



**Draft Citizen's Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
December 13, 2023**

Members Present:

Debi Osborne	Manatee County
Harry Phillips	Lee County
Kayton Nedza	Hardee County
Nicole Johnson	Lee County
Phyl Wojcik	Charlotte County
Tom Palmer	Polk County
Tonya Bramlage	Charlotte County
Church Roberts	Hendry County
Bridget Washburn	Glades County

Others Present:

Jennifer Hecker	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Nicole Iadevaia	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Sarina Weiss	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Keara Abel	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Kathleen Burchett	U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Colleen Hibbitts	City of North Port
Jane Collingwood	Lemon Bay Conservancy/Lemon Bay Watch
Robert Winter	Charlotte County Alternate

Agenda Item #1 – Call to Order and Introductions — Harry Phillips, Co-Chair

Co-Chair Harry Phillips called the meeting to order at 9:02 AM. Introductions were then made by existing and new members.

Agenda Item #2 – Agenda Additions or Deletions — Harry Phillips, Co-Chair

No additions or deletions were made to the agenda.

HARRY PHILLIPS MOVED, SECONDED BY DEBI OSBORNE TO APPROVE THE CONSENT AGENDA ITEMS AS PRESENTED. THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #3 – Public Comments on Agenda Items

No public comments on agenda items were made.

Agenda Item #4 – Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC) August 23rd, 2023 Meeting Minutes — Harry Phillips, Co-Chair

No changes were made to the Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC) August 23rd, 2023 meeting minutes.

DEBI OSBORNE MOVED, SECONDED BY NICOLE JOHNSON TO APPROVE THE MINUTES AS PRESENTED. THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #5 – Citizen’s Advisory Committee Member Responsibilities and Upcoming Co-Chair Election Meeting and Planning — Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP

Ms. Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP Director of Research & Restoration, briefed the newest committee members as well as applicants on the background of the CHNEP and the focus of the Citizen’s Advisory Committee. Highlights are as follows:

The Partnership is guided by the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) which outlines specific objectives and actions for implementation. The CHNEP and its partners are collectively committed to undertaking the activities needed to reach the objectives for: Water Quality Improvement; Hydrological Restoration; Fish, Wildlife and Habitat Protection; and Public Engagement. CHNEP Citizen’s Advisory Committee members are a part of the CHNEP Management Conference. The Management Conference is comprised of four committees and the Program Office. Each committee serves a specialized role to fulfill the goals and objectives in the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP). The Citizen’s Advisory Committee is made up of environmental community leaders that act as local liaisons to provide input on community needs and partner opportunities the CHNEP area, as well as to share information with the community about resources and funding opportunities from the CHNEP.

CAC members have many different responsibilities including:

- Communicate the activities of the CHNEP to their respective organizations, communities and representative interest groups and communicate the comments and concerns of these organizations to the CHNEP Management Conference;
- Participate in CAC meetings to discuss and provide input for the Management and Policy Committees to consider;
- Recommend and participate in public outreach on behalf of the CHNEP;
- Provide input into CHNEP Conservation Grant applications and share Grant opportunities with the community and assist community groups to apply for them;
- Help CHNEP staff to implement ‘Communications Strategy’, a collective outreach plan built with the help of the CAC.

The upcoming April 2024 meeting will be an opportunity for a CAC workshop/fieldtrip to engage and discuss future goals together in-person. The location is undetermined and CAC members are encouraged to offer suggestions. The meeting will include the annual CAC Co-Chair election. Members are encouraged to nominate themselves to help lead the committee. CAC Co-Chairs are elected on an alternating basis annually each Spring for a 2-year term. By staggering terms, there is assurance that a new Co-Chair will be paired with an experienced Co-Chair. The duties include alternate chairing of CAC meetings and attending all CAC meetings in person, as well as attending alternate Management Committee meetings to brief them on the CAC meeting discussions. The CAC Co-Chair attending the Management Committee meetings will have voting privileges. Nominations will be requested ahead of the April meeting.

The Committee members suggested a few options for hosting the upcoming meeting and field trip and the co-chair encouraged other members to nominate themselves to serve in the role.

Agenda Item #6 – CHNEP Update — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP

CHNEP’s Executive Director, Ms. Jennifer Hecker, presented on programmatic activity occurring since the last Citizen’s Advisory Committee meeting. Highlights are as follows:

Fall Management Conference planning and execution, invitations and packets sent to new members. The Amended FY2024 Work Plan and Budget were approved at the September Policy meeting and have been implemented. CHNEP drafted a letter of support for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area, created a CHNEP webpage on the topic, as well as sent out two social media blasts and a mass email linking to webpage asking for public comments in support. Additionally, CHNEP staff reviewed the USFWS draft plan and sent technical comments to USFWS staff.

CHNEP drafted Interlocal Agreements for working with Central Florida Regional Planning Council that is being approved in November, as well as one for working with Lee County that is currently being reviewed by legal department. Staff conducted Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network (CCHMN) field audits for the FL Dept. of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission/Research Institute, Lee County, and City of Cape Coral. Additionally, CHNEP staff finished gathering partner data for the 2023 NEPORT Congressional Reporting Survey to report on their annual conservation, management, and restoration accomplishments. This was uploaded into the EPA portal in September and included over 100 habitat entries. Finally, CHNEP drafted and submitted a letter of support for the SWFWMD proposal for the Cape Haze Ecosystem Restoration Project for NOAA's (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) Transformational Habitat Restoration and Coastal Resilience Grant.

