projects and what's working for people and what's not working for people, so that we don't waste our time and tax dollars by doing something that someone else has already figured out doesn't work.

EH: Okay.

RD: So that continues.

EH: So just to jump back a little bit, you said for your internship you had to work with more, like, the parks and rec department like that and understand the people side of it. Can you tell us a little bit about what that experience was like for you?

RD: It was overwhelming at some times, because in our regional parks, they do a lot of, like, camping activities. So they're definitely doing more of a transactional business, I guess is the best way to put it, like they're dealing with people coming in wanting to rent spots and stuff like that. Lots of complaints on that side from about different things like bathrooms breaking and everything like that. So they have to focus more on the—they're more focused more on the amenities. So it was a lot of—it was—they deal with a lot of complaints on that side.

EH: What were some of your biggest takeaways from that experience? How do you apply that experience to what you do now?

RD: One of the biggest—well, the biggest takeaway from that experience is that our parks are still loved by the citizens of Hillsborough County and from all over the place, like the campers came—they come from out of state. A lot of them come from the Northeast to come live down here for the winter months. So our parks are our definitely loved by the people. And I think that we need to be

ready for more people to start coming out on the nature preserves, because there are more and more people finding the nature preserves through different things that we do, like the hiking spree, where we highlight all of our properties and people come out and hike.

So the biggest thing is I want to make sure that as we develop our recreational plans, based on the number of people I saw in our parks, that all of the areas that we're going to allow people to go through will not damage the ecosystem. So that's—really, being prepared for people to come out on the nature preserves is what I saw the most.

EH: What do you consider your biggest accomplishments in the ELAPP program?

RD: So far, the biggest accomplishment that we have is there's a site that used to be called the Cone Ranch property. It's now named the Lower Green Swamp property. And when we first got our bond funds back in 2009 after that referendum, myself and my director, Forest, said that that was the number-one site that we needed to buy. At the time, it was still owned by the Public Utilities Department as a well field, and they didn't really want to sell it. And then all of a sudden, commissioners and public works, or public utilities, started thinking about maybe selling it to private people and making huge ranch properties out there.

There were talks about a giant sports facility out there, and we knew that that piece of property was just a very important piece to what we were trying to do. Not only in Hillsborough County, but it connects into lands and Pasco and Polk and then connects into the 250,000-acre Green Swamp area. So it's a huge—it's a really important environmental link to have animals from those properties come in to Hillsborough County. So we kept saying that it was the most important piece, and there were people above us at the time in our department saying that it was—never going to get it. You're never going to get it. Take it off your list. You're never gonna get it. Stop dreaming. Stop dreaming. And we own it.

EH: So how did you—

RD: And it wasn't—I mean, it wasn't—I'm not going to, it wasn't us. But what happened was one of the commissioners said, if we're going to start exploring private, we need to set up a committee to go out there and actually look at the property and figure out what would be best for the property. So they set up a committee of different environmental people, no one from staff, that went out there and toured the property. And those people saw exactly what Forest and I saw too, that it was an environmentally significant piece of property, and they recommended that it be put into the ELAPP program. So for—I can't remember exactly, but we only had to pay what they paid for it back in the '80s. So we got almost 13,000 acres for about \$11 million.

EH: Wow.

RD: Yeah. In 2010. So it was great to just know that not only did we see it, other people saw it too, and our dream became a reality. I mean we got 12,800 acres at one time, our largest site and one of our most visited sites in Hillsborough County.

EH: So you've had a couple of decades' experience doing all of this conservation [and] environmental work. Do you have any memorable moments that really stick out to you?

RD: There's actually—there's probably a few, I mean, from each of my jobs that I've done here in Hillsborough County. The best one as far as the person that oversees the buying and nominating of property still is Lower Green Swamp. There's a couple of other properties out there that I went in and—during the review process—and talked and got them on the list that had been purchased that have been great, but the current Lower Green Swamp is definitely the best. When I was on the spray crew, even though it was very hard work, it was always rewarding to come back to a site that you treated all the exotics and you would find the native plants starting to survive. You'd find species that you've never seen before like orchids starting to grow up. That was very rewarding.

