



Suwannee-St. Johns Group

Sierra Club

Newsletter

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VOLUME 37 • NUMBER 2 • February 2007

Getting to Know the Little Brown Job

BY BILL RADUNOVICH

To many of us, there is only one kind of sparrow in North Central Florida—the “Little Brown Job.” But contrary to popular belief, there are actually many different species of sparrows in our area.

Our February speaker, Adam Kent, will discuss the diverse species of sparrows in our area. He will show us the different types of sparrows in North Central Florida and how to identify them, and he will describe their habitats and behaviors.

Adam’s interest in nature started as a small child. A love of sharing his passion about the natural world eventually led him to pursue master’s degrees from the University of Florida in both natural resource conservation and education.

Since 1983, Adam has been leading nature tours to Costa Rica, Canada, Mexico and the Amazon, as well as within the U.S.

His experiences living in and traveling throughout Latin America, Europe and Asia have equipped him with a broad understanding of ecological principles, a keen sense of humor and an ability to relate to people of all ages and nationalities. He

led natural history trips in summers in Alaska for Alaska Wildland Adventures, from 2000 to 2006.

Adam has been especially fascinated with birds his whole life. In addition to conducting bird surveys in Florida for more than 20 years, Adam has written a guide to the shorebirds of Baja California. He has also co-authored a paper about birds of the Lake Titicaca region of Bolivia and has



reviewed *A Birder’s Guide to Alaska* for the *Journal of Field Ornithology*.

And, most notably, recordings he made in 1991 in southern

Mexico led to the description of a new species of bird, the Nava’s Wren.

While working for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2000, Adam developed *Bird Detective*, a bird-identification activity guide now being used in schools throughout Florida. Adam also created bird lists for wildlife management areas in Florida and helped develop the Great Florida Birding Trail.

Currently, Adam serves as the Scrub-Jay Conservation Coordinator for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation

Commission.

Adam will bring all of this knowledge and experience to his talk at our February meeting. Even though most North American sparrows lack the bright colors of many warblers, sparrows’ distinctive shapes, interesting behaviors and subtly beautiful patterns can allow us to identify them with often only a quick glance.

Sparrows and their often secretive behaviors can present identification challenges in Florida in the winter. After you understand the basics of the combination of shapes, behaviors and patterns, you, too, can do away with the term “Little Brown Job.”

GENERAL MEETING

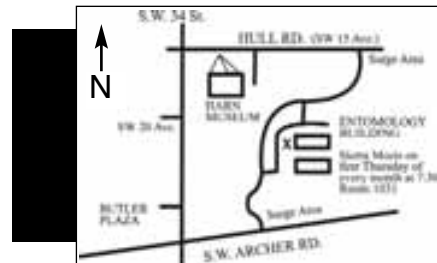
Thursday, Feb. 1, 7:30 PM

Entomology/Nematology Building on the UF campus
(Just east of the Performing Arts Center. Turn south off
Hull Road on to Natural Areas Road.)

NORTH CENTRAL FLORIDA SPARROWS

ADAM KENT

SCRUB-JAY CONSERVATION COORDINATOR
FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION



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An Inconvenient Winter

BY ROB BRINKMAN

Spring has sprung kind of early this year. While we are having a wetter winter than normal, other areas such, as Central America, where it should be the rainy season, are experiencing unusually dry weather. Welcome to global warming, where the weather—while not always hotter—is definitely unusual.

In the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, global warming is compared to rolling a pair of dice that is increasingly loaded. More often our weather will be abnormal, and often but not always, hotter.

A Pennsylvania development company has plans of its own for a profitable spring. On page 4, a local coalition explains how the SpringHills development of regional impact is in the process of submitting a “substantial deviation” form the previously approved DRI for the area around Northwest 39th Avenue and Interstate 75.

The required amendments to the comprehensive plan would double the commercial area and add more than 3,000 more dwelling units. The commercial area proposed for this development would be equivalent to one-and-a-half times the area of the Oaks Mall. At our January meeting of the SSJ Sierra Club Executive

Committee, the members voted unanimously to join the Coalition for Responsible Growth in opposing these changes to the DRI.

