Wakulla wetlands battle to heat up

Commissioners set to eliminate wetlands setbacks as voters gather signatures for ballot question

By Jennifer Portman
Democrat senior writer

Wakulla County commissioners are poised to scrap wetlands protections from the books starting next month, but opponents expect to have enough signatures to try to overturn the divisive measure at the ballot box next fall.

The county commission plans to vote on Feb. 18 to remove from its comprehensive plan a provision that calls for a 75-foot buffer around wetlands. The move is the first step, begun last summer, to get rid of the county’s wetlands protection ordinance, which bans all development within 35 feet of wetlands and restricts building within 40 additional feet if no other options exist.

The current majority of the board says the rule is an unnecessary impediment to development and infringes on personal property rights in a county where about 50 percent of the land is wetlands. The move signals a departure from years of efforts to enhance local policies aimed at water-quality protection. Three years ago, the board, with different members, unanimously approved the reinstatement of the ordinance, first adopted in 2006.

Commissioner Howard Kessler, the lone board member opposed to the plan, asked in August that the decision on the land-use change be left to the citizens. When the effort was rejected 4-to-1 by the commission, See WETLANDS > 3A

Wetlands like these in Wakulla County are at the center of a fierce debate between their protection and property-development rights. DEMOCRAT FILE

“We feel very comfortable we will get the petition on the ballot.”

RON PIASECKI, Wakulla Wetlands Alliance member