Regarding finance and grants management, CHNEP sent customized invoice letters and information packets to City and County partners who contribute to the CHNEP, providing an overview of what value and projects CHNEP provides to their areas. CHNEP entered Purchase Requisitions for all FY2024 Annual Scopes managed under Interlocal Agreements (Upper and Lower CCHMN and Water Atlas). These FY2024 Purchase Orders were then subsequently issued.

CHNEP staff continued attendance at partnership meetings and conferences. CHNEP presentations were featured at the 27th Biennial Coastal & Estuarine Research Federation (CERF) Conference and the Association of National Estuary Programs (ANEP) Conference as well as the American Water Resources Association (AWRA) One Water Summit and the 2023 Florida Resilience Conference. CHNEP was a mainstage panel speaker at the Corridor Connect: Ecology + Economy for a Better Florida Conference on the Ecosystem Resilience is Economic Resilience panel. CHNEP will serve as co-chair along with Auburn University on a session titled Advancing coastal resiliency through watershed planning and hydrological restoration at the Gulf of Mexico Conference (GOMCON) in 2024. For outreach events, CHNEP coordinated with Lemon Bay Conservancy to distribute free informational brochures and educational materials at the Englewood Water Fest and Family Day Program. Charlotte County also distributed free informational brochures and educational materials at the Climate Eco Fair. CHNEP attended the Wildcat Tailgate in Wauchula at which they hosted an estuary trivia game and the 7 Rivers Water Festival in Winter Haven. CHNEP hosted a cleanup event with Keep Charlotte Beautiful and Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center in observance of International Coastal Cleanup Day and partnered with Charlotte County Sea Grant, UF/IFAS, and FWC to host Florida Horseshoe Crab Watch Training. Regarding publications, CHNEP staff worked with the designer and the printer to produce the final proof of the 2024 Nature Calendar and produced updated Water Quality Fact Sheets by Basin, as well as created a 2023-24 Funding Opportunities Fact Sheet (<https://www.chnep.org/federal-funding>) to distribute to stakeholders, community members, and anyone who can benefit from current funding opportunities. Committee members had no questions following this presentation.

Agenda Item #7 – New Conservation Grant Applications — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP

Ms. Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP’s Executive Director, provided an overview of new conservation grant applications that were received for the FY23-24 cycle. The Conservation Grants program supports the public engagement goal of the CHNEP CCMP by increasing actions to protect and restore estuaries and watersheds. Highlights are as follows:

There were two grant applications this cycle. The first was for funding to cover 12 months of support for the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council (MRMCC) Website. The amount requested was \$220 which is the total project cost and is less than the \$500 regular threshold for CHNEP Conservation Grants. The MRMCC was established in 1985 by the Myakka River Wild and Scenic Designation and Preservation Act to provide interagency and intergovernmental coordination in the management of the Myakka River. This project would support the continuation of the MRMCC website to provide citizens as well as council members with meeting minutes, council archives, current council member list, and other important watershed updates. The CHNEP staff recommendation was to fully fund the website hosting with additional modifications made to the website: 1) all updated affiliated member names and contacts be added to the website; 2) the CHNEP name is updated on the website; and 3) all meeting notices and agendas be added to the website.

The second grant application is titled “Implementing the Healthy Lakes Initiative at Heritage Oaks.” The amount requested was \$4,500 of the \$14,500 total project cost. The Healthy Lakes Initiative is an ongoing project to revitalize its 25 lakes (stormwater ponds). This project would involve planting aquatic vegetation along the littoral shelves in the lakes at Heritage Oaks. The project is located on private property and does not have an education and/or research component that would be provided to the public. Therefore, it is ineligible for funding from the CHNEP Conservation Grants Program. CHNEP staff recommended that it not be funded and CHNEP reached out to the applicant to provide information on alternate funding sources, including Sarasota County Yards and Neighborhoods Program and the Sarasota County NEST program which have funding for stormwater pond improvement in private communities.

A committee member commented that they agree with the grant determinations suggested by CHNEP staff. The member suggested that CHNEP encourage the MRMCC to increase their ask in next year’s grant application since they are such a great partner. Another member stated that they understand that HOAs are ineligible for the Conservation Grant program and asked if that would apply to Community development districts (CDD)? Ms. Hecker responded that she does not believe that CHNEP has ever had a CDD apply for a grant before and while there is no formal policy against it, CHNEP would have to look at the bearings of the applications and consider the implications of something like that. Another member asked if the program considers whether there is public access on the project site, to which Ms. Hecker responded that public access is something that is looked at when considering applications. Ms. Hecker explained that the funds would be exhausted quickly if applications for private stormwater ponds were considered, and the role of the community to help fund those types of improvements to their own private preserves and lakes while public funds can be used toward public projects or in underserved communities. Ms. Hecker commented that she was pleased this past year with the number of groups that applied to do underwater cleanups following Hurricane Ian, improving the waterways for everyone- explaining that it is important to ensure there is money available for those types of projects. A committee member suggested that NAWCA (North America Wetlands Conservation Act) offers smaller grants to enhance or establish smaller wetlands through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for wildlife or wetlands reasons, adding that this was a resource CHNEP can provide to applicants looking to improve private stormwater ponds.