Meanwhile, after extensive and at times tense negotiations, the Sierra Club has reached a partial settlement with respect to the Seminole Electric Co-operative’s coal power plant in Palatka. According to the settlement terms, Seminole will buy and distribute to the customers of its member utilities \$200,000 worth of compact fluorescent light bulbs. At a wholesale cost of 99 cents a bulb, this should result in the distribution of 200,000 bulbs. Over the life of these lamps, the emission of as much as 160 million pounds of carbon dioxide could be avoided, as well as the related levels of all other pollutants, including sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, particulate matter and mercury. Seminole agreed to lower emission levels for all three of its coal plants in Palatka more than required in the draft permit issued by FDEP.

Seminole also agreed to assign a project manager to investigate future renewable energy options, including the potential for using methane from the Putnam County landfill to fuel generators, as well as solar wind and biomass projects. Significantly,

Sierra Club refused to relinquish the right to challenge the prevention of significant deterioration permits that Florida environmental regulators must issue on behalf of the Environmental Protection Agency to ensure the protection of air quality in federal conservation areas.

While Sierra Club staff negotiated the final agreement, the SSJ ExCom expressed a desire for Seminole to acknowledge the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Because we are the ones who live in the area, we will be closely watching the implementation of this agreement.

Florida has a new governor and also new heads of important state agencies. There has been a generally positive response from the environmental community towards the new Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole and the new Secretary for the Department of Community Affairs, Tom Pelham, who led DCA when the growth management act was first implemented.

I am encouraged by Gov. Charlie Crist’s action to replace two Public Service Commissioners with the possibility that more changes may be forthcoming. The FPSC plays a pivotal role in the permitting of power plants by certifying the need for new generation.

CHAIR’S



CORNER

see CORNER, page 3

Visit the National and Local Sierra Club Websites!

National: <http://www.sierraclub.org> • Local: <http://www.gatorsierra.org>

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FOLDING PARTY

Interested in hosting a newsletter folding party? Contact Scott Camil at 375-2563

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Wildlife-Friendly Yards

BY KAREN GAREN

We all lead busy lives and don't spend as much time as we'd like getting out to parks and preserves for exercise and to view wildlife. If you're one such person, you can instead entice wildlife into your yard and your life.

What a pleasure to be doing dishes and to watch out the window the antics of birds and squirrels. And to mow the remaining patch of lawn after ensuring the big old female toad has retired for the day. To fetch the mail, pausing to watch butterflies flutter on flowers. And to rejoice with the pair of wrens on their third nesting of the season, even if the rat snake ate the second.

All living things need food, water and safe shelter. Supplying water can be as simple as a dish under an outside spigot that's allowed to drip, or as elaborate as a planted water garden fish pool.

If you provide a bird bath, do not make it the focal point of your front yard. Find a nice piece of statuary for that. Birds are shy about bathing. They prefer their bath tucked into an out-of-the-way corner with overhanging shrubbery and trees to protect them from prying eyes of hawks and owls, and to sit in and preen after their dip. Bath bowls should have fresh water every few days and be scrubbed of algae every week.

A diversity of herbaceous plants and shrubs provides sources of food for insects,

birds, reptiles, and small mammals. Some plants commonly regarded as weeds, such as pokeberry and Bidens, have great wildlife value and can be attractive in their own right.

If you wish to provide bird feeders, they must be guarded from squirrels and filled regularly, because birds will come to depend on them. Giving squirrels their own covered feeding station relieves some pressure and comes in handy for disposing of chopped vegetables, fruit, stale bread and crackers, and other kitchen scraps. If enhanced with peanuts, sunflower seeds, corn and birdseed, birds will use it as well. All other kitchen waste can go to a compost bin open to the ground.

Birds will feed on fly larvae, while box turtles will munch on vegetables and fruit scraps.

Refrain from over-manicuring your yard. Let corners and lot lines fill with shrubs and trees. Sunny areas along walkways can be planted with flowers. Native plants are pest resistant. Don't use pesticides. Keeping yard waste on site maintains nutrients. Leaf rakings and grass clippings make excellent mulch. Throw your spent

Christmas tree on top of a branch pile.

