

Feel like a hike? Bellini Preserve, 640 acres on shore of Lake Marion, is open to public



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The Bellini Preserve, a 640-acre conservation tract on the eastern shore of Lake Marion, is now open to the public.

Polk County purchased the land for \$7.5 million in September to protect it from development. The purchase was part of an agreement between the county, Conservation Florida and the Department of Defense, with funding assistance from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Resilient Florida grant program, the county said in a news release.

The public entrance is at Pine Street and Lake Marion Creek Drive in the unincorporated Poinciana area. The property has seven miles of trails, the county said.

The property is open daily from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.



“The Bellini Preserve is an excellent example of a partnership conservation project,” Gaye Sharpe, Polk County’s Parks and Natural Resources Division director, said in the news release. “It brought together non-profit, local, state and federal funding to acquire approximately 640 acres of land along the eastern shore of Lake Marion.”

The preserve largely consists of undeveloped scrubland, and it holds sand skinks, a federally threatened species, and gopher tortoises, a regionally and state-designated threatened species. The parcel contains other terrain and habitats, and some sections offer lakeside views



The county’s purchase will protect more than three miles of Lake Marion’s shoreline from development, reducing pollution and improving water quality, the release said.

“This project highlights the success of Polk County’s commitment to caring for our water and natural resources,” Sharpe said. “It protects the native lake shoreline, providing nature-based water quality improvement solutions for our lakes, rivers and natural areas while building more resilient communities. Safeguarding our water resources was a priority for this project.”

The preserve is named for the former owner, Arnie Bellini, a Tampa-based philanthropist.

A housing development was planned at the site more than 40 years ago but was never constructed, and no water or sewer lines were laid, The Ledger previously reported. Aerial photos show unpaved roads that now serve as trails.

Polk County does not plan to develop major amenities at the property, Sharpe has said, though county officials talked of eventually building a boat ramp. The property is set among existing conservation lands, including the Lake Marion Creek Wildlife Management Area. It is northwest of Creek Legacy Ranch, a 1,342-acre tract the state agreed to purchase in March through the Florida Forever conservation program.