Agenda Item #8 – Update on Conservation Grant Projects — Church Roberts, Church Environmental and Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP

Mr. Church Roberts of Church Environmental and Ms. Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP’s Director of Research & Restoration, provided an overview of Conservation Grant projects that have been underway this year, preliminary results, and outcomes from those that have been completed. Highlights are as follows:

The “Caloosahatchee Drone Wading Bird Nest Survey” Conservation Grant project was completed by Church Environmental in 2023. The proposal was for the development of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) survey methodology for bird surveying in Southwest Florida. The funding amount requested from CHNEP was \$1,200, with the total cost of the project being \$2,650. Earth Tech Environmental was a partner who provided the boat and boat operator. The project aimed to determine the effectiveness and safety factor of using drones versus historically used aircraft for rookery surveys. Census data was captured from nesting surveys on 2 rookery islands in the Caloosahatchee River. The first being Manatee Sign Island the second was Lenore Island. The altitude of the UAV ranged from 60-80 feet above surface level with the launching and the landing greater than 200 feet from the rookery sites. The flight speed over the islands was between 5-10 miles per hour. Single passes were made over each rookery before returning to the launch site. Total flight time ranged from 2-4 minutes.

The deliverables produced were drone footage of the area and a technical report that tallied the results from the footage and compared them with a previous survey. The project found that with the ability to hand-launch the UAV from a boat, surveys can be performed in remote areas where traditional surveys would be very time consuming and expensive. For the 2022 survey, an approximate 30-foot minimum separation was maintained, and no group or individual startle response was observed during the 2022 UAV operations. Mr. Roberts recommended that future surveys use a minimum separation of 20-25 feet as the 30-foot separation was less effective at identifying bird species. He also recommended that a comparison of morning and afternoon surveys should be conducted to determine the best angle of sunlight for video review. Finally, Mr. Roberts suggested that there should be coordination with the FDEP to know which rookeries are being surveyed and what the nest counts are. There is yet to be an accessible library or database with that information even with so many people using drones.

Ms. Iadevaia shared outcomes from other conservation grant projects recently completed; “Educational Signage and Habitat Restoration for Cape Coral Wildlife Trust Properties.” The project involved installing educational signage on 18 properties about gopher tortoises and burrowing owls and planting native grasses and flowers. The CHNEP logo was included on each sign. The volunteers for this project spent between 135-170 hours per month on the care, maintenance, monitoring, and education at the Cape Coral Wildlife Trust sites. The native plantings have been completed. The installed berms and artificial burrows have had much success in attracting baby gopher tortoises and owls. The project also produced brochures on starter burrows to educate citizens on how to have owl burrows in their own yards. The “Pedersen Preserve Pine Restoration Area Habitat Improvement.” project involved habitat restoration of an old upland citrus grove on Lake Annie in Polk County. The restoration and improvements were made to over 9,408 square feet of the old citrus grove on Lake Annie through invasives removal and planting of 1,764 native grasses and 588 wildflowers. Potential pollutants were removed from the Peace River Watershed such as asphalt dump removal and disposal. The project also involved the creation of a wildlife brush pile and installation of pine snags for raptor and other birds, as well as marking and recording gopher tortoise burrows and installation

of gopher tortoise signage. Last, the results from the “2023 Great American Clean-Up/International Coastal Clean-Up with a Focus on Waterway Clean-Ups” project was shared. The Ocean. The CHNEP, FDEP Aquatic Preserves, Sea Grant, FWC, Charlotte County, and Keep Charlotte Beautiful came together to clean up the Charlotte Harbor West Wall, at which 2,013 pounds of debris was removed from the mangroves. The debris was mostly Styrofoam with some derelict fishing gear. At the Great American Clean-Up in June, 58 volunteers collected 600 pounds of debris. 151 volunteers collected 850 pounds of debris across 8 locations from CHEC at Alligator Creek to Bay Heights Park in Englewood for International Coastal Clean-Up Day.

A committee member commented that the South Florida Water Management District does rookery surveys too and suggested that Mr. Roberts may want to talk to them regarding survey coordination. Mr. Roberts responded that is currently searching for a resource to examine data collected by the following state agencies: WMDs, FWC, and FDEP. Another member asked if Mr. Roberts had any specific flight plan over the islands and explained that some of the drones have GPS tracking so as to ensure that time in the air is maximized. The member asked if Mr. Roberts likes to run transects spiral, to which Mr. Roberts responded that he uses transects, usually east-west because that is the orientation of the river. Mr. Roberts explained that he can create a mosaic from the photos to compete the nest counts back at the office. He does not do a predetermined flight path.

Another member commented that they were very familiar with the Cape Coral Wildlife Trust. They explained that Cape Coral is a pre-platted community, started in the late 1950s. Over 20 years, canals and roadways were put in. The member commented that the idea of buying contiguous quarter acre lots to provide habitat for wildlife like the burrowing owls and gopher tortoises is a great idea. The Cape Coral Wildlife Trust recently approached the City of Cape Coral environmental staff and parks department to come up with a habitat management plan for those lots. The member explained that that is why they are getting slash pines, saw palmettos, etc., for the gopher tortoise habitat. They are trying to find the best way to manage the lots that have many animals on them.

