

Hardee County Adaptation Action Areas

Task 2: Proposed Adaptation Strategies

Completed by:

Kimley-Horn & Associates Inc.

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Introduction

Florida communities face increasing impacts of heavy rainfall, increased temperatures, and severe storm events, impacting infrastructure, property, and the daily lives of residents. The Adaptation Action Area (AAA) Plan serves as a strategic framework to address vulnerabilities within Hardee County to strengthen the community. To kick off this effort, the Central Florida Regional Planning Council organized community workshops to understand the concerns of residents. A set of adaptation strategies was developed to address community concerns based on the results of the community meetings. This community outreach effort is followed by a vulnerability assessment which involves identifying vulnerable areas which are disproportionately impacted by the effects of severe weather events by collecting flood data. The adaptation strategies and vulnerability assessment along with the quantitative data from the exposure analysis and sensitivity analysis will inform the AAA boundaries and assist the County prioritize investments and guide policymaking decisions. The Hardee County Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessment (CVA) is being completed in accordance with the requirements outlined in Section 380.093, Florida Statutes.¹

The vulnerability assessment involves identification of the County's critical community assets such as healthcare facilities, government buildings and libraries/community centers, schools, public health, public safety facilities, parks and natural areas, and roads and evacuation routes. The most up-to-date data and information is used to map current and projected rainfall flooding to evaluate the potential impacts on those critical assets during future weather events. The protection of these assets will ensure the County can continue to serve the community after major weather events. Combined with data related to each of the communities, the County can identify and prioritize critical action areas for investment. Adaptation Action Areas were adopted into Florida Statutes in 2011 through the Community Planning Act, Chapter 163, F.S. "Adaptation Action Area" is an optional comprehensive plan designation for areas that are vulnerable to flooding and can be used to prioritize funding for infrastructure needs and adaptation planning. This process includes assessing added vulnerabilities and risks to the identified hazards as they pertain to resource limited populations. Additional risks are being examined beyond flooding, including severe weather, wildfire, transportation, housing, and access to healthy foods.

Public Outreach

Several meetings were held with municipal staff, community organizations and champions, and the public to gain an understanding of the specific needs of the community in vulnerable areas based on their experiences. The outcomes of these meetings informed the specific strategies and recommendations of the AAA. Following the in-person meetings, municipal staff were granted additional time to coordinate internally with relevant departments. This extension allowed for a more thorough identification of locations prone to flooding or requiring heightened attention, ensuring a more comprehensive and informed response plan.

- Meeting 1: County and Municipal Staff – December 18, 2024

A virtual meeting was held with staff from Unincorporated Hardee County and surrounding communities including the City of Bowling Green, the City of Wauchula, and the Town of Zolfo Springs, to gain insight regarding vulnerable areas and the challenges they face, such

as flooding, washed out roadways, limited funding for post-disaster recovery, and barriers to engaging with the community. Additionally, attendees provided details related to upcoming plans and projects within each jurisdiction, including a resurfacing project and the installation of street lighting along a portion of US-17.

- Meeting 2: Community Organizations – January 6, 2025

Key community organizations and non-profits from the County and City attended this virtual meeting to share their insights based on their services and relationships to the community. Participants included Hardee Help Center, United Way, Hardee County Crisis Center, and Heartland Coalition for the Homeless. They discussed challenges such as transportation, access to food, and flooding.

- Meeting 3: Vulnerable Communities – January 9, 2025

Hosted at the Hardee County Agri-Civic Center, this meeting was open to the public. Participants shared their experiences with flooding, giving specific examples of streets and neighborhoods with the most challenges during and after rain events. Additionally, participants shared concerns related to poor walkability and challenges of recovery following a disaster. The following roadways/locations were listed as areas of concern related to flooding:

Bowling Green:

- 4821 US-17, Bowling Green, FL 33834 (Crews Bank)
- 713 E. Main Street.
- Chester Avenue.
- County Line Road near Bertha Fulse Street and Doyle Parker Avenue.
- Creek near Avion Palms.
- Jones Street.
- Main Street and W. Central Avenue (Train Depot)
- Maple Street.
- US-17.

Unincorporated:

- Bronco Drive.
- Center Hill Road.
- Circle Drive.
- Clifton Bryan Road.
- CR-665.
- Crewsville Road.
- Cross Creek Lane.
- Fish Branch Road.
- Gillete Road.

- Goose Pond Road.
- Gordon Road.
- Jim Williams Road.
- John Carlton Road.
- Locklar Road.
- Magnolia Manor.
- Maude Road.
- Murphy Road.
- Old Town Creek Road.
- Parnell Road.
- Pine Level Road.
- Rest Haven Road.
- Ridge Rainey.
- River Road.
- Riverview Heights Subdivision.
- S. Barlow Road.
- Steve Roberts and Kelly Roberts Road.
- Sweetwater Road.
- Ten-Mile Grade Road.
- Tolbert Stephens Road.
- Van Simmons Road.
- Wauchula Hills.

Wauchula:

- E. Bay Street at Martin Luther King Jr Avenue.
- Green Street.
- Griffin Road.
- Hawaiian Drive and Citrus Valley.
- Louisiana Avenue.
- US-17 Northbound near Will Duke Road.

Zolfo Springs:

- Cracker Lake RV Park.
- Peace River trailers along Parkview.
- Suwannee Street.
- 9th Street.
- E. 4th Street and Palmetto Street.
- Pioneer Park.



