

Tampa Bay Times

Hillsborough commissioner's wild idea? Native flowers by roads



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Sunday, June 9, 2013 4:30am

TAMPA — Hillsborough County Commission Chairman Ken Hagan wants to save kittens by having fewer killed at his government's shelter.

Now fellow board member Al Higginbotham is pushing the county to plant flowers.

Who knew the red-meat eating conservatives on the County Commission were such softies?

Higginbotham has won board support to have the county pursue a program of planting native Florida wildflowers along its roadways and in its highway medians, seemingly tapping his inner Lady Bird Johnson.

"Please don't tell anybody," he said, joking.

If it works the way he hopes, the county would partner with private not-for-profits that encourage the planting of native wildflowers, some of which have been all but wiped out by sprawling development. Those groups, some including some that provide grant money, potentially would help train county employees in how and where to plant the flowers and keep them beautiful.

The proposal drew enthusiastic support from other commissioners when Higginbotham introduced it May 15 after a contentious debate about another issue.

"I'm a lover of wildflowers," gushed former Navy man Mark Sharpe. "I think this is kind of a cool item."

Anyone who has traveled the North Carolina mountain highways from, say, Asheville to Smoky Mountains National Park understands the idea. There, thanks to an active program by the state's department of transportation, flowers bloom in a kaleidoscope of colors in highway medians and along the shoulders from spring to fall.

It's one of the things that make driving the state's roads a pleasure, particularly in contrast to Florida's mostly straight, flat and grass- or pine-flanked highways.

Johnson, the former first lady, was famous in part for leading a similar effort on a national scale in the 1960s, promoting the planting of native wildflowers along highways, as well as on Washington, D.C., government grounds and parks.

Florida offers a rich variety of native flowers as well, from the purple petals of the Tampa verbena to the yellow blooms of coreopsis, a type of aster more commonly known as tickseed that is the state's official wildflower. The state was initially called La Florida, after all, which loosely translates to "land of flowers."

But you wouldn't necessarily know that strolling through most Florida residential subdivisions, where native plants were scraped away and replaced by St. Augustine lawns and all manner of exotic plant species.



Photo courtesy of North Carolina Department of Transportation
The North Carolina Department of Transportation Wildflower Program began in 1985 as an integral part of highway beautification. Wildflower beds are installed and maintained across the state by Roadside Environmental personnel in each of the 14 highway divisions.

"This is Florida," said Lisa Roberts, executive director of the Florida Wildflower Foundation. "Let's let Florida look like Florida. It's that sense of place that I think we're losing."

The Wildflower Foundation receives the proceeds from sales of an automobile license plates that features the image of a coreopsis. Sales have raised more than \$3 million since the license plate was first offered in 2000.

It awards the money to local governments and other groups in a variety of grants used to train roadway managers or provide seeds for community or school wildflower gardens. By passing the resolution, Hillsborough commissioners open the door for the grant money and join 23 other counties in doing so.

Going native has a variety of benefits, Roberts said.

Native plants have evolved to roll with Florida's sandy soils and fickle climate, with its daily summertime downpours followed by periods of sustained drought. So they can weather the peaks and valleys, requiring fewer replantings and less water once established. They don't require the fertilizing, either, that contributes to the degradation of waterways.

Native plants attract pollinators that, too, have evolved to feed off what was initially was here but is now in less supply. So they support native honeybees, butterflies and other bugs.

The Wildflower Foundation is working to create a native bloom highway corridor in the Panhandle that it hopes will also prove to be a tourist draw, or at least enhance the state's scenic image for the people who already visit.

Higginbotham said there is an actual Lady Bird behind his proposal. His wife, Devon Higginbotham, is president of the Suncoast chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society and he says she is the one who planted the idea.

In additional to the natural beauty and environmental benefits, there's an argument for native plants that any fiscal conservative can get behind, Mrs. Higginbotham said.

Fewer replantings mean less cost to maintain county rights-of-way. And as it stands, the county often lays sod along its roads, which requires crews to mow and provides little aesthetic appeal.

"So much of the right of way is mowed," Devon Higginbotham said. "It seems like such a waste."

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