

Martin County Western Lands Studies Summary

Martin County has conducted a wide array of planning efforts over the past 25+ years focused on preserving the rural character, agricultural economy, and environmental assets of its western lands. These studies reflect a long-standing commitment to smart growth, environmental stewardship, and community resilience. A map illustrating the County's preserved lands complements these studies, providing a visual overview of conservation achievements across western Martin County. However, implementation has been mixed, with some strategies realized, others partially underway, and several still unfulfilled.

This study examined a series of planning efforts in Martin County, focusing on land use, environmental preservation, and sustainable growth over the past several decades. The key studies reviewed include:

- **The 2020 Vision for a Sustainable Martin County (1999)** – Glatting Jackson
- **Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (2000)** – U.S. Congress
- **Martin-St. Lucie Regional Land-Use Study (2002)** – Renaissance Planning Group & Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council (TCRPC)
- **Rural and Agricultural Lands Inventory (2003)** – Eckbo, Dean, Austin, and Williams (EDAW)
- **Rural Lands Symposium (2003)** – Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council (TCRPC)
- **Sustainable Treasure Coast (2005)** – Committee for a Sustainable Treasure Coast
- **Development Patterns Study (2007)** – Glatting Jackson
- **Land Protection Incentives Amendment (Valliere Amendment) (2008)** – Created by the Martin County Board of County Commissioners, reviewed by the Florida Department of Community Affairs
- **St. Lucie Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) (2013)** – Developed by St. Lucie River and Estuary Basin stakeholders, organized by Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- **Rural Lifestyle Land Use Presentation (2022)** – Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council (TCRPC)
- **Martin 2040: The Western Lands Study (2024)** – 1000 Friends of Florida, Guardians of Martin County, & University of Florida's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning

The purpose of this review is fourfold:

1. Summarize the results and current status of each study's recommendations.
2. Identify strategies that continue to be used successfully elsewhere in the United States, providing a national benchmark for comparison.
3. Highlight strategies previously recommended for Martin County that were not implemented or remain only partially realized.
4. Identify additional tools and approaches that may be applicable today, based on both local needs and proven national models.

A separate, more detailed Excel matrix accompanies this summary. This matrix documents each study's key recommendations and assesses whether they have been fully implemented, partially implemented, or not implemented. This supplemental resource provides a comprehensive, at-a-glance inventory of progress and gaps across the County's long-term planning efforts.

The sections that follow provide a detailed, study-by-study assessment of progress made, gaps that persist, and opportunities for modernizing the County's approach to rural land preservation, agricultural viability, and smart growth.

This review concludes that Martin County has sufficient planning guidance for its western lands and that no additional studies are necessary at this time; the priority must now be implementation of existing recommendations.

2020 Vision Plan for a Sustainable Martin County (1999): Status Update

Martin County has achieved meaningful progress toward the Vision Plan's goals – particularly through environmental land acquisition, the establishment of Community Redevelopment Areas (CRAs), and the development of countywide commercial design standards. Initiatives such as the Sustainable Martin Alliance and the “Martin 101” civic education program further demonstrate strong public engagement and environmental stewardship.

However, major elements of the Vision Plan remain uncodified or inconsistently applied. Key sustainability indicators were never fully implemented, and efforts to track progress between 2003 and 2009 were hindered by vague metrics and limited access to private data, resulting in inconsistent monitoring and no reliable benchmark system. Several important components – including a unified Countywide Master Plan, integration of the Department of Community Affairs' Best Development Practices, and establishment of a dedicated urban design function – remain incomplete.

To strengthen implementation, Martin County should:

- Codify the Vision Plan's core elements
- Update and formalize measurable sustainability indicators
- Create a clear interagency framework for long-term coordination
- Expand public engagement and design standards across all planning areas

Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (2000): Status Update

As of 2025, Martin County and regional partners have achieved significant progress on several Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) projects. The Allapattah Flats Wetland Restoration and the C-44 Reservoir and Stormwater Treatment Area (STA) are completed and operational, providing major water-quality improvements, flood reduction, and habitat restoration.