Images 1 & 2: Public Meeting hosted at Hardee County Agri-Civic Center

Identified Hazards

The hazards identified by the County, community representatives, and public, include:

- Flooding
- Hurricanes and Tropical Storms
- Severe Weather
- Infrastructure
- Response and Recovery
- Community Engagement
- Land Use and Urban Design
- Ecosystem Restoration
- Emergency Preparedness
- Transportation
- Healthy Foods
- Housing

Flooding

Despite being inland, Hardee County is vulnerable due to the many waterbodies and waterways in the County, such as lakes, streams, and wetlands which are susceptible to rain-induced flooding. Severe weather events such as hurricanes, tropical storms, and thunderstorms, and a change in weather patterns have created hazards for the residents, community, and businesses in the County. There are several different types of weather events that lead to this severe flooding, including: hurricanes, severe thunderstorms, tropical cyclones, seasonal rain, and similar weather-related conditions.

The County has three main waterways – the Peace River, Horse Creek, and Charlie Creek – all of which are areas within the 100-year floodplain. The properties within these areas are most susceptible to flooding events. According to the 2020 Hardee County Local Mitigation Strategy, 107,443 acres of land and waterways are located within the 100-year floodplain and vulnerable to

flooding throughout the County.² Flooding was the most frequently reported issue during public meetings, highlighting the impact on the community.

Hurricanes and Tropical Storms

Because of the nature and size of the hurricanes and tropical storms that Florida experiences, Hardee County is subject to the effects of such weather. Hardee County often experiences high winds and inland flooding generated by hurricane activity due to the low elevation of the County, causing damage to vulnerable structures.

Based on historic trends, there is a high probability that hurricanes and tropical storms will continue to impact Hardee County, causing property damage, displacing residents, and resulting in loss of life.

Severe Storms

Hardee County is susceptible to severe weather, including lightning, thunderstorms, hail, and tornadoes. While these severe weather events can be interconnected, they can also occur as isolated incidents. Located in Central Florida, which has about 90 thunderstorm days a year, Hardee County is particularly lightning prone. Thunderstorms can often create hail, which can damage structures, vehicles, and crops. Additionally, thunderstorms can result in flooding, property damage, and disruption to utility services. According to the 2020 Hardee County Local Mitigation Strategy, Hardee County has historically been impacted by tornadoes, which can be expected to continue to affect the County in the future.³

Severe storms can wreak havoc on vulnerable communities in Hardee County, as these communities often lack the resources to prepare for and recover from such weather events. Inadequate housing and lack of insurance exacerbate the challenges created by the damage caused by severe weather and put residents at risk of displacement.

Infrastructure

Several areas within Hardee County have faced severe hazards. The hazards, such as severe heat, hurricanes, flooding, sinkholes, and similar events have caused havoc on the infrastructure within the County. In 2017, Hurricane Irma caused \$1.8 million in property damage and displaced residents from their homes; Hurricane Ian caused \$38 million in property damage and \$230 million in crop damage due to catastrophic flooding. Thunderstorms have a history of causing property damage in the County. Dating back to 2001, Hardee County Emergency Management reported that a severe thunderstorm impacted Bowling Green, resulting in the overturning of a large travel trailer. Strong winds caused significant damage, bringing down trees and large branches throughout the area. The estimated financial loss was approximately \$35,000. In 2002, severe thunderstorms caused roof damage to three (3) homes and knocked down several trees with damages estimated at \$10,000. In 2003, another dangerous thunderstorm impacted ten homes in Zolfo Springs, linked to another \$35,000 in damage due to the over 50 mph wind gusts. Thunderstorms of similar strengths have also caused downed power lines, damage to personal vehicles, and damage to the siding of buildings, and often causing thousands of dollars in damage.³

Fortunately, the County is undergoing infrastructure improvements, such as State Road 64 (milling, resurfacing, and safety improvements), Center Hill Road Bridge, Pioneer Park (water and sewer, bathhouse replacements, playground equipment, and ADA compliance), and Rural Infrastructure

Fund Projects. A portion of the funding for these improvements comes from nearly \$5.5 million from the state. Between 2018 – 2024 the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) provided two rounds of funding for the reconstruction of the Center Hill Bridge, totaling over \$2 million. The second round of funding was provided through the County Incentive Grant Program to cover the increased cost of the project due to inflation. Another \$2.5 million was funded for a resurfacing project along Martin Luther King Jr Avenue between Bay Street and Sally Place, covering over a mile of roadway. The other \$1 million was awarded from the Florida Department of Commerce for the infrastructure improvement to Pioneer Park.⁴

Response and Recovery

Hardee County has faced several physical and economic stressors. Hurricane Ian went directly over Hardee County in 2022 and caused major flooding and damage. According to Recover Hardee, which provides long term recovery support to individuals and families affected by disasters, Hurricane Ian destroyed 720 homes in Hardee, with an additional 613 homes majorly damaged.⁵ Since then, several other storms and seasonal rain events have occurred resulting in additional property damage and the need for some structures to be completely gutted. Low-income households are disproportionately impacted by the impact of disasters, due to a higher likelihood of living in an older, less stable structure, inability to afford flood insurance, or inability to afford hardening and repairs.

The National Flood Insurance Program requires that if the cost of repairs or improvements to a structure in a high-risk zone equals or exceeds 50% of the building's market value, the entire structure must be brought into compliance with current flood regulations, which can be costly. Funding is critical to the revitalization of damaged structures. Coordinating with local organizations, including nonprofits and philanthropies, federal funding programs, and funding through other organizations such as the American Red Cross, United Way, and SendMeMissions, will help to fund the hardening and repairs to protect private and public properties.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is key to providing information regarding hazards, emergency preparedness and post disaster recovery resources. Outreach and engagement approaches should be comprehensive to reach all residents, regardless of language, ability, and access to the internet.

According to HDPulse, a program of the US Department of Health and Human Services, 671 households in Hardee County experience language isolation, which the Department defines as, “A linguistically isolated household is one in which no member 14 years old and over (1) speaks only English or (2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English ‘very well.’ In other words, all members 14 years old and over have at least some difficulty with English.”⁶ This data is further supported by the U.S. Census data indicating that other than English, 29.4% of residents speak Spanish at home.⁷ Providing disaster preparedness resources in multiple languages and deploying multi-lingual (Spanish and Creole) emergency response teams are essential to overcoming language barriers and ensuring fair access to critical information. These measures strengthen community resilience by addressing linguistic needs and fostering equal participation in disaster response efforts.