Ms. Hecker encouraged input from the meeting attendees on conservation grant opportunities and asked members to brainstorm opportunities. She asked members if they are hearing about anything in their communities that NGOs or community groups of any kind are working on that would enhance the implementation of the CCMP. She explained that it could involve restoring waterways, doing clean-ups to improve water quality, conducting research on fish, wildlife, and habitat, etc. Ms. Hecker concluded that CHNEP would love to hear about any projects that CAC members and/or the public see that could use some additional funding support. A member commented that they have been helping with planting SAV in the Caloosahatchee River. They explained that FDEP has the Living Shoreline program and asked if there was some other grant opportunity focusing only on the Caloosahatchee that people living along the river could use to enhance the quality of the river. The member elaborated that there may be a partnership opportunity with the State. Ms. Hecker mentioned to members there was information available on a previous citizens’ seagrass gardening project where CHNEP worked with homeowners to plant installations behind their homes and monitor growth.

Ms. Iadevaia commented that CHNEP is partnering with Angler Action Foundation to explore SAV restoration and specifically looking at tape grass in stormwater canals. She explained that it is proliferating there and could be beneficial to water quality, so instead of eliminating tape grass in the canals, the project would help communities to understand the benefits of allowing it to grow and maybe even installing it in other places where it could be successful. This would involve restoration and extensive monitoring – pre and post – in the sediment and in the water column to see how beneficial the tape grass is. If there are benefits, partners would coordinate with FDEP to quantify

that as a “best management practice”. A committee member commented that the project could have a tremendous lift for Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) and basin management actions plans (BMAPs). The committee member stated that if the cost benefit could be quantified it could incentivize people to go out and do these plantings. There is a process to do it and it does take time, but the benefit would be huge. Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP had previously identified that as one of the reasons that seagrass restoration wasn’t happening more often – currently there are not credits awarded for the restoration. CHNEP had also funded Dr. James Douglass at FGCU to conduct a study to quantify those water quality benefits, and the project is ongoing. Ms. Hecker added that awarding credits would certainly stimulate seagrass restoration projects.

Another member commented that their group had adopted CHNEP’s vertical oyster gardening (VOG) program and has expanded it to a program called “One Dock at a Time.” Their group has joined another group, the VOG Alliance, which allows them to communicate with people all over the state, estuary programs, bay watch programs, etc. The committee member explained that group would like to build a template for projects around the state. Ms. Iadevaia responded that the vertical oyster gardening is a good project to be pointing people to because there is a lot of public interest in improving water quality. She also commented that FDEP has formulated some guidelines regarding permits for artificial reefs and making sure to not impact water quality. She concluded that anyone interested should contact CHNEP (who has copies of those guidelines) or FDEP for more information.

Agenda Item #9 – Updates of Proposed “Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area” — Kathleen Burchett, Refuge Supervisor for Florida and the Caribbean of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Ms. Kathleen Burchett, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), updated the Committee on the USFWS’s efforts to establish a Wildlife Conservation Area in Southwest Florida. Highlights are as follows:

This effort started off in July of 2022 with a landscape conservation design (LCD). That work was contracted through Julie Morris of the Florida Conservation Group, who, at the time, was also with the National Wildlife Refuge Association. The science behind the LCD was provided by Dr. Tom Hoctor of the University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning. If successful, a new conservation area would allow the USFWS to work with willing landowners to protect the lands most important to our water and wildlife in one of the most biologically diverse regions in our country. This landscape-level conservation effort would assist and complement that state of Florida’s successful efforts to protect the Florida Wildlife Corridor as the region faces increasing threats such as rapid population growth, intensification of land use, and climate change. A new conservation area would aid in recovering the Florida panther and protect many rare and endemic species, including 74 Federally and State listed Threatened and Endangered Species.

The USFWS wrapped up the public comment and final technical comment period in September, technical input was given by CHNEP. CHNEP and others also sent letters of support for the initiative. The proposed conservation area includes the Myakka River, Caloosahatchee River, Peace River, and Fisheating Creek. These are important watersheds for restoration as well as for keeping the estuaries healthy and providing land and water protection within the State and the aquifers. The team put together a draft land protection plan (LPP) and an environmental assessment (EA). These documents helped outline and prioritize the unprotected resources; determine the vision, goals, and objectives; identify potential public uses; identify an acquisition boundary; identify land acquisition methods;

evaluate alternatives; and analyze the impacts to physical, biological, socioeconomic, public use, and cultural resources. There were 4 broad goals: 1) protect, restore, and manage habitats for fish and wildlife; 2) provide science-driven landscape-level conservation; 3) conserve important lands and waters for the benefit of all people; and 4) promote conservation partnerships working with adaptive and flexible tools and strategies. The proposed “Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area” includes Everglades restoration project areas. It will influence water quantity and quality into and out of Lake Okeechobee, as well as influence the Charlotte Harbor, the Caloosahatchee River, and Fisheating Creek. It is a subset of about 4 million acres (up to 10% fee title). It excludes tribal lands and provides wildlife linkages.