Other projects (including the C-23/C-24 STA and Atlantic Ridge) are partially complete, with land acquisition and early construction underway but full hydrologic restoration still pending. The Lake Okeechobee Watershed and Loxahatchee River Watershed restoration projects remain in planning or early implementation phases.

Recommended next steps include:

- Accelerating land acquisition
- Strengthening state and federal funding commitments
- Improving interagency coordination
- Prioritizing shovel-ready components for early environmental benefits
- Expanding public-private partnerships and stakeholder engagement

Martin – St. Lucie Regional Land Use Study (2002): Status Update

The Regional Land Use Study envisioned a network of compact, mixed-use Community Centers to reduce automobile dependence, improve regional mobility, and preserve rural and environmentally sensitive lands. Several aspects of this vision have been partially implemented, including the identification of Community Centers in CRAs and the Comprehensive Plan, enhanced multimodal infrastructure, and redevelopment efforts such as the Village Green Master Plan in St. Lucie County.

New mixed-use communities like Newfield (fka Pineland Prairie) demonstrate progress toward walkable, transit-supportive development patterns that help buffer rural lands from sprawl.

However, the broader framework remains only partially realized. Missing or incomplete components include:

- Formal Multimodal Transportation District (MMTD) designations
- Countywide design standards for Community Centers
- Policy amendments to support compact, mixed-use patterns
- Codified Community Center hierarchy (neighborhood, town, regional)
- Connectivity, circulation, and performance zoning requirements
- Fiscal incentives to support infill and redevelopment

Rural and Agricultural Lands Inventory (2003): Status Update

Martin County successfully completed Tasks 1 and 2 (land inventory and agricultural economic analysis) but did not formally adopt Tasks 3 and 4 addressing cost-benefit evaluation and conservation alternatives.

The County has implemented several conservation tools, including wetland and upland protection policies, right-to-farm safeguards, and selected agricultural easements. However, major gaps remain, such as:

- No formal Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program
- Lack of countywide cluster zoning outside the urban boundary
- Absence of a comprehensive agricultural zoning framework
- Limited local incentives for agricultural land retention

Recommended improvements:

Develop a full TDR program, adopt countywide cluster zoning with clear standards, and strengthen agricultural zoning using sliding-scale or area-based density.

Additionally, revisiting the County's Rural and Agricultural Lands Inventory presents an ideal opportunity to update the previously unadopted cost-benefit analysis associated with Task 3. A modernized evaluation would allow Martin County to quantify the full economic, environmental, and community benefits that agriculture provides – ranging from local food production and job support to ecosystem services, flood mitigation, and preservation of rural

character. By integrating current data and contemporary economic modeling, the County can more accurately assess the fiscal advantages of retaining agricultural lands compared to continued conversion pressures. This updated analysis would not only inform the design of new tools such as TDR, countywide cluster zoning, and enhanced agricultural zoning, but also help demonstrate the long-term value of agriculture to Martin County's overall economic resilience and quality of life.

A complementary recommendation is to also conduct a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis for the County's parks and recreation lands. This analysis should evaluate not only operational and maintenance costs but also the economic, environmental, and public-health benefits provided to residents. By quantifying the value of open space, trail networks, natural lands, public access, and ecosystem services, Martin County can better understand the long-term contributions of parks and recreation to community resilience.

Rural Lands Symposium (2003): Status Update

While progress has been made in preserving agricultural lands, agriculture is not yet fully integrated into the County's broader planning system. There is no formal mechanism for early farmer engagement, local incentives remain limited, and no major density adjustments have been enacted to balance housing and conservation goals.

A more holistic, data-informed approach is needed, with structured farmer participation, targeted incentives, and cross-sector planning to preserve the rural landscape.