Additionally, while 18.7% of households do not have an internet subscription, 94.9% of households have one or more types of computing devices, including smartphones.⁶ Social media offers an efficient and accessible outreach method considering the high percentage of the population with access to the internet and cellular service. Residents can sign up for the AlertHardee County notification system to receive time sensitive messages through email and text messages and the County can post information to Facebook. Other methods include providing information in utility bills, letters sent through mail, and engaging local organizations and faith-based groups.

Land Use and Urban Design

Vulnerable communities are most impacted when there is a lack of policies to improve urban design and sustainability. Hardee County has seen an influx in residential and infill development particularly within the City of Bowling Green. The future land use designations and zoning maps can be evaluated to target infill development in areas of low flood risk, including density bonus opportunities to locate more units where residents and structures would be less susceptible to flooding. Land development regulations should address the required elevation of new structures to improve the longevity of new construction, and in combination with other measures, lead to improved insurance eligibility and lower premiums for the future residents of that construction.

Hardee County, specifically the City of Bowling Green, has a scarcity of traditional grocery stores, leading to deficient access to fresh produce and culturally appropriate food options. The land development regulations could expand to allow small-scale food retailers in areas close to residential neighborhoods and permit mobile groceries to meet the residents where they are, reducing the impact of the lack of transportation access.

Ecosystem Restoration

As flood stressors continue to pose a threat, ecosystems near creeks and streams are increasingly impacted. Without a proactive strategy to maintain these ecosystems, invasive species can proliferate, disrupting the natural balance and affecting the surrounding community. In speaking with the County and City leaders, particularly within the City of Bowling Green, the accumulation of debris and unchecked overgrowth has further strained the area's natural ecosystems' ability to withstand the heavy winds and rainfall associated with these severe weather events.

To enhance community resilience and environmental health, the County, in collaboration with municipal staff, recommends the development of a multi-beneficial park. This initiative would incorporate recreational amenities alongside strategically designed stormwater retention features within County-owned parks, promoting both ecological restoration and community well-being.

Emergency Preparedness

Hardee County has responded to the change in weather patterns and severe weather events by replacing seven (7) bridge structures originally one-lane, with two-lane asphalt and concrete structures. Not only does this assist the County's residents' possible evacuation routes, but the drainage opening at each of the bridges increased, therefore decreasing the vulnerability of flooding.

The County provides AlertHardee, a voluntary emergency alert program that delivers timely updates on critical situations, including severe weather, unexpected road closures, missing persons, and

neighborhood or building evacuations. Residents can sign up to receive these important notifications and stay informed during emergencies through the County's website.

Transportation

Hardee County faces transportation challenges that create barriers to accessing daily needs, healthcare, social connection and resilience in the face of hazardous events. According to community feedback received through the public engagement process, many households lack a personal vehicle and instead rely on friends and family or walking to go to the grocery store, medical appointments, and other daily errands due to the lack of public transportation. An effective transportation system addresses the full range of infrastructure to support a variety of mobility options. Mobility systems are dependent on creating a safe environment that is served by a mix of residential and non-residential uses near one another. Lighting, well maintained sidewalks, and bike infrastructure are necessary to encourage and support a well-functioning system.

While the County does not provide a public transit service, the Central Florida Regional Planning Council developed the Heartland Rides service as a mobility information resource. It serves to connect residents across several counties, including Hardee, with available transportation options which meet the specific needs of individuals to help them access their daily needs by partnering with a wide range of organizations.

Healthy Foods

Exacerbated by limited transportation options, Hardee County residents face significant obstacles to access healthy foods. Lack of public transportation, safe pedestrian pathways, and cycling infrastructure, combined with far travel distances to the nearest grocery store pose considerable challenges for households without a personal vehicle. These barriers not only restrict access to nutritional foods but also contribute to stress factors from the additional time and travel costs, resulting in negative health implications.

According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), a food desert refers to low-income census tracts with a substantial number of residents with low access to retail outlets selling healthy and affordable foods. Distances which qualify as food deserts include half a mile from the nearest grocery store in urban areas, and 10 miles in rural areas.⁸ The USDA Food Access Research Atlas reveals that large portions of Hardee County, particularly the northwest and southeast quadrants, are classified as food deserts due to low-income and low access to grocery stores. Additionally, the northwest quadrant is classified as having low vehicle-access, as more than 100 households do not own a personal vehicle.⁹

Infrastructure damage caused by severe weather and flooding creates additional challenges for residents living in food deserts already impacted by having to travel great distances to access food sources. Pedestrians and bicyclists are at greater exposure during severe weather events which can lead to increased food insecurity. Disruptions to supply chains following a disaster further exacerbate food accessibility challenges.

Housing

With an aging building stock, many homes within the County are at risk of damage from severe weather such as hurricanes and thunderstorms. According to the 2023 American Community Survey, 75% of homes in Hardee County were constructed prior to the year 2000.¹⁰ These structures

are less likely to meet modern building codes designed to withstand high winds, heavy rain, and flooding. Older homes may have degraded roofing, foundations, and drainage systems, making them more susceptible to leaks, mold, or collapse. Additionally, old plumbing and electrical are more likely to fail in the event of severe weather. Retrofitting homes against flooding will reduce property damage and protect residents.

However, such home improvements can be costly, creating a barrier for low-income households to protect their homes against severe weather. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines households who spend more than 30% of their income on housing as cost burdened.¹¹ Approximately 30% of households in the County are renters, of which 58% are cost burdened. Among homeowners, approximately 13% are cost burdened.¹⁰ Spending more than 30% of their income on housing places financial stress on households, in turn reducing available funds to put towards healthcare, transportation, education, food, and savings.