It's always rewarding to do a prescribed fire and know that you're managing the property the way it's supposed to be. It's very nerve wracking to be the person that's in charge of that fire. But that's rewarding. And then, as the invasive species task force coordinator, pulling together 15 different organizations to focus on a project—one of the biggest projects we did was the Upper Tampa Bay Trail, where we cleared all the Brazilian pepper along the trail for a couple-of-mile area. And that was extremely rewarding too, because you had people out there from all these different places plus volunteers. It was just great to see everybody come together to get a job done. So there's been some really rewarding times here at Hillsborough County. I still come to work happy every day, and I know that that's a good sign.

EH: Yeah, that's a great sign. So the point of this—we host this audio online and these collections online so they're available to students to use for research, for the public to listen to. So, what would you want someone listening to this or any of these collection programs really take away when they're hearing your stories and everybody else involved?

RD: I think one of the biggest things to take away, especially if you listen to the original history part—portion, plus what we're talking about now, is that while people may tell you that it's not important, always be thinking forward about what you want to do. Back in the '80s when Jan Platt and Gus [Muench] and all of them started kicking around the idea of the ELAPP program, everybody thought they were crazy. And now here we are, the largest local preservation program in the state of Florida, 33 years strong. People model their programs after us and what we do. It's just—if you have an idea about preserving something or enhancing environmental qualities in your area, stick with it, because there's a lot more support out there than you know.

EH: Do you have anything else?

Jane Duncan (JD): Just one question. I'm curious about carbon sequestering. You talked about that when we first met. Can you explain what that entails?

RD: So we actually lucked out with our project. There's a couple of ways that you can set up—it's called a “carbon sequestration bank.” So, what you're doing is you're setting up an area that the

vegetation is pulling in the carbon from the air, so it's removing it. So the project that we did at the Lower Green Swamp Preserve is we found areas that are currently full of mature trees that are really pulling in a lot of carbon. And we set it aside under the agreement so that—and then all these scientists come out and they measure the cubic tons of carbon that it's pulling in based on leaf size, canopy—they do a lot of different measurements out there. So now there's an area out there that's owned by Hillsborough County. It has a conservation easement over it by the organization that's paying us for it, and they're paying us \$7 a metric ton of carbon that they assume it's pulling in. So over the next 10 years, we're going to make a little over a million dollars for just having trees on our property.

And while the financial benefits are fantastic, the thing that I love the most about it is it puts a 40-year conservation easement on the property. So I know that that property can't be touched for at least 40 years. And the ELAPP program, it is preserved in perpetuity, but you never know. I mean, but now I know that there's an extra layer of protection on that property. So when I retire, I know that at least that area that's set aside as the carbon bank is going to be there. And one unique thing about the state of Florida is we're in what's called a “voluntary market.” California has a mandated carbon-mitigation market. If you are going to put carbon into the air, you have to pay to mitigate that carbon that you're putting in the air. Nowhere else in the country has that.

So the person or organization, whoever that's paying us, we have a broker. So the broker made the deal, but whoever is paying for the carbon here in Hillsborough County is pretty much doing it out of the kindness of their heart. They don't have to do it. So it's amazing that somebody is paying us just to have trees on our property and to continue managing it the way that we're managing it now.

JD: That's wonderful.

RD: Yeah. It is wonderful. We're really trying to expand that program here in Hillsborough County because that money that we get paid back can be used for restoration. It can be used for staff. It can be used for anything that we need that maybe the county can't supply the budget for. We can use that money for it.

JD: Plus, it's a way to kind of put a financial—

RD: Another value. Right.

JD: It's unfortunate that you have to, you know, translate it in those ways, but if it helps the program. It helps people understand the value of the environment around them.

RD: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JD: Thank you so much.

RD: Thank you.

EH: Yeah. So that was it for all of the questions I have for you, so unless you have any final thoughts or anything—

RD: Nope.

EH: Something that we didn't touch.

RD: No. I think you did a great job.

EH: Okay, great. Well, thank you so much. This has been really wonderful.

RD: Thank you. I appreciate it. I appreciate you doing this.

End of interview.