

**Thursday, September 29, 2011**

## **Conservation about far more than protecting nature, expert says**

By [Anthony Clark](#)

Alan Front advocates conserving the environment just for an appreciation of nature, but said the choices we make also have major implications for clean water, renewable energy sources and a \$730 billion-a-year outdoor recreation industry.

"There's something you get from these open spaces, a community good that goes beyond the feel-good," said Front, who runs Conservation Pathways and was formerly senior vice president of the Trust for Public Lands, having been involved in about \$2 billion in conservation purchases in 48 states.

Front was one of three guest speakers at the Models of Innovation Series forum about conservation Thursday night as part of the Plum Creek timber company's Envision Alachua effort to involve the community in planning future development of its lands in eastern Alachua County.

From the outset, Plum Creek officials have expressed a desire to balance development with conservation.

As much as being about scenic beauty, the landscape connects us to our culture and history — "the various facets of the American landscape that dwell in us as much as we dwell in them," Front said.

He credited Florida's water management districts with protecting land that filters water and provides flood control and other benefits.

"We need clean water. Do we want to create clean water by putting together water treatment plants that cover the landscape and cost hundreds of millions or billions of dollars?" he asked.

Forests can provide woody biomass as an alternative to mining, pumping and drilling for energy, he said.

Outdoor recreation supports one in every 20 jobs in America from outfitters who sell backpacks and other gear to communities that benefit from ecotourism, he said.

But conservation funding makes up a tiny slice of the federal budget pie, he said.

Asked about current public opinion of conservation, he said the general sentiment of anti-government involvement breaks down when it comes to open space in a politician's district or state.

Robert "Hutch" Hutchinson of the Alachua Conservation Trust said Florida is seeing an unprecedented level of antagonism from the governor and legislators, even though 70 percent of Floridians identify themselves as environmentalists.

"We haven't made voting green by our legislators an important litmus test," he said.

Hutchinson provided a rundown of local conservation efforts that have produced the vast majority of preserved spaces over the last 40 years, including purchases by the state, the Alachua Conservation Trust, water districts and voter-approved tax-funded efforts such as Alachua County Forever and Wild Spaces & Public Places.

Alachua County has 103,320 acres in conservation. That makes up 18 percent of the land area, ranking the county 37th out of 67 Florida counties.

The local efforts have conserved 14,000 acres, which ranks 11th in Florida.

Hutchinson said the young people in the audience may see a day when every legally developable lot is developed and the only green space is legally preserved.

"It's a race between development and conservation," he said.

Busy Byerly of the Conservation Trust for Florida recounted her group's efforts to work with farmers and ranchers to provide conservation easements, transfer development rights or use deed restrictions to receive tax breaks on estate taxes.

**Thursday's forum was the second Models of Innovation event following an Aug. 4 forum on economic development. Plum Creek is hosting a community workshop at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at Springhill Missionary Baptist Church, 120 SE Williston Road.**