Hardee County Adaptation Strategies

The following strategies are intended to address the weather-related threats identified by the vulnerability assessment and the concerns discussed during public outreach.

Strategies identify opportunities to provide protection from disasters, accommodation to mitigate the effect of future threats, and relocation to avoid further damage. The recommendations consider a variety of approaches, including nature-based solutions, policy changes, infrastructure improvements, partnerships and collaboration, and funding mechanisms. The strategy descriptions incorporate specific locations of concern discussed by the public outreach participants to identify methods of intervention; comments received from the public outreach process can be found in Appendix A.

Through a comprehensive set of strategies, Hardee County can ensure a strong future for the entire community.

- 1. Encourage the installation of green infrastructure and low-impact development (LID) features in municipal codes.**

For example, the train depot at Main Street and W. Central Avenue in Bowling Green floods during afternoon storms; defining and prioritizing the use of LID features and nature-based solutions such as bioswales, pervious pavement, and rain gardens will assist in the storage of water and slowing of runoff, thus improving stormwater management and reducing flooding.

- 2. Incorporate green infrastructure and Low-Impact Development (LID) features into drainage specifications in the engineering standards manual to slow and filter runoff.**

This strategy is intended to work in tandem with strategy number one. The County should dictate the minimum acceptable engineering standards for the LID features to effectuate the necessary drainage quantities and at what speeds.

- 3. Permit mixed-use development in low-risk areas and encourage neighborhood amenities such as grocery stores and retail to serve the surrounding residents.**

Mixed-use developments allow multiple uses within a site, often with retail on the ground floor and residential units above, or in separate buildings within a designated area. These

developments lead to a less car dependent lifestyle when complimentary uses are located within the same development. The municipal regulations should be addressed to permit this type of development.

4. Expand tree canopy to contribute towards walkability by amending the municipal code to require that all new development and redevelopment install street trees.

Street trees in Florida are essential for mitigating severe heat, supporting pedestrians, and enhancing environmental health. They provide shade, reducing the urban heat island effect and making walking more comfortable, especially for those who rely on it as their primary mode of transportation. Trees also filter pollutants like absorbing carbon dioxide, contributing to a healthier environment. Additionally, they help manage stormwater by reducing runoff and preventing flooding. Identify funding mechanisms to plant canopy trees along frequently walked corridors, such as grants offered by the U.S. Forest Service or the Florida Forest Service.

5. Establish standards to require traffic calming measures to encourage slower driving speeds and create a more pedestrian-friendly environment.

Traffic calming measures include elements such as street trees, wide sidewalks, marked pedestrian crossings, and narrow lanes. Slower speeds support a more walkable environment by increasing pedestrian safety.

6. Establish an engineering standards manual and account for severe weather events and support stronger infrastructure development as necessary.

For example, the culvert along S. 1st Avenue in Bowling Green was washed out, limiting access to residential properties. Establishing an engineering standards manual is crucial for ensuring consistent and effective infrastructure planning, providing clear guidelines and minimizing the risk of poorly designed systems that may fail under stress such as the culvert along S. 1st Avenue.

7. Implement streets which serve walkers, bicyclists, bus riders, motorists and freight handlers, consistent with the Florida Metropolitan Planning Organization Advisory Council Complete Streets Best Practices Report¹².

When municipal codes address safe biking and walking for all, sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, and shade would be requirements for development. For example, participants in the community meeting hosted by CFRPC believe that when the new traffic circle in front of Winn-Dixie at 1133 S 6th Avenue in Wauchula was constructed, pedestrian safety was not considered, and the result is an unsafe walking and biking conflict zone. Establishing a sales tax can support a transportation initiative, and secure funding for an effort to reduce traffic related deaths in Hardee County.

8. Facilitate targeted infill development in areas of low flood risk.

Development should take place in areas of low flood risk to avoid damage, which can be facilitated through the Comprehensive Plan by increasing density and intensity in these areas, or through density bonuses. Additionally, providing impact fee credits to incentivize adaptive reuse and building / façade improvements can help direct development to targeted infill areas of low flood risk. Affordable housing should be incentivized in these areas. Additionally, consider density bonuses and/or cluster development in upland areas of the County and require high functional wetlands and other environmentally sensitive lands be preserved as conservation areas.

9. Permit and encourage small-scale food retailers in residential neighborhoods, focusing on fresh produce and culturally appropriate options.

Incorporating mobile vending regulations into the municipal code could provide a more streamlined entry point for food retailers and restaurants. This approach not only lowers barriers for businesses but also enhances food availability in areas where transportation options are limited. Mobile vendors can offer healthy and culturally appropriate food options, helping bridge gaps for vulnerable communities.

10. Increase building requirements to include vulnerability reductions measures such as additional hardening, higher floor elevations or incorporation of natural infrastructure.

Stricter development and construction standards will prioritize long-term vulnerability reductions and lead to a reduction in property damage and improved safety. Raising base floor elevations provides a buffer against flooding; hardening requirements such as hurricane shutters and breakaway walls increase a structure's ability to withstand high winds. At a minimum, requirements should be added or increased in the municipal code for households, utilities, and public facilities to be built or rehabilitated to at least two feet above the Base Flood Elevation (BFE) for a 100-year storm.

11. Require Florida Friendly Landscaping™ for new developments to conserve water and retain runoff and require the removal of invasive species such as the Brazilian pepper, cogongrass, torpedograss, Chinese tallow, and Caesar weed.

Florida Friendly Landscaping™ Plant Guide¹³ provides guidance on appropriate plants for landscaping which provide environmental benefits, such as filtering stormwater, capturing water to irrigate plants, protecting landscapes from erosion, and providing habitat for local species. The use of recommended plants can manage stormwater and reduce flooding, while improving community aesthetics, reducing water pollution, and reducing the long-term costs of stormwater management through natural interventions.

