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WGP Friends saddened by Yankeetown Town Council;

Town voters urged to protect WGP

Published Nov. 28, 2018 at 4:28 p.m.

YANKEETOWN -- The Friends of the Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve (The Friends) sent a message via email on Wednesday (Nov. 28) alerting interested individuals in a stark reality.

The potential exists for this public treasure to fall into the hands of a private developer.

The Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve (WGP) is a 413-acre parcel of land owned and managed by the Town of Yankeetown.

The property was purchased with funds from the Florida Forever Community Trust. Most of the improvements to the WGP have been made with State Department of Environmental Protection Grants, Felburn Foundation Grants, other small grants, and private donations. General maintenance, utilities, insurance, and other expenses are paid by the Town of Yankeetown with funding from property taxes, and donations from the Friends of the WGP, The Friends noted in the email.

"The Board (of Directors) of the Friends of the Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve wishes to inform our members, volunteers, and the general public of recent developments effecting the Preserve," The email notes. "During the Yankeetown Town (Council) budget hearings in the summer of 2018, there was a discussion about the expense to the Town of maintaining the WGP.

"The Town Council subsequently investigated the possibility of turning the WGP back to the State," the Friends continued," thereby removing the financial responsibility from the Town. The Town of Yankeetown has decided to put an advisory referendum on the 2019 February ballot asking whether the Town should stop funding the WGP. If the Advisory Referendum receives a majority in favor of defunding the WGP, then the Yankeetown Town Council will pursue turning the property over to the State."

If the voters of Yankeetown want to have the town no longer help the WGP, then the state "... would try to find another entity to take over the management of the property – State, County, or a viable non-profit organization. If no entity can be found, it is possible that the Preserve could be sold to a private organization," the Friends noted.

The Friends of the WGP is a non-profit organization that works with Yankeetown to promote and develop the WGP.

"The Friends of the WGP are saddened that the (Yankeetown Town) Council is considering divesting the Town of this community treasure," The Friends' Board of Directors noted. "We believe the property is an asset to the Town, providing unique recreational experiences to our community and visitors. Unfortunately, the Friends do not have the manpower or the financial funding to assume responsibility of the Preserve. However, our mission still stands and we will continue to support the WGP with promotions, programs, and educational events until such time the Preserve's fate is determined.

"Listen up Yankeetown voters," the Friends noted. "The second reading of the Advisory Referendum will be at 6 p.m. on Monday, Dec. 3 at Yankeetown Town Hall. This is an opportunity for you to be heard before this referendum is official. Also, be

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prepared in February to vote your choice on the future of the WGP."

The Friends of the WGP note more for people who not residents and able to vote in a Yankeetown election.

"To our WGP visitors who enjoy this preserve as a public entity, please send your comments and concerns to:

Yankeetown Town Hall, 6241 Harmony Lane, Yankeetown, FL

email: yankeetownTH@gmail.com Phone: 352-447-2511."

Friends of wildlife seek volunteers

Published Nov. 28, 2018 at 3:28 p.m.

LEVY COUNTY -- The Friends of the Lower Suwannee and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges (The Friends) are seeking volunteers to man a desk so that the Refuge headquarters can remain open and visitors will be greeted by something other than a locked gate.

Since last spring, when the group initiated the Friends Volunteers for Front Desk Welcome program, many people have volunteered to help staff the front desk at Refuge headquarters.

The Refuge headquarters are located off of Levy County Road 347 between Fowlers Bluff and Cedar Key.

The Friends originally indicated that the program would go until the end of April and then be resumed in November, but there was enough enthusiasm that a small group volunteered all through the summer.

Now, as many "snowbirds" return, The Friends hope to expand the coverage so that every day the Refuge is officially open -- there will be somebody to greet and assist visitors.

As many of people already know, reductions in staff have severely impacted the remaining staff members. Their responsibilities mostly require them to be out in the field, leaving visitors confronted with a locked gate.

This necessary aspect of life is not very welcoming. By having volunteers in the office, the gate can remain open and visitors can come in and obtain the information and materials they need.

The Friends' volunteers' presence means that staff who are working in the building will not have to be interrupted when visitors arrive.

And, that is essentially what being a volunteer entails: providing a warm greeting, answering questions, handing out materials, and, perhaps, even selling a t-shirt or two.

The Friends have established a schedule, which includes two shifts a day: 10 a.m. until 1 p.m., and 1 p.m. until 4 p.m.

Any interested volunteer is invited to select just a morning, just an afternoon – or both.

For any person who is interested in participating, they are asked to contact Friends Board Member Kit Lane.

Please reply by email at kitglane@gmail.com. Include your phone number and email contact information. The Friends will provide training and support. It is a wonderful way to be involved with the mission of the Friends of the Refuge.