To determine how quickly this needed to happen, a threat analysis was conducted. It was based on the Florida Future Land Use 2070 trend database. There are 1,200 species that are tracked by the Florida Natural Area’s Inventory which is housed at the Florida Resource and Environmental Analysis Center at Florida State University. Of those species, 25% are likely to lose half of their current habitat due to sea level rise alone. It is important to know where the urgency is and that the work is being done in the right places. As soon as the proposed conservation area is approved, more information can be viewed at [Proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area](#) and distributed to anyone that is on the mailing list. It is important to note that a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System is not officially established until the first right is acquired which could be an easement or a fee title acquisition or donation. This could happen in Spring of 2024 if the project is approved and there are willing sellers.

Committee members thanked Ms. Burchett for the fabulous overview of the important proposed conservation area, most of which is in the CHNEP watershed. A committee member asked what the best step is to point landowners towards this new opportunity for funding, to which Ms. Burchett responded that if the plan is approved in January, the next step would be to reach out to the project leader/refuge manager in charge of this conservation area. Ms. Burchett explained that because it’s brand new and hasn’t been approved, there is no one assigned yet. Ms. Burchett said that the member could send something to her directly. Ms. Burchett added there seem to be many willing sellers in Florida. She explained that there is a list with criteria to evaluate the land and that is available in the Draft LPP so that landowners can see what criteria they are looking for. Ms. Burchett expressed that connectivity is important and even if land critical for a corridor needs to be restored it will rank high in important and priority. Ms. Burchett concluded that if any CAC members know of landowners that have exhausted other opportunities, they are encouraged to reach out to her.

Ms. Hecker thanked Ms. Burchett for taking the time out of her busy schedule to share this information. She said that the CHNEP put out action alerts to engage the full Partnership to express their support. CHNEP sent a technical comment letter as well as a general letter of support for this effort and is very excited to hear that this is progressing. Ms. Hecker added that she appreciates how the Service has worked with the CHNEP to utilize the Habitat Restoration Needs (HRN) plan that the collective Partnership worked on for several years to try to come up with one comprehensive land conservation vision for the region. Ms. Hecker commented that the CHNEP checked the draft plan and was thrilled to see that almost all the areas that were in the HRN were also identified in the plan as part of the conservation area. Ms. Hecker also asked if Ms. Burchett has any words of advice as to how CHNEP can best support the Service’s efforts going forward, to which Ms. Burchett responded that the very thorough commenting and support helped, and it reaffirmed that they were on the right track. She thanked the CHNEP and CAC members for the comments and support. Ms. Burchett also commented that as the project moves forward, it will enter another phase which then leads to the question as to how these purchases will be funded which is always the challenge. Ms. Hecker

responded that Julie Morris, who sits on the committee and is very involved with the CAC, will keep CHNEP informed. Ms. Hecker added that Julie also has great connections with some of the landowners in the area. She explained that the CHNEP has representation across the stretch of the proposed conservation area and that the CHNEP will be a great vehicle for implementing the fully approved vision.

Another member commented that this is a great program and asked how much is funded and how secure that funding is. The member explained that to purchase all that they want to purchase would cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Ms. Burchett responded that there are many ways to fund a project like this, the most common way being through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) which is from the receipts of oil and gas. She added that the America Great Outdoor Act allowed full funding of \$900 million dollars a year for land conservation and Service competes for that grant on a national scale. She explained that these projects show up on a line item in the federal budget, so the Appropriations Committee, in both the House and the Senate, can adjust those numbers directly. Ms. Burchett also said that sometimes they can tap into migratory bird funding if there are a lot of wetlands in a parcel. The money for the migratory bird funding comes from the purchase of hunting equipment. She explained that there are many different pots of money, and every seeable funding resource will be tapped. Sometimes the Service will work together with the state with each side contributing. The America the Beautiful initiative has grant opportunities as does the Inflation Reduction Act. Ms. Burchett concluded that she would share information with the CHNEP as she becomes aware of additional funding sources.

Another member commented that the plan will need support at the federal level and encouraged others to write letters of support as individuals, CHNEP is governmental and cannot advocate. They concluded that the only way that land will get conserved at scale is if a real mark is made by getting great projects with congressional support.

Agenda Item #10 – CHNEP Resources for CAC Members and Communities — Sarina Weiss, CHNEP

Ms. Sarina Weiss, CHNEP, provided the committee with an overview of the scope and scale of CHNEP environmental education resources that are available. Committee members received a packet in the mail with hard copies and examples of the materials and literature. Highlights are as follows:

CHNEP's goal for public engagement is to create an informed, engaged public making choices and taking actions that increase the protection and restoration of estuaries and watersheds. CAC members serve as CHNEP partners in various communities throughout Central and Southwest Florida and are invited to work together with CHNEP staff to continue to grow these programs and share educational items within their own organizations, the public, and with policy makers. Priority actions identified in the CHNEP CCMP include new ways to engage and introduce new target audiences into the conversation. Introducing role-play-based games and educational activities are great tools to get people engaged and thinking more globally.

