

Conservation

Dr. Pamela Hall — Keeping it Rural

BY NEIL FLECKENSTEIN

On a chilly December evening in 2014, the Leon County Commission chamber was uncharacteristically packed. Rural land owners were there to hopefully celebrate the culmination of a long, pitched battle to protect picturesque northeastern Leon County from incursion by a familiar suburban landmark—the mega-gas station. As Commission Chairwoman Mary Ann Lindley announced the unanimous 7–0 vote adopting strict regulations against building huge gas stations in the Rural land use category, the chamber erupted in applause.

Later, over celebratory drinks at Andrew’s Downtown, members of the Keep It Rural Coalition relived the hard work, time, and considerable expense it took to protect their community. Amidst the members sat Dr. Pamela Hall, nursing a beer and enjoying the moment, but also planning the next steps to ensure Leon County’s rural lands are protected from incompatible development. After all, this was not Pam’s first rodeo. Within a year, largely due to her efforts, the Leon County Commission approved changes to the Comprehensive Plan clarifying that the primary focus of the Rural Land Use Category was to protect the character, natural resources, and rural land use traditions in these areas. Only commercial development that was compatible with the rural and agricultural nature of these lands would be allowed.

For nearly 20 years, working as a citizen advocate, Pam Hall has been at the center of some of the most crucial issues affecting Leon County’s rural lands, lakes, and other natural resources. Advocating for stringent stormwater standards to protect Leon County’s lakes and groundwater? Check. Playing an integral role leading the charge to develop and fund a plan to reduce wastewater contamination of groundwater and Wakulla Springs? Check, check. Spending countless hours analyzing data and providing guidance and recommendations to maintain the Tallahassee-Leon County Urban Service Area to reduce habitat-fragmenting urban sprawl? Check, check, check.

Pam is the first to unequivocally state that many others have contributed significantly to each of these issues. However, few have devoted as much time, energy, and brain power — and hers is a BIG brain — as Pam Hall. And Leon County and the Red Hills are immeasurably better for her many contributions.



Dr. Pamela Hall



Keep it Rural members at the courthouse after a landmark victory. Photo by Dr. Pamela Hall.

A Long Road to Tallahassee

So, let's get this out of the way. Like a number of Red Hills residents (myself included), Pam is a Yankee. She grew up in a rural community in Vermont. (That's probably redundant). She is the daughter of a long-time college administrator and a homemaker and was raised to value education, critical thinking, and intellectual curiosity. Never one to shy away from challenges, Pam went to MIT, earning an undergraduate degree in biology and then to Boston University (BU), eventually earning a Ph.D. in biology. While at MIT and later again at BU, she met her future husband, Scott, a physicist. Like Pam, Scott also has a large brain.

Before settling down with Scott in Tallahassee in 2000, Pam worked for a number of years studying tropical forests in Southeast Asia and the Amazon region of Ecuador, was an assistant professor for six years at the University of Aarhus in Denmark, and an adjunct assistant professor at Florida State University. Her work on three continents gave her insight into well-planned urban areas, like Aarhus, Denmark and also into some of the most remote corners of the world – think tropical forests in Borneo.

When they moved to Tallahassee, Pam found the lush forests and rural character of Bradfordville reminded her of her Vermont home. Not long after relocating, she met attorney Randie Denker, and community leader, philanthropist, and Tall Timbers' Board member Kathy Archibald, both of whom founded the Centerville Rural Community Association. Randie and Kathy were leading an effort to remove a portion of the rural Bradfordville community from the Urban Services Area (USA) — the area within which the City and County encourage intense urban development. Pam became a supporter and advocate for the effort, which ultimately resulted in 1,600 acres of gently rolling hills and forestland being removed from the USA. At approximately the same time as the effort to shrink the USA, a much larger battle in northeast Leon County was already in motion.