12. Adopt municipal codes that restrict inappropriate redevelopment or new development in areas damaged by inundation, erosion and flooding to prevent future losses.

Municipalities should revisit the Future Land Use and Zoning Maps to direct areas of growth to upland areas. Incentives to increase density and incentives to develop a mix of uses should be used to attract developers to upland areas where history reflects less flooding damage and residential displacement.

13. Revise the Land Development Code to allow non-conforming structures to add flood-proofing without having to bring the entire building into compliance.

With aging homes that predate the existing Land Development Code, Hardee County has many non-conforming structures. When the reconstruction, additions, or repairs exceed 50% of the structure's value, the building is required to fully comply with the updated standards. This can create a barrier for retrofitting existing structures with flood-proofing, which should therefore be exempt from the 50% rule.

14. Execute a written agreement between municipalities and the County for maintenance of the stormwater system on an annual basis so it is prepared for major and unexpected rain events.

Execute a written, legally binding agreement between the municipalities and Hardee County to ensure the consistent and coordinated maintenance of the stormwater management system. This agreement will outline shared responsibilities, funding obligations, and

maintenance schedules to ensure that drainage infrastructure is functioning optimally—particularly in preparation for major and unexpected rain events that disproportionately impact low-income communities. Coordinate with FDOT to add the annual clearing of the culvert along US-17 to the recurring maintenance list.

15. Coordinate with local organizations, including nonprofits and philanthropies, to support emergency preparedness and disaster recovery.

Develop strategic partnerships to build a robust, community-led network for disaster resilience. These partners play a vital role in reaching vulnerable populations, filling resource gaps, and delivering trusted support before, during, and after flood events and other emergencies. Public engagement activities can help educate residents on the resources that organizations such as the Heartland Coalition for the Homeless have to offer. Local organizations, faith-based groups, and community leaders already have relationships with migrant workers to understand their specific needs and vulnerabilities.

16. Partner with local contractors to offer free or low-cost flood-resilient upgrades through strategic funding programs.

Flood resilient upgrades can help protect against future damage, with potential upgrades including elevated structures and waterproof materials. These efforts can be funded through programs such as the Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant or Florida's Elevate Program. Prioritizing the hiring of local contractors and construction workers can stimulate the local economy and build in-community capacity for future resilience efforts. Assisting low-income communities, particularly where homes have already been damaged in past storms, is critical.

17. Prepare a Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan to map the areas where sidewalks exist, identify where connectedness is missing, and prioritize bicycle and pedestrian safety improvements.

This effort is soon to be in progress with the federally funded grant to Hardee County for Safe Streets for All. This initiative will assist the County in applying for funding for these prioritized projects. Implementation of these prioritized projects will reduce traffic related fatalities by improving safe roadway design, promoting safe driving behaviors, and providing for pedestrian and cyclist safety.

18. Prepare a County-wide Stormwater Management Plan.

A county-wide stormwater management plan is crucial for securing funding for projects because it provides a comprehensive, organized approach to addressing stormwater challenges. Having a unified plan allows counties to demonstrate clear priorities, long-term strategies, and cost-effective solutions, making it easier to attract federal and state funding sources like, Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF), Sewer Overflow and Stormwater Reuse Municipal Grants Program, The Watershed Planning Program, and the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP).

19. Pursue shared drainage and water management infrastructure through public-private partnerships.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) for drainage and water management help improve stormwater systems by combining government and private sector resources. Municipalities collaborate with developers, utilities, and environmental groups to fund, build, and

maintain shared infrastructure. Examples include joint stormwater retention projects that cut costs while boosting flood resilience.

20. Regularly inspect and maintain gutters, drains, and other stormwater infrastructure and adopt a routine maintenance schedule in coordination with municipalities.

Community leaders in municipalities within Hardee County have raised concerns about unclear responsibilities for maintaining stormwater infrastructure. Without proper upkeep, the infrastructure's effectiveness declines, increasing the risk of failure. For example, the culvert for the tributary running down the west side of town washed out where it crosses Louisiana Avenue, and has not been repaired. Another example is County Line Road where ditches were constructed by the County and comments from the community leaders indicate the ditches are overgrown, eroding, and not maintained, specifically around Bertha Fulse Street and Doyle Parker Road. Establishing a maintenance schedule and agreement ensures transparency and accountability for those responsible.

21. Adopt or update sediment and erosion-control regulations or practices. Ensure guidelines accommodate changes that may occur due to the anticipated increased, heavier precipitation events.

By implementing updated practices, the county can reduce the loss of soil during heavy rains, protecting agricultural lands and natural habitats. Additionally, enhanced erosion-control measures can safeguard roads, bridges, and buildings from damage caused by flooding and sediment accumulation. This is particularly important near Magnolia Manor, where the community reported culverts and ditches needing upgrades. Sediment and erosion control practices can assist in increasing the life of this infrastructure and are a lower cost solution to replacement of the infrastructure. It is notable that FDOT currently utilizes this area to convey water flow from US-17 that contributes to increased flooding, according to the community feedback. Coordinating with FDOT leadership to convey the serious impacts of the water flow from US-17 could result in infrastructure improvements to that roadway and future FDOT projects.

22. Connect open spaces and ecosystems to establish habitat corridors and improve water management. Identify, establish, and protect corridors that connect fragmented habitats, allowing species to migrate and maintain varied genetics.

