

# A way to preserve our treasured land



**Conservation easements are an excellent approach to preserve special places in Manatee County such as Triangle Ranch.** [PHOTOS COURTESY OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATION]

**A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization to preserve outdoor treasures**



**Lee Amos**



**Cattle graze amid watery pastures at Triangle Ranch.**

Manatee County has an incredible combination of cultural and natural history, unique and found nowhere else in the world. The problem is, it's disappearing fast. However,

this November, Manatee County residents may have a chance to preserve their most treasured places.

If approved by the

Manatee County Commission later this month, a referendum will

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## AMOS

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appear on the November ballot, entitled "Water Quality Protection, Fish and Wildlife Habitat Preservation, and Park Ad Valorem Tax Bonds."

Voting yes on the referendum will provide a much-needed source of funds to preserve Manatee County's finest places.

Over the next few months, I will bring to Herald-Tribune readers vignettes of beautiful Manatee County, to help you understand what's at stake and what an approved referendum could do.

This month, I want to talk about Triangle Ranch, and a special land preservation tool called a conservation easement.

In 2013, the deep-rooted Triangle Ranch was put up for sale. A retired park ranger from Myakka River State Park, Paula Benshoff, called our office at Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast and asked if there was a way to preserve the land.

She described its unique location, situated in southeast Manatee County, across Clay Gully Road from Myakka River State Park. Three miles of the Myakka River flowed through Triangle Ranch before entering Myakka River State Park. Preserving the ranch would forever ensure clean water flowing through the park and into Charlotte Harbor.

This opportunity piqued our interest, and we asked to meet the landowners and see the land for ourselves.

The property owners were the Carlton family, who had treasured and cared for the land for more than 100 years. In fact, an earlier family member, Dink Murphy, once owned thousands more acres that eventually became Myakka River State Park. (Search the web to learn more about Garrett "Dink" Murphy).

The family ethic was therefore one of long-term respect and honor for the land, and they generously showed us around the property.

Standing on the banks of the Myakka, we looked out at the oak-lined marshland found there, a 2,500-acre vista, more than three times the size of Upper Myakka Lake.

That September, the dark flood waters of the Myakka had imbued the vibrant green marsh



**In 2013, the deep-rooted Triangle Ranch was put up for sale.** [PHOTO COURTESY OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATION]



**Triangle Ranch, Copyright Glenn Gardner** [PHOTO COURTESY OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATION]

with life, painting a scene that looked like an African river delta, taken from the pages of National Geographic.

Long-horned cattle grazed watery pastures, roseate spoonbills fed among rushes, iridescent ducks and white pelicans floated on the water, and dark eagles and spotted osprey turned in wide circles overhead. It was beautiful.

Conservation Foundation worked to put the pieces together, and after three years, we helped the Carlton Family find a conservation buyer, and helped the new owner partner with the Southwest Florida Water Management District to sell a type of preservation agreement on the property, called a "conservation easement."

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization.

Each conservation easement is designed by the landowner to specifically meet their unique needs, situation and land character.

Under a conservation easement, the land continues to be private land that the owner can use for hunting, fishing, farming, grazing and/or recreation. An agreed-upon number of additional houses may be built. The property is usually not open to the public. It can be bought

and sold and passed on to heirs. And special features — like fields, forests, water and scenic views — are preserved for future enjoyment. In short, the land is preserved as the landowner wishes, thereby creating a legacy of working lands and natural areas that will be passed on to future generations.

Special places in Manatee County, like Triangle Ranch, deserve preservation, and conservation easements are an excellent approach.

Rather than taking farms and woodlands out of private hands and extinguishing that homestead heritage, easements preserve the land in all its facets: water, nature, history, beauty. And by keeping the land private, conservation easements benefit the public while avoiding the cost of public ownership and management.

Still, there is one primary cost: While some landowners may choose to donate an easement, at other times it must be purchased.

An easement reduces the land's full development potential and therefore reduces the land's value. An appraisal is performed analyzing the before and after value of the land, and the landowner is paid for the difference.

Sometimes, the landowner requests partial payment and "donates" the rest as a

tax-deductible charitable gift, an arrangement called a "bargain sale." A special program for conservation easements provides enhanced tax benefits. Either way, that's the cost of a conservation easement. But the cost is a fraction of buying the land outright for public ownership, and the resulting benefit hits a triple bottom line, where the community, landowner and environment all come out ahead. For this reason, conservation easements are an excellent way to save Old Florida. Unfortunately, sources of funding are scarce. That's where a Manatee County referendum could do a lot of good.

Now if you want to experience the Triangle Ranch area for yourself, I suggest driving out to Crowley Museum and Nature Center, whose observation tower looks out over Triangle Ranch. Visit [www.crowleyfl.org](http://www.crowleyfl.org) to learn more, and be sure to check the hours, as they change seasonally.

The drive to Crowley Museum passes through Sarasota County and the community of Old Miakka, where you'll see the Old Miakka School House, the site where the Old Miakka Hootenanny is enjoyed every October. You'll also pass dozens of yellow yard signs, advertising a community movement to preserve the region, despite development pressure. And after you see the beautiful countryside, I trust you'll agree with their message: "Keep the Country Country," they say. Yes, Manatee County residents can do that — and more — by voting yes this November.

I'll bring you more details next month.

*Lee Amos is Land Steward for the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast.*