Committee members received a packet in the mail with hard copies and examples of the CHNEP resources, materials, and literature. The materials included: a list of outreach items available for loan; a 2023-24 funding opportunities fact sheet; Hurricane Ian webpage; water quality, seagrass, and habitat restoration needs' fact sheets by basin; economic valuation fact sheets by county; CHNEP CCMP brochure, Spanish and English versions; *Kid's Activity Book*; and previous *Harbor Happenings* magazines.

The first sheet in the packet was a list of resources that are available to partners to be checked out from the CHNEP program office at 1050 Loveland Blvd., Port Charlotte, Florida. These resources include:

- The Watershed Game – Coast Model: Classroom Version
- Educational banners on bird identification, seagrass, Florida-friendly landscaping, and mangroves
- Community clean-up buckets and grabbers
- Sampling bottles
- Awesome Aquifer advanced hydrologic kits
- Earth Echo water quality sampling kits (for holding a community training)
- Educational and environmental posters
- CHNEP calendars

All reusable resources must be returned to CHNEP.

The second sheet in the packet was the 2023-24 Funding Opportunities Fact Sheet which should be distributed to stakeholders and community members. It is updated regularly and available at <http://www.chnep.org/federal-funding>. CHNEP hosted the 2023 Southwest Florida Climate Summit on March 15th & 16th, 2023. The third sheet in the packet included a QR code and link to find information on the 2023 Climate Summit as well as a Save the Date for CHNEP's 2024 Southwest Florida Climate Summit being held on February 28th-29th, 2024. All materials from the 2023 Climate Summit, including the agenda, proceedings and Citizen's Climate Action Guide, may all be found at www.chnep.org/climate-summit and the presentations may be viewed on CHNEP's YouTube channel. CHNEP also hosted the 2023 Watershed Summit, a triennial scientific symposium which brought together natural resource managers and the public to discuss research, restoration, and environmental issues in Central and Southwest Florida. Committee members received a sheet with a QR code and link to find the agenda and proceedings from the 2023 Watershed Summit, available at www.chnep.org/2023-watershed-summit. Additionally, a link was provided to video presentations from the Summit found on CHNEP's YouTube Channel. The packet included a fact sheet featuring CHNEP's Hurricane Ian webpage (www.chnep.org/hurricane-ian) which offers information and resources including a breakdown of impacts by basin. The page is updated routinely to include any new information as it becomes available. It has a link to the National Hurricane Center's Hurricane Ian report. CHNEP staff recently created water quality and seagrass fact sheets by basin that not only detail the current state of each basin but emphasize the importance of water quality and seagrass. The fact sheets were included in the packet and can be found on the CHNEP website at <https://www.chnep.org/water-quality-fact-sheets>. CAC members were encouraged to distribute these throughout their networks. The packet also included fact sheets on several CHNEP Water Atlas pages and tools. The Water Atlas is CHNEP's technical website where it houses and stores all types of ecological monitoring data. For the last couple of years, CHNEP has been working on revamping and restructuring the Water Atlas and the new waterbody pages are almost complete. New waterbody pages will be presented with associated FDEP (WBIDs) and appropriate impairment criteria and explanation, water quality dashboard dials, and four interactive mappers for water quality, hydrology, wildlife/habitat, and climate change. The CHNEP Water Atlas now features a custom "Winter Haven Lake Assessments" component on waterbody pages for those lakes within the City of Winter Haven. The assessments include lake water quality management plans, numeric nutrient criteria (NNC) exceedance, log-term lake levels, and aquatic biology and vegetation data (invasive percentage, diversity increases, overall percent area coverage). Within the Water Atlas is the Water Quality Trend

Analysis page. This page features an interactive mapper with 10-year and period-of-record trends up to 2022 for several parameters. The map shows a summary of the results of a seasonal Kendall tau analysis for trend by station and by CCHMN strata. All the data is sorted by nutrients and other parameters as well. The Water Atlas Seagrass pages have been updated and now feature updated acreage and transect graphs through 2021/2022, algae and epiphyte graphs for all basins through 2022, and an interactive mapper that has seagrass and macroalgae maps, monitoring station and transect data and graphs, and the FDEP propscar map layer. CHNEP recently added a landing page for the Place-Based Recreational Fishery Project (www.chnep.wateratlas.usf.edu/fishery-conservation). The project was recently awarded \$1.2 million from NOAA RESTORE and will include fisheries research, mapping, and modeling as well as the creation of decision-making tools for county and state governments that prioritize locations for restoration, and protection of juvenile snook and tarpon habitats.

Another great resource on the CHNEP Water Atlas is the Oyster Habitat Restoration Program landing page. This page includes a map with past restoration projects as well as restoration suitability and ranked priority sites. Additionally, there is a Clam Habitat Suitability landing page that features an interactive suitability map and potential restoration site selection. This project identified and ranked 10 potential clam restoration sites within the Charlotte Harbor Estuary which provide optimum habitat suitability with minimal logistical challenges. Finally, the Lake Okeechobee and Caloosahatchee Release Levels Tracker tool includes the recent elevation levels of Lake Okeechobee and the corresponding rate of discharge (flow) of water into the Caloosahatchee River. The interactive graphs also include the “lake management bands” defined in the LOSOM as well as the minimum and maximum flows to maintain lake ecological health. The packet included economic valuation fact sheets by county which are available at www.chnep.org/natural-resource-economic-valuation, as well as Habitat Restoration Needs (HRN) fact sheets by basin which include restoration opportunities and are available at www.chnep.org-hrn-hrcc-projects. Both are great resources to have when talking to policy makers. The CCMP brochure was also included so that members can communicate to others who and what the CHNEP is and what its goals are for the public. The *Kid’s Activity Book* is focused on education and includes hands-on activities as an early way to begin the engagement process. The packets also included previous editions of CHNEP’s *Harbor Happenings* magazine. These are topical with themes such as climate change, resiliency, wildlife, water and public health, shellfish, and restoration.