One of the greatest losses to ecosystems due to land clearing is of dead trees, invaluable food sources for woodpeckers, but especially as cavity nesting sites for woodpeckers, kestrels, owls, flying squirrels and others. Sadly, wooden phone poles that serve the same purpose are being replaced with concrete pillars.

Yards with large trees that provide screening cover can have nest boxes installed high up. Nest boxes have openings



of various sizes to accommodate various species of birds. If you have dead trees in your yard that aren't threatening structures or activity areas, let them stand. Lop branches for safety and add to the stick pile.

As more green open spaces become converted to development, beleaguered wildlife can use friendly yards as refuges. The wilder you let your yard get the more wildlife will use it. Wouldn't you like more wildlife in your life?

CORNER, from page 2

Last month's newsletter had an article by SSJ Conservation Chair Paula Stahmer that dealt in part with the search for a new GRU general manager. Many of the concerns expressed in her article have proved to be well founded.

About the time this newsletter is being prepared for mailing, the Gainesville Commission will have before it a field of only three candidates. One is the current manager of the water and wastewater division of GRU and another was recently terminated from his position as head of the utility in Lansing Michigan.

There were several other candidates who were characterized as unsolicited

applicants; they were not included in the recommendation of candidates to the City Commission by the consultant Mycoff and Associates. Many have gotten the impression that a limited field of unimpressive candidates was recommended to the Commission to make it likely that the candidate currently at GRU would be selected.

In my personal opinion, at a minimum the search needs to be redone by a competent firm and it needs to advertise widely in order to maximize the pool of candidates.

It may also be an opportune time to consider a re-organization of GRU to once again make it part of the general government with a department head rather than

a separate entity with a general manager. What's the difference? Among other things, at least a \$100,000 in annual salary costs. The current candidates are seeking in excess of \$200,000 a year—more than the combined salaries of the seven-member City Commission.

Next month I hope to report on a seminar I am attending called Fostering Sustainable Behavior, presented by Dr. Doug McKenzie-Mohr, an environmental psychologist. It involves what is known as community based social marketing and explores how people can be motivated to engage in sustainable behaviors. This method involves community based activities and direct contact with individuals rather than media outreach.

SPRINGHILLS MEGA-DEVELOPMENT

A Taxpayer and Traffic Nightmare

BY THE COALITION FOR RESPONSIBLE GROWTH

SpringHills is one of the largest single developments in the history of Alachua County. The project of a Philadelphia developer, SpringHills is 600 acres of big-box stores, warehouses, hotels and tightly packed housing. It would fill the entire area between Interstate 75 and Northwest 39th Avenue and San Felasco State Preserve and have far reaching negative effects on our county.

A smaller proposal from the developer was approved by the Alachua County Commission in 1999. It had 1,971 dwellings, 495,000 square feet of offices, 801,342 square feet of stores, 459,471 square feet of warehouses and industries, and 748 hotel rooms.

With little notice to residents, the developer now presents a new and grossly expanded proposal that clearly violates the spirit and provisions of Alachua County's Comprehensive Plan, a document that provides our best assurance that growth will be managed. The developer wants to double its stores to 1.5 million square feet and pack in 317 more dwellings.

To visualize the breathtaking size of SpringHills, imagine a development one-and-a-half times the size of the Oaks Mall and bloated farther by tightly packed houses, warehouses, apartments and hotels. Estimates are that population will increase by 15,000 and tens of thousands of people daily will visit or work there.

