

The Windy Hill Initiative: A Common Future on Common Ground
by Sally Morrison, Windy Hill Initiative committee member

The Windy Hill Initiative grew out of local individuals' desire and determination to preserve this remarkable piece of Florida landscape forever and the ability and willingness of Green Horizon Land Trust (GHLT) to do just that.

In the larger scheme of things this impetus is an acknowledgement of a disheartening trend; across America, and especially in Florida, natural and agricultural lands are disappearing. When we lose these kinds of lands to development, more than the land is lost – we lose the rural character that sustains a way of life and defines us.

Located approximately 300 feet above sea level at its peak, Windy Hill competes with National Historic Landmark Bok Tower Gardens for the highest point in peninsular Florida. It is bounded on the west and north by Crooked Lake, an Outstanding Florida Water, and on the south by lakes Moody and Patrick.

The focus for initial conservation consists of approximately 90 acres west of Harris Road to Crooked Lake and south of Seminole Road to Cody Villa Road. This area is divided into numerous parcels devoted almost entirely to the production of citrus. The view of Crooked Lake and the Lake Wales Ridge from there is vast and unrivaled, and for generations people of all ages have come to this spot to witness and wonder.

At the heart of the Windy Hill Initiative is the concept that the natural lands and agricultural lands on Windy Hill are good neighbors on common ground. For example, natural lands can effectively buffer residential areas from agriculture. Meanwhile, agricultural lands provide important open space.

Proponents of both land types grasp the critical importance of such things as good stewardship and the prudent use of resources like water. They live close to the land, value it, and defend it. And these days they worry about its future. Citrus Greening still has the upper hand. Wildlife habitat continues to decline.

The Windy Hill Initiative is about providing a viable common future for the lands of Windy Hill by offering financial options to growers that will preserve the Crooked Lake viewshed and create opportunities for restoration of natural habitat. Through private donations, GHLT proposes to purchase distressed citrus properties in fee or purchase agricultural conservation easements.

Properties acquired in fee by the land trust may be restored to sandhill or another suitable habitat. Acquisition of easements would provide capital for landowners to continue agricultural operations while ensuring the land will continue in agricultural use. Either way, the future of Windy Hill remains green, and the rural character of this part of the Lake Wales Ridge is preserved.

Windy Hill Initiative committee member Steve Morrison would be happy to discuss this project with you in greater detail. Call him at 863-443-4716.