A Champion for Our Lakes

The pitched battle over intense commercial development in Bradfordville spanned nearly a decade from the late-1990s to the mid-2000s. The crux of the issue was that Leon County had approved permits for large-scale commercial development *before* the County completed required stormwater studies and other analyses to protect

lakes and the distinctive rural character of Bradfordville as mandated by the Tallahassee-Leon County Comprehensive Plan. Three homeowners' associations — Centerville Rural Community Association, Lake Carolyn Estates Homeowners' Association, and Lake McBride Residents' Association — sued Leon County for this violation. In 1998, a Leon County judge agreed with the homeowners' groups and issued a moratorium prohibiting commercial development and some residential construction across a 20-square mile area in Bradfordville. The moratorium ultimately lasted two years spurring more than 20 lawsuits, before Leon County finally completed the required water quality and other studies.

As the president of the Centerville Rural Community Association, Pam, along with the leaders of the other homeowners' groups, was front and center in what arguably became the most contentious and expensive growth battle in the history of Leon County. Looking back, Hall acknowledges it was not a pleasant place to be given the long, costly, divisive, and highly public controversy that played out like a soap opera in the local newspaper and the 6:00 PM newscast (it was the 90s after all). She notes, however, that substantial gains came out of the Bradfordville controversy, including judicial recognition that the Tallahassee-Leon County Comprehensive Plan had the rule of law and the completion of the long-awaited Bradfordville lakes and stormwater study, which set a high bar for the rigorous approach Leon County would embrace to evaluate impacts to its signature lakes in the future.



Paddlers enjoying Carr Lake, one of many lakes that benefited from enhanced stormwater standards since the Bradfordville dispute. Photo by Brian Wiebler.



Wakulla Springs will benefit from improved wastewater treatment in the Wakulla springshed. Florida Memory Project. Photo by Richard Parks.

Ultimately, as a result of the Bradfordville dispute, Leon County adopted the Bradfordville watershed stormwater standard, which requires treatment that is designed to remove 95 percent of pollutants before reaching receiving waters. Leon County Director of Environmental Compliance John Kraynak commented recently that Pam was instrumental in Leon County adopting the strict Bradfordville stormwater standard, which ultimately led to improved water quality protections in lake basins throughout Leon County. Kraynak praised the rational, data-driven perspective that Pam approached all issues with, noting that she has tremendous credibility with County regulatory staff. Kraynak added, “When Pam talks, people will listen. They may not always agree, but County staff highly respect her perspective.”

Pam’s interest and passion for protecting our lakes, rivers, and drinking water led her to serve on the Leon County Water Resources Committee (WRC). She and the WRC became advocates for a study by Lombardo and Associates that identified wastewater disposal options for the Wakulla Springs watershed. Wakulla Springs is the world’s largest and deepest freshwater spring and a destination for generations of Capital area residents and visitors seeking relief from the summer heat. Unfortunately, Wakulla Springs is also perilously vulnerable to groundwater contamination. The WRC, with Pam leading the effort, and the Wakulla Springs Alliance joining in, saw an opportunity to implement the recommen-