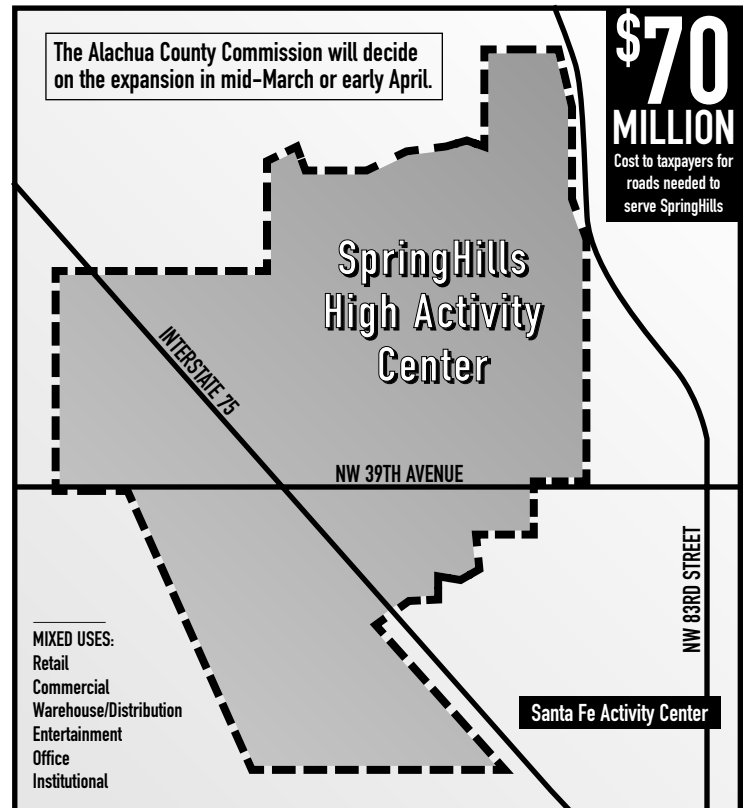
To realize its ambitions, the developer wants NW 39th Avenue to be six-laned like

nearly I-75, a road to be built from NW 39th Avenue to Millhopper Scenic Road, and a bridge to be built across the interstate to the entrance of Meadowbrook.

The developer's plans were reviewed with alarm by the North Central Florida Regional Planning Council, which published a report detailing its fears. The council's concerns include:

- Traffic congestion will have "significant adverse impacts on the regional transportation network." SpringHills will cause three intersections on NW 39th Avenue to become too overcrowded in a few years. Worse, traffic will congeal down Fort Clarke Boulevard, where it collides with the 11,000 additional vehicle trips of the recently approved Newberry Village development on grid-locked Newberry Road. This impact is not addressed by SpringHills.

- Roads costing \$120 million are needed to serve SpringHills. The developer might pay about \$50 million, and county residents must pay about \$70 million. This will tie up money for needed projects elsewhere in the county for years to come.



- The developer has no survey or plan to minimize loss of plant species. The comprehensive plan calls for protection of strategic ecosystems, preservation areas and wetlands. Also, a county review raised concerns that invasive plants would spread to San Felasco Preserve.

- There is a geological "fracture" and sinkhole under SpringHills that could dump pollution directly into the Floridan aquifer, the source of our drinking water.

see SPRINGHILLS, next page

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SPRINGHILLS, from previous page

The developer has acknowledged this threat but has not addressed it.

- No analysis of storm water runoff has been provided. The homeowner's association of Meadowbrook, a subdivision downhill from SpringHills that was flooded in 2004, asked for but did not receive answers from the developer.

- The water management district wants the developer to implement water conservation, groundwater, and surface water monitoring and management plans. The developer has not complied.

- The developer has not, as required, addressed adverse

Our coalition, like the Sierra Club, seeks responsible growth. The best way is to follow the comprehensive plan, rather than rely on a developer that frequently does not provide requested information, has not conducted required research, and wants to break several covenants in the comprehensive plan.

To approve this development, the County Commission must conduct a final hearing under the comprehensive plan. The hearing is expected in mid-March or early April. For the commission to hear the concerns of residents, a group of laypeople organized the Coalition for Responsible Growth. Our purpose is that of

“With little notice to residents, the developer now presents a new and grossly expanded proposal that clearly violates the spirit and provisions of Alachua County's Comprehensive Plan.... The developer wants to double its stores to 1.5 million square feet and pack in 317 more dwellings.”

impacts on the recreation and open space requirement of our comprehensive plan.

- The developer has been asked by the state Department of Community Affairs for documentation to justify changing the comprehensive plan. The developer has not complied.

