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Board of County Commissioners
Board of Environmental Protection Commission
Roger P. Stewart Center
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Dear Commissioners:

Audubon of Florida is concerned by recent actions by the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners to eliminate the Wetlands Division of Hillsborough County's Environmental Protection Commission.

Hillsborough County wisely put expanded wetlands protections in place 22 years ago, not simply to preserve the aesthetics of the Tampa Bay area, but to protect our residents' quality of life. Our communities rely on these wetlands to provide important and well-documented beneficial functions. Wetlands provide stormwater attenuation, holding water after extreme rainfall events and helping to prevent or limit flooding in developed areas. Tampa Bay has a stormwater crisis, and eliminating small wetlands will exacerbate it.

Wetlands also pace freshwater flows to the Tampa Bay estuary, helping to maintain that system's delicate balance between salt- and freshwater, and its ecological integrity. Similarly, these wetlands protect the Bay's water quality by helping to clean runoff, removing nutrients and allowing sediment to settle, before the water is discharged to the Bay. Furthermore, these wetlands recharge the flows of the wells upon which our water users depend, and the springs in which our families recreate.

Hillsborough County is fortunate to have such a wealth of wetlands, which function collectively as a vast complex tributary to Tampa Bay. Because of this area's unique natural resources, Audubon has been active in the study and management of Tampa Bay's wetland species for more than seventy years through our Florida Coastal Island Sanctuaries Program.

Through our history in the region, we can attest to its singular importance for wildlife, supporting 50,000 pairs of colonially nesting wading birds of thirty species, fourteen of which are considered imperiled by the state and/or federal government. Hillsborough County's wetlands shelter the state's largest breeding colony of Roseate Spoonbills, 50% of the state's nesting White Ibises, and 10% of the state's endangered Wood Storks, plus many more charismatic colonially nesting waterbirds. These imperiled species nest in our wetlands, and forage in these habitats. The loss of Hillsborough County's wetlands would mean the loss of a devastating percentage of the state's signature wading bird populations.

Other state and federal programs simply do not provide the protection needed by Hillsborough County's unique suite of wetland resources. Fortunately, former county leaders, supported by the Florida Legislature, had the foresight to establish the Environmental Protection Commission's Wetland Division, to address the shortfall in meeting local conservation objectives. In Hillsborough County, the Environmental Protection Commission's priority is to avoid disturbance to wetlands and protect their natural functions and environmental benefits. Collectively, the value of the functions they provide is tremendous. Similarly, the local knowledge and location of the Wetlands Division ensures that their determinations are accurate, impacts are avoided or minimized, and mitigation is well sited. They also are able to ensure that wetlands mitigation is evaluated afterwards for effectiveness, assuring that the public interest is served, and developers' dollars are not wasted on projects devoid of real wetland benefits.

If Hillsborough County chooses to abandon its Wetlands Division and rely solely on the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, or the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers to protect its local wetlands, the local attention our wetlands receive would decline dramatically, and compliance with wetland regulations and protection would suffer. These wetlands perform necessary ecosystem functions for our community at a fraction of the cost of less effective human-engineered solutions.

Commissioners, wetlands are an integral part of the quality of life that makes Hillsborough County such an attractive place to live, and we urge you not to eliminate Hillsborough County's Wetlands Division.

Tampa Bay's world-class resources demand these protections; we hope you will agree with us that wise planning now best serves the community's interests.

Sincerely,



David E. Anderson
Executive Director