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Birdsong Nature Center land permanently protected through collective effort

Thanks to the collective efforts of conservation-minded voters and elected officials, along with public and private funding support, the long-term vision for Birdsong Nature Center has finally come to fruition. The entire 565 acres located on Meridian Road in Grady County are now permanently protected.

In June 2023, parties from Birdsong and Tall Timbers – a nonprofit organization based between Thomasville and Tallahassee – signed a conservation easement agreement to limit the development of the land permanently and to protect its natural resources. This agreement is attached to the land and will remain in effect regardless of future ownership.

Tall Timbers is an accredited land trust with a successful history of land conservation in the Red Hills region of South Georgia and North Florida. Currently, Tall Timbers holds over 156,000 acres of conservation easements.

“Placing the entirety of Birdsong’s land under the permanent protection of a conservation easement has been a goal since our inception, said Birdsong Executive Director Kathleen Brady, “Our founders, Betty and Ed Komarek, would be very pleased.”

The Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act, which received 83% support from Georgia voters in 2018, provided significant funding through sales tax from outdoor recreation stores for the conservation easement. Tall Timbers and other conservation organizations in Georgia advocated for the Act as a dedicated funding mechanism to protect lands critical to wildlife, clean water, and outdoor recreation.

The Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program, which implements the Act, selected the Birdsong easement project proposal from statewide applications to receive a “Conserve Georgia” grant totaling \$635,620. The proposal was highly competitive thanks to additional funding from Grady County Commission, the Grady County Joint Development Authority, and financial support from the Conservation Fund, EJK Foundation, Alexander and Vann, LLP, and Tall Timbers.

Funding sources secured a total of \$800,000, with approximately 75% from public and 25% from private sources, to acquire the future development rights on approximately 440 acres of Birdsong. It's worth noting that the remaining 125 acres had already been placed under a conservation easement by the Georgia Wildlife Federation in 2008.

Individuals who choose to protect their land from future development with a conservation easement can receive compensation for the value of the rights held in the conservation easement through Federal tax deductions,

state tax credits, direct funding or a combination. Compensation is calculated based on the difference between the assessed value of the land with and without the conservation easement in place.

In Grady County, the conservation easement on Birdsong is compatible with the county's Conservation Use Valuation Assessment (CUVA). Many rural landowners apply for the 10-year covenant, which reduces county property taxes for agricultural, timberland, and environmentally sensitive lands.

The new revenue from their development rights is a big opportunity for Birdsong Nature Center. Executive Director Kathleen Brady explained, "This conservation easement permanently protects the lands we know and love as Birdsong while also providing financial resources that we can set aside to ensure the long-term existence of Birdsong as an education and recreation asset for the region."

The relationship between Birdsong Nature Center and Tall Timbers is not new. In 1958, Betty and Ed Komarek played essential roles in founding and running Tall Timbers as a research station dedicated to understanding fire and natural ecosystems. In 1938, the couple acquired the Birdsong property, eventually leading to the establishment of Birdsong Nature Center as a nonprofit organization in 1986. The center provides public and youth educational opportunities, complementing research and advocacy efforts at Tall Timbers.

"We are so excited to have Tall Timbers and Birdsong working together to permanently protect this special piece of the Red Hills. Additionally, we are honored that the project supports the conservation and outdoor recreation goals of the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program and the other public and private partners who made this happen," noted Shane Wellendorf, Land Conservancy Director at Tall Timbers.

The Birdsong Nature Center Board is planning a fall 2023 event to celebrate this land conservation milestone with the community. Visit www.birdsongnaturecenter.org for more details in September.

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