- The comprehensive plan calls for reducing poverty in East Gainesville, but SpringHills is too far away to offer employment opportunities to residents there.

the comprehensive plan, which in the words of the commission itself is to “slow sprawl in the county's rural areas and western Gainesville while encouraging higher density infill within Alachua County municipalities.”

We ask Sierra Club members to express their concerns to the county commission via e-mail, letters, letters to The Gainesville Sun and, most importantly, to visit individual commissioners.



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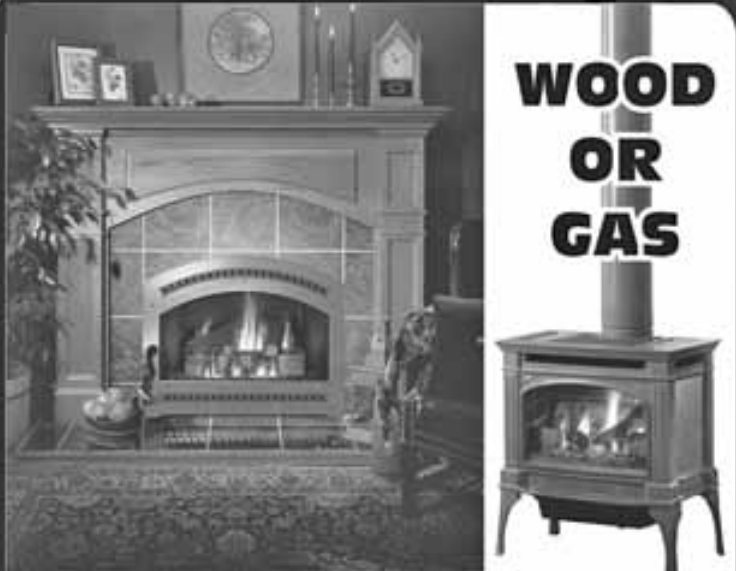
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SCHOOL CONCURRENCY'S COMING

Does Anybody Care?

BY PETER REBMANN

Local officials are well along in the process of creating Alachua County's school concurrency management system. They will soon make decisions on critical aspects of that system in order to meet a state deadline of July 2008.

Despite the profound impact it will have on growth, public participation in the process has been minimal.

In Florida, concurrency means providing new public facilities to support new growth. These facilities must be provided at the same time that new growth occurs.

Local governments must provide the facilities required by growth. Therefore, state law gives local governments authority to deny permits for developments that would cause overuse of those facilities.

A concurrency management system is a process created by a local government to apply the state concurrency laws to a particular public facility. Applied to schools, such a process is called a school concurrency management system.

School concurrency is therefore a management system for preventing school overcrowding. It does this by establishing rules that allow local officials to deny permits for developments that would cause school overcrowding.

You can tweak school concurrency to

have a large or a small effect on restricting new developments. As officials start drafting the final features of our system, debate is heating up over certain critical details that will have the greatest effect on how it works.

Three details are especially controversial: level of service standards, concurrency service areas and school siting.

- Level of service is a way to legally specify when a school's enrollment has exceeded its capacity. State law does not dictate how to measure a school's capacity or how to tell when that capacity has been exceeded. Elected officials must decide those details as they create our management system.

- Concurrency service areas are geographic areas within which the impacts of specific developments on specific schools are weighed. If a development will overcrowd any school within its CSA, then permits for that development might be denied. State law does not specify how to draw the boundaries of CSAs. Elected officials must agree upon those boundaries as they create our management system.

- School siting is a process used by school boards to decide where to build new schools. It can have a profound impact on development. State law requires an assessment of the impact of developments on schools but not of the impact of schools on development. Elected officials must decide whether or not to require the latter as they create our management system.

As mentioned, you can tweak these features to have the least possible impact on developers. Our local officials appear inclined to do just that.

Take capacity as just one example. There are three standard ways to measure school capacity—FISH (Florida Inventory of School Houses) capacity, program capacity and core capacity. Without going into technical details, these normally yield the largest, the second largest, and the smallest school capacity respectively.