By linking fragmented habitats, corridors support ecological processes like pollination, seed dispersal, and predator-prey dynamics. Healthy ecosystems are more resilient to disturbances such as changes in weather patterns or natural disasters. Vegetated corridors and open spaces act as natural sponges, absorbing rainfall and reducing surface runoff. This helps prevent soil erosion and minimizes sedimentation in water bodies. Open spaces and connected habitats can serve as natural floodplains, providing areas for excess water to spread out during heavy rains, thereby reducing the risk of flooding in developed areas. Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation¹⁴ and Archbold Florida Wildlife Corridor Water Benefits Report¹⁵ are excellent examples of how such connections can support both biodiversity and water management. There are significant portions of Corridor Opportunity Areas in Hardee County.

23. Implement riparian restoration and creek maintenance programs to reduce flood risk and support ecosystem resilience.

This strategy emphasizes nature-based solutions that restore natural hydrology, enhance biodiversity, and prevent flooding by enhancing the absorption of excess water. For example, preserving and enhancing the wetlands in and near Pioneer Park will retain floodwater and reduce pressure on the berm. Establishing a comprehensive riparian and waterway restoration strategy focused on stabilizing riverbanks, maintaining local creeks, and preserving native ecosystems will reduce flood risk and improve community resilience.

24. Add the installation of piping beyond the existing fencing near the Water Treatment Plant to a Capital Improvement Program list for Hardee County in order to assist in the efficiency of the water flow adjacent to the City's critical assets.

Direct drainage ditch from US-17 on its way to the Peace River crosses Edison Avenue adjacent to the Wastewater Treatment plant at 596 Lake Branch Road and continues through the property south of the treatment plant to the east. 27.628591 N, -81.817660 W on Edison Avenue. Per community leadership, discussions with Hardee County indicate a promise to install piping beyond the existing fencing, but have not yet been completed.

25. Strengthen micro-mobility tactics such as enhanced networks of pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and other means that increase fairness and emphasize connectedness.

For example, the City of Bowling Green is requesting new street lighting for much of the area of downtown along US-17. The City coordinated with FDOT and was quoted \$6K to replace the lights. The new lights will provide appropriate and much needed lighting to help drivers see pedestrians. In addition, recent pedestrian fatalities at the intersection of US-17 and Hardee Street are cause for additional engineering treatments to slow traffic moving into the City of Bowling Green. Options include a Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacon (RRFB) to offer pedestrians a flashing sign to notify motorists of their intent to cross the street or a raised crosswalk with a refuge island. Establishing a sales tax for a transportation funding initiative could fund projects to enhance traffic and pedestrian safety.

26. Support the expansion of the County's regional trail system to provide pedestrian and bicycle routes off main roadways and to connect to adjacent municipalities.

Support the continued buildout of and safe connections to the Blueway, Greenway, Equestrian, Hiking, and Bicycle Trails Plan.

27. Establish a comprehensive awareness program to ensure residents are informed of evacuation zones, clearance times, shelter locations and capacities, and evacuation routes.

This comprehensive awareness program should include updates to the Hardee County Emergency Management Disaster Supply Kit Checklist to include the additional elements: family disaster planning, home protection tips, evacuation zones, routes and shelters, what to expect after the disaster, etc. These should be distributed countywide in English, Spanish, and Creole through partnerships with local utility companies sending traditional postal mail as well as social media blasts and physical bulletin boards at local faith organizations. This effort should include public education and engagement activities. These checklists should also include resources related to immediate relief following a disaster,

such as emergency sheltering or temporary housing, evaluation of damage, how to seek medical care, and small business aid.

28. Educate, inform, and disclose flood hazards to the public through various mechanisms such as real estate and lease disclosures, public mapping resources, community or citywide public information campaigns, or other innovative and effective approaches.

Ensuring that flood hazard information is included in property transactions and rental agreements can help residents make informed decisions. Providing flood maps through municipal websites and physical copies in public offices can help residents understand their risk levels. Lastly, The County can launch public awareness campaigns using social media, local news outlets, and community events to educate residents about flood risks and preparedness.

29. Explore the opportunity to designate the Train Depot on the National Register of Historic Places to unlock additional funding mechanisms for improvements on the property.

Pursuing the designation of the Train Depot as a site on the National Register of Historic Places can provide opportunities for federal and state funding, tax incentives, and technical assistance that can be used not only for preservation but also for critical flood-resilient upgrades. This approach protects the cultural and architectural heritage of the community while enhancing the property's capacity to withstand climate impacts.

Resources

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Appendix A: Public Outreach Meeting Comments

Meeting 1: County and Municipal Staff – December 18, 2024

City of Bowling Green

- The ditches west of US-17 flood easily, even during summer afternoon thunderstorms. Maintained by three employees in zones. *See Strategies 1, 2, 11, and 21.*
- Train Depot at Main Street and W. Central Avenue (near the downtown master plan boundary) floods and holds water with any rain event. *See Strategies 1 and 21.*
- The median on US-17 by Crews Bank (4821 US-17, Bowling Green, FL 33834) experiences flooding. *See Strategies 1, 2, 11, and 18.*
- Chester Avenue was washed out in Hurricane Ian and has since been fixed but experiences flooding behind Crews Bank. New homes are anticipated here. *See Strategies 10, 11, 19, and 28.*
- Jones Street, Doyle Parker Avenue, and Main Street experience flooding. New homes are anticipated here. *See Strategies 10, 11, and 28*
- Flooding issues at W. Central Avenue and Main Street. The culvert fills up with sand and needs to be vacuumed out. Water overflows out to the centerline of the street for days following a heavy rain event, draining from US-17 to Main Street. *See Strategy 14 and 18.*
- Where Main Street dead-ends at its westernmost point (713 E. Main Street) a private drainage system was installed to drain into the roadway into the private agricultural land. Currently the City is dumping into it without a written agreement. During Hurricane Ian the water only stood for a couple of hours, but Hurricane Milton and others have caused more flooding in the past. Dirt and sand are clogging the ditch system and impairing its efficiency. *See Strategy 14 and 21.*
- Direct drainage ditch from US-17 on its way to the Peace River crosses Edison Avenue adjacent to the Wastewater Treatment plant at 596 Lake Branch Road and continues through the property south of the treatment plant to the east. 27.628591 N, -81.817660 W on Edison Avenue. Discussions between the City and Hardee County include installation of piping beyond the existing fencing. *See Strategy 24.*
- The City of Bowling Green has requested a stoplight at the intersection of US-17 and Hardee Street due to three pedestrian fatalities. FDOT has declined the request. A feedback sign has been added in the interim. *See Strategies 5, 17, and 25.*
- Another problematic intersection for pedestrians is Hillcrest Drive. and US-17. There was a pedestrian fatality the evening prior to the meeting, on 1/10/25. *See Strategies 5, 17, and 25.*
- Railroad tracks have been abandoned by CSX. The tracks are owned by FDOT and are being discussed for a possible roadway or trail. *See Strategies 22 and 26.*
- Maintenance of Maple Street is under County jurisdiction. As more rainfall has been received in recent years, the ditches are not able to handle it. The ditches are eroding and need to be cleaned out with erosion prevention tactics installed. During Hurricane Irma, this was a separate ‘river’ with approximately 100 feet wide water flowing across the roadway and flooded several resident’s yards. *See Strategies 1, 18 and 19.*