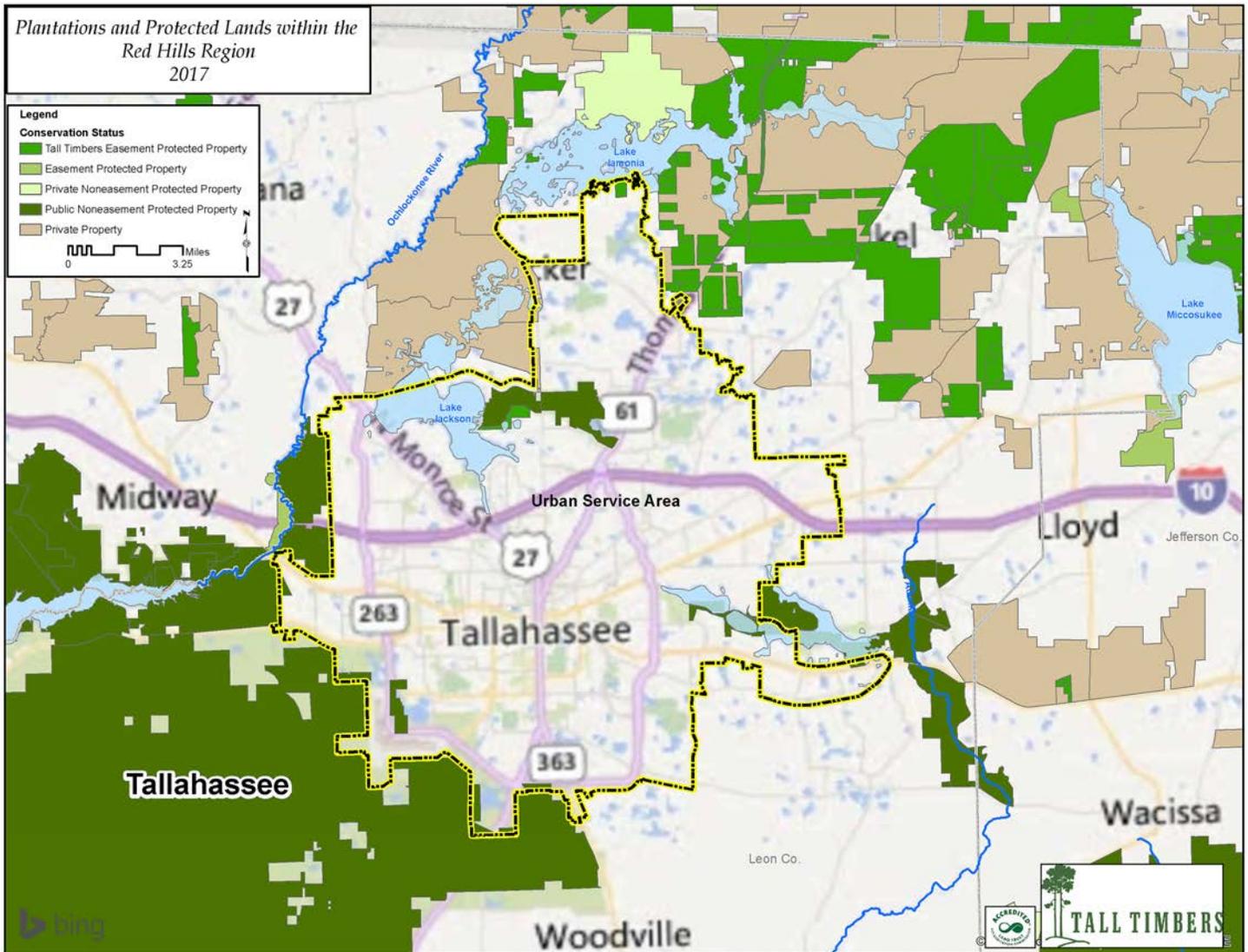
dations of the Lombardo study when the Tallahassee-Leon County one-cent sales tax came up for renewal in 2014. Pam and the WRC successfully obtained \$2.8 million from Tallahassee and Leon County for the plan, which will identify the most appropriate advanced treatment options for wastewater plants and septic systems in rural Leon County. Recognizing her significant contributions to protecting this iconic resource, the Wakulla Springs Alliance presented Pam with the 2018 Wakulla Springs Champion Award.

Protecting Rural Lands

Among her many accomplishments, Pam counts her 20-year effort to maintain the Urban Services Area (USA) as one of the most important. The USA is the portion of the City and County where urban infrastructure and services, such as roads, central water and sewer, stormwater facilities, and transit will be provided to serve urban-scale residential densities. The intent of the USA is to promote well-planned compact urban growth, ensure the efficient use of scarce tax dollars, and protect the natural resources and rural character of areas outside the USA boundary.

Of all the advocacy work in her career, Pam’s efforts to curtail sprawling growth have had the greatest direct benefit to Tall Timbers’ conservation mission in the rural Red Hills region. Pam’s efforts to maintain the USA are vital because it has significantly reduced the seemingly relentless conversion of rural land to residential subdivisions. Pam’s efforts complement Tall Timbers’ community planning efforts and our long-standing Board policy supporting the goals and objectives of the Tallahassee-Leon County Comprehensive Plan—in particular those that speak to the importance of the USA in protecting rural working lands from sprawling development.