A committee member asked if additional CCMP brochures are available, to which Ms. Weiss responded that CHNEP has many copies available that can be picked up from the CHNEP program office. Another member thanked CHNEP staff for providing this information. They had asked for the information and were overwhelmed with the quality, the depth, and the diversity of resources. The member said that they will be sharing it with all of their education, outreach, and event staff so that it can be disseminated more often. Ms. Hecker commented that CHNEP has recorded this meeting and will be cutting each presentation into a video which will be available on the CHNEP webpage so that if anyone wants to share it with education staff or others in their respective organizations, they will have the ability to share it.

Agenda Item #11 – CHNEP Technical Projects Updates & New Tools — Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP

Ms. Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP’s Director of Research & Restoration, provided an overview of CHNEP’s technical project progress since the previous CAC meeting. Highlights are as follows:

The Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network (CCHMN) is a regional partnership of agencies that collects monthly surface water quality data in the open estuaries using consistent, technically sound sampling design. The CCHMN partners agree to collect, analyze, and upload their water sample results from 60 randomly selected field sites throughout 10 waterbodies to a state assessment database (FDEP WIN) each month. CHNEP's role is to directly fund sampling efforts to fill data gaps, host the annual CCHMN partners meeting, house and update the network's SOPs, conduct field sampling audits, attend RAMP meetings, upload data into CHNEP Water Atlas, and fund the maintenance and trend analysis features on CHNEP's Water Atlas pages on behalf of partners. Annual field audits were conducted with each sampling partner in August. The Annual CCHMN Meeting was held in September and included review and discussion of field audit results, standard operating procedures (SOPs), improved data collection and QA/QC, and instrumentation configurations and calibrations. The meeting also featured presentations from SWFWMD on *Optical Modeling and PAR Data Collection* and Charlotte County on *Water Quality on Data Applications for Understanding Impairment* as well as University of Florida Center for Coastal Solutions on *CCHMN 2000-2021 Data and Trend Results*. All FY2023 data collection was completed and invoiced in September. Field and laboratory partners participated in the Southwest Florida Regional Ambient Monitoring Program (RAMP) quarterly meeting and split-sample analysis in October.

As for restoration projects, the Myakka Headwaters Preserve Restoration is a 2022-2023 project to fund and project manage a restoration/enhancement project on 363 acres of conserved land within Flatford Swamp (called the *Myakka Headwaters Preserve*), the Myakka River's largest forested wetland located in Manatee County. Partners for this restoration project include SWFWMD and the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast. The objective is to remove exotic plants and replant native plants to restore wetlands. If successful, the result will be enhanced aquatic habitat, flood protection, and water quality. Project plantings and associated work at the two strategically selected sites was completed in December. The treatment of the exotic species in the 20-acre floodplain forest and 4-acre basin forest was completed in April during the dry season. The funding agencies conducted a site visit in May. A final project report will be submitted in mid-December to close out the project and a final site visit will also be conducted by all partners to review progress at the site. The final report will include detailed methods, results, and discussion (ex: recommendations for land management, both onsite and at other area restoration sites, based on project results).

Other upcoming projects include Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessments. CHNEP has held meetings with Lee, Charlotte, Polk, and Highlands Counties and partner Central Florida Regional Planning Council to discuss the logistics/funding agreements and scope of work for their vulnerability assessments. Each project will be tailored to each county. The Charlotte County Vulnerability Assessment is in the final stages of the procurement process, after which a firm will be selected to begin the work. CHNEP's goal is to complete all 10 county vulnerability assessments over the next 5 years (DeSoto and Hardee Counties are set for FY24, with Sarasota and Manatee Counties set for funding in FY25, and Glades and Hendry Counties for funding in FY26). Another upcoming project is the Yucca Pens Hydrological Restoration Planning Project. It has been added to the work plan and partner meetings have been held and the procurement process will begin when the FY24 BIL funds are received. Two other upcoming projects are the Pine Island Flatwoods Restoration and the Tiki Point Harborwalk Living Shoreline Project, for which partner meetings have been held to discuss logistics and scope and these projects can begin in 2024.

CHNEP finished gathering partner data for the 2023 NEPORT Congressional Reporting Survey to report on their annual conservation, management, and restoration accomplishments. This included over 100 habitat entries that were accepted. Ms. Iadevaia thanked partners who contributed their data. CHNEP also drafted a Letter of Support for the USFWS proposed “Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area” and created a CHNEP webpage asking for public comments in support. Additionally, CHNEP reviewed the USFWS draft plan and sent technical comments to FWS staff. Finally, CHNEP staff participated in an interview on aquaculture science with Sea Grant and NOAA’s Southeast Fisheries Science Center.