- The creek near Avion Palms is very overgrown. It eventually connects to Haines Creek and the Peace River. The ditches on either side of the road at this location need clearing. See *Strategies 18, 19, 20, 21, and 23*.
- US-17 becomes problematic with even one-half inch of rain. It is currently being widened by FDOT and the underground stormwater system is not being improved. FDOT is utilizing ditches on the side of the road to accommodate for the widening, but these are not regularly maintained by the state or the county and are therefore backed up with trash and plantings and become eroded. See *Strategies 18, 19, 20, and 21*.
- County Line Road is lined with ditches constructed by the County and they are not maintained with any structure. It was an attempt to alleviate the flooding issues, but the ditches are overgrown, eroding, and not maintained. This occurs the worst around Bertha Fulse Street and Doyle Parker Avenue. See *Strategies 18, 19, 20, and 21*.
- Generally, very few sidewalks, where they exist, they are at grade, no traffic calming measures, speed limits of 60 mph leading into town and abrupt drop to 40 mph. Resurfacing project to occur on US-17 between REA Boulevard and SR-62 to add lighting. See *Strategy 7*.
- The City is requesting new street lighting for much of the area of downtown along US-17/ FDOT quoted \$6K to replace the lights. The new lights would be less charming but would provide appropriate and much needed lighting to help drivers see pedestrians. See *Strategy 25*.

City of Wauchula

- Culvert for the tributary running down the west side of town washed out where it crosses Louisiana Avenue, flooding the houses in Sunset Park. Some of these homes are being reconstructed due to flooding and should be elevated. See *Strategies 10, 16 and 20*.
- The City's maintenance shop, yard, WWTP Griffin Road, E. Bay Street and Green Street all flooded impacting houses and city infrastructure. (not warehouses). See *Strategies 16 and 19*.
- East side of town between the unincorporated areas along S. 1st Avenue to where the road is labeled "private" has a large culvert that was washed out, limiting access to the couple of residential properties in that area. The dirt road has since been fixed but remains a concern as the fix took a long time. See *Strategies 2, 6, and 19*.
- Homes in Sunset Park are not being reconstructed. They were mucked and gutted but not to where they could be elevated at this time. See *Strategies 13, 15, and 16*.

Town of Zolfo Springs

- Cracker Lake RV Park experiences regular flooding. See *Strategies 13 and 16*.
- Peace River trailers along Parkview, South of 64, flooded in Jan and have experienced issues since then. See *Strategies 13, 15, and 16*.
- Duplexes along Suwanee Street and 9th Street experience flooding issues. See *Strategy 16*.
- E. 4th Street and Palmetto Street flood with heavy rain. See *Strategies 1, 19, and 21*.

- SR-64 Overflow Bridge, South of Pioneer Park- Berm at Pioneer Park needs to be repaired to protect the SR-64 Overflow Bridge. It also provides water quality treatment before it discharges to Peace River. Hurricane Ian funding opportunities. See *Strategies 1, 19, and 21*.
- Pioneer Park at Wildlife Refuge Area- Flooding occurs at this location during a major storm event since it's a low-lying area. See *Strategies 11, 22, and 26*.

Unincorporated Hardee County

- Wauchula Hills experiences major flooding. This area experiences flooding from Hog Branch Creek that runs into Peace River due to drainage issues which causes wash-outs on roads and issues with the operations of the Lift Station from Lost Acres to Wauchula Hills Subdivision. The residential area population is in an low-lying community serving approx. 2,000 residents. 27.57721 N, 81.83726 W. See *Strategies 8, 20 and 23 for Hog Branch Creek*.
- Magnolia Manor experiences flooding due to culverts and ditches that need to be upgraded and installed. There are no proper drainage locations in this area, and they are surrounded by wetlands that run into the Peace River. FDOT currently utilizes this area to convey water flow from US-17 that contributes to increased flooding. 27.52897 N, 81.79887 W. See *Strategies 11, 14 and 21*.
- Limestone area experiences flooding due to the major creeks surrounding this community. See *Strategies 11 and 23*.
- Bronco Drive experiences major flooding as it is in a wetland and low-lying area. See *Strategies 1, 11, 12, and 18*.
- River Road is in a wetland area. See *Strategies 1, 11, 12, and 18*.
- Griffin Road - tributary creek that leads to Peace River overtopped that causes flooding to this community. See *Strategy 23*.



Images 3 & 4: Images of Griffin Road post Hurricane Ian in September of 2022, provided by residents of Hardee County.

- Cross Creek Lane - Drainage Issue. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18*.
- Circle Drive - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18*.
- Murphy Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18*. Jim Williams Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18*.