In 2003, Pam participated on the Residential Land Availability Committee, evaluating the availability of residential land in the USA. Pam devoted hundreds of hours painstakingly analyzing existing, proposed, and allowed development, infrastructure availability, and population projections. Her analysis demonstrated that



The Urban Service Area protects rural lands from incompatible growth.

the Urban Service Area has capacity for decades of future growth if new residential development is built approximating currently “allowed” densities. Beyond her work with the Residential Land Availability Committee, Pam has weighed in over the years on a number of efforts to bring development outside the Urban Services Area. She has been stalwart in responding to these challenges—always data in hand and a rational argument founded on the goals and policies of the Comprehensive Plan and the fiscal difficulty of providing infrastructure to support development in rural areas. Often, Tall Timbers weighed in on these same contentious issues, defending our conservation interests from incompatible development in rural Leon County. Tall Timbers could not have asked for a better partner.

It recently occurred to me that Pam’s strong will and tenacious spirit reminded me of another Red Hills leader:

Miss Kate Ireland. Though different in many ways, both were tenacious when it came to protecting the rural lands of the Red Hills. Pam and Miss Kate met only once, at a Red Hills Spring Dinner. Miss Kate surprised Pam, saying, “I know who you are.” Pam, responded in-kind telling Miss Kate “And I know who *you* are!” Miss Kate told Pam she knew about her work protecting the Red Hills from sprawling development. (Odds are Miss Kate’s language was saltier than that). After chatting for a few minutes, Miss Kate told Pam to keep up the good fight. Something Miss Kate *always* did.

One approach Pam took to fighting the good fight was meeting regularly with elected officials. Unlike many of the meetings that elected officials have with constituents, the purpose of Pam’s was often focused on detailed conversations about the fine details of complex issues. Water quality, septic tank technology, the cost of extend-



The Red Hills Region provides water quality protection and drinking water recharge. Photo by Darryl Vest

ing (and maintaining) infrastructure to far-flung rural areas—meetings with Pam felt like they should come with a syllabus and study guide. Test to follow.

Leon County Commissioner Bryan Desloge laughs recalling lengthy meetings with Pam going over important development issues in his district. “They were more like study sessions” he quipped. He laughs again recalling Pam telling him he was “educable” following a meeting to discuss maintaining the USA. Later, he comments that while he and Pam have not always agreed on every issue, he greatly respects her rationale perspective, her informed approach to important county issues, and her civility, noting that “She has taught me a lot about land use and conservation.”

Commissioner Mary Ann Lindley has known Pam Hall going back to Lindley’s days as an editor at the Tallahassee Democrat. Lindley has great respect for Pam and her approach to issues. She describes Pam as someone she trusts, noting that Pam isn’t trying to pull the wool over your eyes. She researches an issue, provides her perspective, and is willing to acknowledge other views. Commissioner Lindley says she views Pam as someone with great personal integrity who has had a huge influ-

ence in protecting Leon County’s water resources and rural character.

Of course, you can’t make an omelet without annoying a few eggs. Pam still recalls her favorite response to one of her earlier advocacy efforts in which a landowner referred to her as a “meddling heifer.” She chuckles to this day at the remark and the missed opportunity for a great T-shirt idea. Pam readily acknowledges that people can interpret data differently, have other policy priorities, and a range of motivations. She just asks that decisions be based on good data, consider the potential intended and unintended consequences of all decisions, and do no harm to your neighbors or community resources.

The Big Picture: Red Hills Ecosystem Services

I asked Pam why residents of Tallahassee and other communities in the region should care about conserving the Red Hills. Pam quickly responds, “Ecosystem services.” She continues, “The Red Hills provide essential ecosystem services that we cannot do without.” She stretches out the last four words for emphasis: “WE. CANNOT. DO. WITHOUT. Clean water, drinking water recharge, flood control, climate regulation . . .,” she trails off.