Developers naturally want the largest measure of capacity. Greater capacity means less chance their developments will cause school overcrowding. Our officials have chosen FISH capacity, the largest, as the county's measure of school capacity.

Such things happen when public participation in the process is low. In six public meetings on school concurrency over the last year, public attendance has ranged from two to eight persons.

School concurrency is obviously low on most peoples' list of things to think about. Unless more people make it a priority, the foxes will end up not just guarding the hen house, but also running off with it.

Making it a priority means accepting personal inconvenience. Not making it a priority means accepting a weak and docile system. The choice is clear but the present prospect is grim.

People may think there is still time to discuss the issue. But officials plan to settle the final details of our management system during the spring of 2007. There is little time for talk. Indeed, there is precious little time to act.

Only a joint effort by large numbers of alert citizens can prevent the systematic undermining of our school concurrency system. The consequences of continued public apathy are real and dire.

The time is now, the choice is ours. School concurrency's a-comin'. Does anybody care?

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GAS TAX

THE COST OF SPRAWL

AC07

BY DWIGHT ADAMS

A recent poll of Alachua County residents showed that traffic congestion is their top quality-of-life concern. Traffic congestion is the certain outcome of the sprawl growth and car-dependent policies that have been followed by Alachua County for decades.

Commissioners are again looking for sources of revenue, particularly a 5-cent increase in gas taxes, to pay for transportation improvements.

At its January meeting, the SSJ Sierra Club Executive Committee voted unanimously for conditional support of the proposed 5-cent increase in gas tax for Alachua County.

Although most people squawk about the “high price of gasoline” (significantly less than most other liquid sold), doubling the price could make a dramatic environmental improvement. There would be less driving, a shift to more fuel-efficient vehicles, and more use of mass transit and other means of transportation.

Gas tax is a pure form of user fees, with those using the transportation system paying for it.

At the same time, provisions must be

made for those who must travel to work and such and cannot afford to pay more for gas.

Furthermore, it is fair to pay for mass transit through gas taxes, because it benefits drivers by getting cars off the roads.

More use of mass transit would require that it be relative fast compared with driving in congestion. Bus rapid transit is the only economical way to achieve this here. Rapid is the key, and this requires dedicated bus and high-occupancy vehicle lane along major bus routes.

If there are already four or six lanes, one each way could be designated as BRT or HOV lanes. The added gas tax could be used to construct such lanes where they do not already exist. BRT has been quite successful in the few areas where it has been implemented.

Good mass transit is essential for reducing congestion—building more lanes for cars will not do it. Transportation planners know that if you build more lanes, additional cars will soon fill them (see, e.g., Dom Nozzi’s *Road to Ruin*).

Conditions for Sierra Club support of the tax increase:

- The tax should be distributed to the various local governments using the current state formula, meaning that the City of Gainesville should not forgo its share.

- At least 25 percent of the overall tax increase should be devoted to improving mass transit (through BRT) and alternative modes of transportation, including walking and bicycle paths. Free bus service should be provided to all residents (with only a nominal fee if economics requires it). Routes should be planned to facilitate travel between East Gainesville and various work locations.

- The County’s funds should be used primarily for maintaining and improving existing roadways rather than for building new roads that would entice more sprawl.

- The County and all its municipalities should make more use of impact fees, which currently are fairly nominal.

- If the proposed tax increase is enacted through a referendum, governmental agencies should not expend public funds to promote a particular outcome. Although this requirement by State law has been rendered moot in several case-law rulings, the County should follow the intent of the law.

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FEBRUARY 2007 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

FEB. 1—SSJ Sierra Club Group general meeting, in the Entomology/Nematology Building on the UF campus (see page 1 for details).

FEB. 8—SSJ Sierra Club Executive Committee meeting, 7 p.m., at the Santa Fe Community College Downtown Gainesville campus. Board meeting room.

FEB. 16—Folding Party for the March newsletter. At Scott Camil and Sherry Steiner's house. Call 375-2563, after 3 p.m., for more information.

FEB. 24—Celebration of Water, at Fanning Springs State Park, 9-3 p.m.



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