Agenda Item #12 – CAC Updates & Roundtable Discussion on Topics of Interest — Harry Phillips, Co-Chair

Mr. Harry Phillips, CAC Co-Chair, led discussion on how the CAC provides the critical link between the Partnership and the public, initiating input about public concerns and ideas, and as an essential mechanism for sharing program information and resources with key community organizations and individuals. Mr. Phillips asked members to share updates on major projects or initiatives that they think would be of interest to the other CAC members from the Counties they represent. Highlights are as follows:

Debi Osborne, Manatee County: The Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast was the successful bidder of a 20-acre inholding on a creek within the Charlotte Harbor Estuary State Park on Tippecanoe Bay. The inholding was going to a tax lien sale. The Conservation Foundation looks forward to selling that to the State as an addition to the state park to get rid of one of the largest privately-owned properties within that area of the state park. Yesterday, the Manatee County Commission voted to spend for the first time some of the land acquisition fund that 71% of the voters approved in 2020. It's been 3 years trying to get the Commission to start spending that money and the first property is 64 acres on the Manatee River with a half mile of river frontage and old Florida habitat. It's very well maintained, and it will be a new Manatee County Preserve. It is hopefully going to closing in February. Two other properties on the Manatee River are lined up for acquisition. If others know of properties in our watershed in Manatee County, there is an opportunity to submit those for funding.

Kayton Nedza, Hardee County: The City of Wauchula just put in some new boardwalks at the Peace River Park and Crews Park. Committee members from the other parts of the watershed may be interested in coming up and taking a walk through those parks. In a few months, they are going to have City staff or a contractor run a kayaking program out of the City of Wauchula boat ramp there.

Tom Palmer, Polk County: Tom Palmer was appointed earlier this year to the Conservation Land Acquisition Selection Advisory Committee. They are reviewing land purchases that have been submitted and are still under review from the funding from the referendum that voters approved last year. They are starting to get a few proposals in though it's still in the early stages. Some are in the Charlotte Harbor Basin. Some will be conservation easements, and some will be outright purchases.

Harry Phillips, Lee County: The City of Cape Coral recently cleared a 50-plus acre parcel of land that was wooded of melaleuca, Brazilian pepper, and other invasives. It's going to become a passive nature park called Joe Coviello Park. The hydrology changed slightly because of the removal of the exotics. It will be a nice neighborhood park that has passive recreation opportunities but also will be good for wildlife. They are already starting to see a lot of wading birds there. Mr. Phillips may inquire if there are any CHNEP funds to put up educational signage there, especially in terms of wetlands. The City of Cape Coral has 2 festivals coming up: the Burrowing Owl Festival and the

Water Science Festival. The Burrowing Owl Festival is going to be in its 22nd or 23rd year. CHNEP usually has a presence there. It will be held on February 24th, 2024. It's going to be an inaugural year for the Water Science Festival hosted by the Environmental Resources Division. It's going to be held on March 9th, 2024 and it would be very cool if CHNEP can be there. The City of Cape Coral is putting in an Environmental Education Center in their Yellow Fever Creek Preserve. It's going to turn into Cape Coral's version of Caloosahatchee Regional Park. It will offer camping and extensive hiking trails, no equestrian trails, but a lot of good nature-viewing. Mr. Phillips will ask the City of Cape Coral's Parks Department if the Environmental Education Center will be ready by April, and it could potentially be the site of the April CAC meeting. It's supposed to be open in March as long as they get their certificate of occupancy.

Mr. Phillips asked if there is a PDF of the Climate Summit flyer showed and said it would be cool to send out via email or post it at City Hall or environmental centers or other public viewing areas, even libraries, to get the message out that it's coming up in February. Ms. Weiss responded that there is a PDF version of the Climate Summit fact sheet that will be added to the CAC webpage after the meeting.

Agenda Item #13 – Public Comment — Harry Phillips, Co-Chair

A member of the public commented that they would like to stop by the CHNEP office to pick up some information before the Peace River Audubon meeting on December 21st so that they can distribute it and make a little bit of pitch to get people to join the CHNEP. Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP would be glad to provide materials and said that the member of the public should email CHNEP staff with the amount of people they're expecting and when they're coming by and CHNEP staff will round up and create a box of materials to have ready for pick up.

Another member of the public commented that they recently took several CHNEP brochures to the Englewood Water Fest and they garnered a lot of interest. They added that the brochures are very professional. They also commented that they are going to come back to the CHNEP office for more material, particularly focused on seagrass because they will be hosting an in-house seagrass monitoring training. They explained that the Lemon Bay Conservancy has an Open House coming up in February and they plan to pick up more materials for that event. Additionally, they hope to coordinate with CHNEP to do some workshops at the Open House at the Wildflower Preserve in Englewood.

Agenda Item #14 – Next Meeting's Topics, Location and Date

Topics: TBD, Date: 4/24/24 (field trip/in-person), 8/21/24, & 12/18/24; Location: TBD

Agenda Item #15 – Adjourn.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:41 AM.

**HARRY PHILLIPS MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING, SECONDED BY DEBI OSBORNE.
THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.**