“Many people do not understand that these things are difficult and costly, if not impossible to replicate and the Red Hills does all of them for us at no cost to our residents.” Her advice to elected leaders and the public: “We have to understand the importance of ecological benefits and services that we receive from our natural systems and do a much better job ensuring their sustainability—including the Red Hills.”

Amen.

Still Work to Do

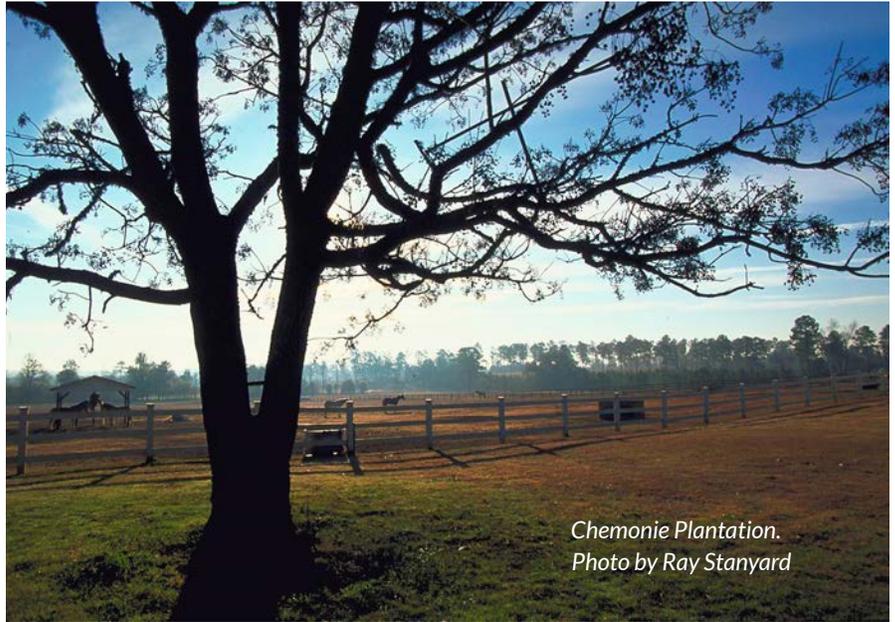
Twenty years after getting involved in her first local growth and environmental issue, Pam continues working on planning issues vital to the future of Leon County. She has worked for nearly three years (along with Tall Timbers’ staff and others) on a focus group helping guide the overhaul of the Tallahassee-Leon County Comprehensive Plan. She’s also considering updating her earlier research on the residential development potential inside the Urban Service Area (owing to now-familiar calls to expand the boundary).

Asked about her own legacy, Pam hesitates a bit but eventually discusses the importance of helping raise standards to protect Leon County’s lakes and, of course, helping hold the line on the USA boundary to protect rural working lands. Ever the scientist, she also notes her willingness to challenge her own assumptions and change her mind in the face of facts. She quickly pivots though to reflect on a favorite quote by Margaret Mead:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Pam says the thing that sets Leon County and the Red Hills apart from other areas is the presence of so many intelligent, committed residents who care so deeply about the environment and quality of life in their community and are willing to give freely of their time, energy, and skills. The same and much more can be said of Dr. Pamela Hall who has left an indelible mark advocating for the protection of Leon County’s lakes, drinking water, and distinctive rural lands for nearly 20 years.

Tall Timbers thanks Pam for her unwavering help protecting the Red Hills and looks forward to continuing our collaboration in the future.



Chemonie Plantation.
Photo by Ray Stanyard

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neil Fleckenstein is the Red Hills Planning Coordinator. He has collaborated with Dr. Pamela Hall and others for 16 years on a variety of efforts to conserve and protect the Red Hills region. Contact Neil: neil@talltimbers.org.

Everybody needs beauty... Places to play in and pray in where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and soul alike. - John Muir

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