- CR-665 - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Pine Level Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Ridge Rainey - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Goose Pond Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Center Hill Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Tolbert Stephens Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Fish Branch Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Crewsville Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Ten-Mile Grade Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Sweetwater Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Old Town Creek Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Locklar Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Parnell Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Steve Roberts and Kelly Roberts Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Clifton Bryan Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Maude Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Rest Haven Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* Gillete Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* S. Barlow Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.* John Carlton Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Van Simmons Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Gordon Road - Road flooding not major. See *Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*

All Jurisdictions

- Open to regulations to require elevated housing types. See *Strategies 3, 8, 10, 12, and 16.*
- Need identified funding sources for both the Cities/County to address municipally owned properties as well as for homeowners to tap into for damages from flooding. See *Strategies 15 and 16.*
- Communication strategies to disseminate information to the public include local newspaper, Facebook pages, County Community Development Office, door-to-door engagement (especially in Zolfo Springs), printed information on the back of utility bills, text messages to the whole municipality. See *Strategies 15, 27, and 28.*

Meeting 2: Community Organizations – January 6, 2025

City of Bowling Green

- Transportation challenges us greatly. See *Strategies 6, 7, 17 and 25.*
- United Way Needs Assessment identified that 73% of the sample size agreed that they would be willing to fund more transportation options. See *Strategies 7 and 25.*
- School Zone was relocated to Banana Street in an attempt to protect the students and make it safer. The relocation was also moved closer to future residential/infill projects anticipating new students. Speeding through the school zone is still an active issue. See *Strategy 7.*

- Infill and residential developments are coming in within Bowling Green (through 2020). The Development Group can provide additional insights into rezoning/permitting/growth areas in Bowling Green. *See Strategies 3 and 8.*
- Hardee County population is not growing per the Census data (seasonal migrant farm workers are moving to this area and are not being counted within the census data). CFRPC did a study on the registered programs for Farm Worker Housing. *See Strategy 15.*
- Bowling Green only has one doctor's office. It is difficult to obtain transportation from family/friend/strangers to Wauchula to get to the doctor. *See Strategies 7 and 25.*
- No traditional grocery stores within the City of Bowling Green, creating a food desert. *See Strategy 9.*

City of Wauchula

- Dip in the road on MLK Avenue at E. Bay Street floods in any rain events. *See Strategy 2.*
- Street lighting is lacking in many areas - sidewalks needed along MLK Avenue from Baker Street to Bay Street. Many have witnessed pushing strollers at night in the roadway as the grass on either side of the road is overgrown and not maintained. *See Strategy 7.*
- The new traffic circle in front of Winn Dixie (1133 S 6th Ave, Wauchula, FL 33873) has no pedestrian crossing or consideration for pedestrian access. *See Strategy 7.*

Town of Zolfo Springs

- Communication is very difficult. Any type of communication or messaging – the newspaper only runs once per week. Tend to rely on social media (Facebook) - always find messaging that needs to go out to the whole population (Spanish, English, and Creole) challenging across the board in a timely manner. *See Strategy 27.*
- Residents by and large reported that they know where to go for help - they know how to access food - but they are not able to choose what is culturally or nutritionally appropriate.
- Carrying their meals home is difficult so they need to go multiple times per week. *See Strategy 9.*
- Migrant/labor buses are the only transportation options they have unless they have a friend. Run through a specific program and only open to those people. People complain about the number of them going to Walmart - the food they eat is often out of stock. *See Strategy 9.*

Unincorporated Hardee County

- Transportation and Access are issues throughout the County. *See Strategies 3, 7 and 25.*
- Transportation is the key - if people need to get to Hardee County Crisis Center, how are they going to do so? Everywhere in Hardee County there is a need. There is a desire for a trolley to run from Dollar General in Zolfo to Dollar General in Bowling Green. *See Strategies 3, 7 and 25.*
- Flooding all over the County. Riverview Heights Subdivision was particularly susceptible with its proximity to the Peace River. *See Strategies 3, 8, 10, 19, and 28.*

City of Bowling Green

- Many county roads have stormwater, but it is not maintained. *See Strategy 14 and 18.*
- The Train depot drain needs to be cleaned out, as it causes flooding onto CR-17. *See Strategy 14 and 18.*

City of Wauchula

- Ditches flood during regular thunderstorms on Griffin Road. *See Strategies 1, 11, 14 and 18.*
- Flooding around the Sheriff's Department during regular thunderstorms. *See Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- The rerouted drains by the old baseball fields on Hawaiian Drive and Citrus Valley flood during regular thunderstorms. The flow is so fast that it washes out the land and clogs ditches. *See Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18.*
- Flooding on US-17 Northbound near Will Duke Road. The water just sits after a storm instead of draining away. *See Strategies 1, 11, 14, and 18*

Town of Zolfo Springs

- Bronco Drive experiences flooding. *See Strategies 1 and 11.*
- Cracker Lake floods during major storm events. *See Strategies 1 and 11.*
- Pioneer Park has a damaged berm near the bridge. Hurricane Ian made the river overflow with sinkholes at the wildlife refuge and barreled through the berm and took a month to rebuild the bridge. The berm has yet to be rebuilt. *See Strategy 23.*

Unincorporated Hardee County

- Entire County faces transportation challenges to access their needs, often relying on family, friends, or walking. *See Strategies 3, 4, 5, 7, and 25.*
- Hurricane Ian affected 200 homes, and 10 families are still displaced to hotels. *See Strategies 15 and 16.*

All Jurisdictions

- Stormwater in city centers collects along roads with curbing and gutters. *See Strategies 2, 7, 18, and 20.*
- Lack of education regarding evacuation routes, location of shelters, and resources following a disaster. *See Strategies 15 and 27.*
- 25 bridges were overtaken by the river in the whole county. *See Strategy 6.*