

## **Hillsborough County Adopt-A-Pond Informational Overview**

### **February 4, 2008**

Adopt-A-Pond receives numerous requests from organizations wishing to model a similar program in their areas. This document is to facilitate efficient dissemination of the most commonly requested information.

#### **Organization**

Adopt-A-Pond is a program of Hillsborough County Public Works Department, Engineering Division, Specialized Services Unit, Environmental Programs Team. Specialized Services is a unit providing specialized technical support to the Public Works Department, such as wetland mitigation, ground penetrating radar, and environmental permit compliance. This includes administering the County's NPDES permit for its Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4). This permit requires environmental education and Adopt-A-Pond is one of several programs that exist primarily to meet this requirement. The program also receives funding from the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) through a cooperative funding agreement.

#### **History**

Adopt-A-Pond was created by Hillsborough County Stormwater Management Section, Environmental Team staff in the early 1990's in an effort to comply with the County's first NPDES MS4 permit. This permit requires public education regarding stormwater pollution prevention as well as inspection and maintenance of the MS4. At the time, it was thought that a program such as Adopt-A-Pond would be able to meet both the requirement for education and the inspection and maintenance requirement at once. Further, through early social marketing research, it was shown that homeowners in the area were interested in the appearance of ponds but felt they were too daunting to maintain on their own. Thus Adopt-A-Pond could provide inspection of the MS4, limited maintenance through pond cleanup efforts, and pollution prevention education to residents in the context of a stormwater pond restoration, which the residents viewed as a problem and had a vested interest in improving.

In the beginning, staff defined certain criteria that would guide them to an acceptable pond site and solicited residents to apply. The first ponds were selected and cleanup assistance was given in the form of staff guidance and labor at a community cleanup day, and limited mechanical assistance from the (then) Public Works Department Road and Street Maintenance Unit. Staff also supervised and assisted in a pond planting using native wetland vegetation.

In 1999, the program had grown significantly and was awarded a Pollution Recovery Fund grant that enabled the purchase of an all-terrain excavator and a 10 yard dump truck exclusively for the program. Positions at Specialized Services were created to operate the equipment.

In 2004, the program had grown further still and it was deemed more efficient to dedicate the full resources of the Specialized Services Unit to Adopt-A-Pond activities on an as-

needed basis. This allowed the program to provide herbicide application, and use various other equipment in situations where the all-terrain excavator was not necessary or would cause too much disruption of the pond system. Prior to this, cleanup assistance was only given to ponds needing work appropriate for the excavator. Other ponds could join the program, but had to arrange cleanup on their own.

In 2007, the Stormwater Management Section, Environmental Team was combined with Specialized Services to form a unit directly under the County Engineer, thus formally combining the program management staff with the operations staff.

### **Program Function**

Adopt-A-Pond is one of several programs under the heading Stormwater Environmental Education Programs. As the biggest and most well-known of the programs, Adopt-A-Pond serves as a flagship program.

Adopt-A-Pond does not actively solicit residents to adopt ponds. Residents seeking assistance must apply. Information about the program is available on the County website, on the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) website, through various County informational offices, and on the Hillsborough Watershed Atlas, which serves as the main website for the program. (See [www.hillsborough.wateratlas.org/aap](http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.org/aap) for policy details).

Applications are reviewed by program staff, SWFWMD regulatory staff, and Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission staff to ensure that all five criteria are met. Once approved, applicants are notified and an initial inspection of the pond is conducted. During this inspection, staff evaluate pond conditions as a baseline from which to assess changes through the restoration, and to determine what, if any, cleanup assistance can be provided.

An Education Meeting is scheduled with the new group. Meetings are held on weekday evenings usually in a resident's home. This one hour meeting is to present the program and educational resources, and to discuss the plan for the pond restoration. Groups are provided with a notebook containing pertinent information on pond management and ecology, a management plan workbook, plant ID materials, and other supplemental items to assist with their project. These materials constitute approximately \$100.00 in free resources.

Following the Education Meeting, cleanup work is scheduled. Once completed, the group will do any supplemental cleanup work, and a planting will be scheduled. If no cleanup is needed, groups move directly to the planting phase. Native aquatic plants are provided to the group free of charge. Plantings are held on weekday evenings (during Daylight Savings Time) or Saturday mornings. A staff member is present to identify plants, explain planting techniques, and supervise/motivate the group.

Plantings last no more than 2 hours and plants are ordered accordingly because experience has shown that residents are more apt to attend an event with a definite end,

and the average pond group member tends to lose enthusiasm and energy after this time anyway. Many groups do continue work beyond the two hours independently. Plants are recommended and provided by the program based on restoration goals and pond group preference. Most ponds require multiple plantings. Subsequent plantings do not require staff to be present, as the group is familiar with species and techniques.

Following planting, groups will continue to work on the project per their plans. Six months from the initial planting staff will conduct a follow-up inspection to assess changes and offer additional advice. After this inspection groups enter the continued maintenance phase involving quarterly reports to the program and work as needed to meet their goals. Staff are available for consultation at any time throughout this phase.

Groups remain in this phase until their third year when they are inspected again. Active groups can continue three year cycles indefinitely and are eligible for program benefits and incentives such as free plants, additional equipment and resources, and giveaways. Groups that have ceased to function are placed on inactive status and files are closed. Provisions for reactivation and removal from the program are detailed in the program policy along with funding allocations for each project.

### **Program Funding**

Adopt-A-Pond was originally funded entirely through a cooperative funding agreement with the SWFWMD. Over time, funding was secured through the Hillsborough County Stormwater Utility Fee. The program currently operates on a budget of \$133,339 annually, derived entirely from the stormwater fee. The program retains the cooperative funding agreement which provides an additional net amount of \$25,000. The program is currently staffed by one full-time coordinator, and with one to two part-time paid interns as needed and available, and additional operations staff available on an as-needed basis for such services as herbicide application and cleanup assistance.

### **Program Statistics**

As of the date of this document, there are 247 ponds in the program. Approximately 72 of those are registered as active. Group sizes vary, but the entire mailing list consists of 5,184 addresses. The program receives an average of 15 applications per year.

There is no reliable estimate of the number of ponds in Hillsborough County, however the county consists of roughly 1050 square miles of land and an estimated 24 square miles of inland water. The population of unincorporated Hillsborough County is 785,120 people.

**For further information please visit [www.hillsborough.wateratlas.org](http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.org).**