Sustainable Treasure Coast (2005): Status Update

Martin County has advanced several conservation initiatives, including clustering tools, Rural Lifestyle designations, wetland buffers, and significant restoration projects such as the C-44 Reservoir. The County has also contributed to the protection of more than 71,000 acres within the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

Yet significant gaps remain:

- No countywide TDR system
- No rural preservation acreage targets
- Limited cross-community engagement
- No Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) framework

- No comprehensive agricultural viability strategy

The study also recommended establishing:

- A nonprofit organization to assist with implementation
- A research institute via FAU and IRSC to support data needs

There is no evidence that these steps have been completed.

Development Patterns Study (2007): Status Update

Key recommendations such as addressing 20-acre and 5-acre sprawl patterns, adopting countywide TDR, incentivizing cluster development, and updating planning horizons have not been implemented. Conservation easements tied to development, long-term management funding, and strategic acquisition mapping remain weak or outdated.

Recommended actions:

1. Establish a formal TDR program
2. Update land-acquisition maps
3. Revise the Land Development Code to support compact rural and urban settlement patterns
4. Revive community planning tools such as Special Area Plans

Land Protection (Valliere) Amendment (2008): Status Update

Although adopted to encourage permanent preservation, the Valliere Amendment has never been used due to its procedural complexity and lack of meaningful incentives. Simplifying the process, adding density or procedural benefits, and clarifying criteria for public benefit would make the tool more functional.

St. Lucie Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) (2013): Status Update

Martin County has made substantial progress toward nutrient reduction and water storage goals. Major water farms (including Caulkins, Scott, and Bluefield) provide tens of thousands of acre-feet in storage annually.

However, agricultural nutrient loading remains a challenge, and only 62% of agricultural lands are enrolled in Best Management Practices (BMP).

Recommended actions:

- Expand cost-share programs
- Fully implement Chapter 40E-61 regulatory source controls
- Improve performance monitoring and reporting

Rural Lifestyle Future Land Use Presentation (2022): Status Update

The Rural Lifestyle designation was adopted in 2022 and amended in 2024, but further changes ceased after the adoption of Florida Senate Bill 180 (2025) which prohibits new development restrictions for 3 years. The designation remains active but constrained by evolving state law.¹

Martin 2040: Western Lands Study (2024): Status Update

The County has made progress using sales tax revenue through Martin County Forever, discouraging development without infrastructure, and investing in septic-to-sewer conversions and advanced wastewater treatment.

However, the study did not address how much density must be accommodated inside the Urban Service District to support preservation goals. Stronger coordination with land trusts, expanded conservation financing, and proactive resilience planning remain essential.

National Strategies for Rural Land Preservation

Having evaluated Martin County's progress across its major planning initiatives, it is equally important to understand how other counties have addressed similar challenges. To place Martin County's efforts in a broader context, this study also examined successful strategies used across the United States to protect agricultural lands and environmentally sensitive areas.

Other strategies used in the United States to protect and conserve agricultural lands and/or environmentally sensitive lands were also examined. Counties across the U.S. have developed diverse and innovative approaches to rural land preservation. These approaches combine

¹ **Notable approvals under Rural Lifestyle:** Atlantic Fields (2022; 1,500 acres, with 70% preserved as open space) and Calusa Creek Ranch (2024; 3,902 acres, with 91% preserved as open space).

zoning, land acquisition, conservation easements, and Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) programs to protect agricultural landscapes, wetlands, and important wildlife corridors. In addition to regulatory frameworks, many counties employ financial incentives such as tax breaks, grants, and land trust partnerships to encourage voluntary land conservation. Based on these examples, Martin County should consider integrating similar strategies – particularly focusing on conservation easements, agricultural zoning, and targeted land acquisition programs that support both ecological health and sustainable agriculture.

The table below highlights proven strategies from other U.S. counties, showing the tools used and their outcomes. These examples provide a blueprint for Martin County to protect its unique rural and ecological heritage while guiding growth to appropriate areas in spite of very significant urban sprawl pressures.

Table: County Land Preservation Models Organized by Strategy Type

1. Counties with Strong Agricultural Zoning + Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Programs

These counties use zoning + TDR to shift growth away from rural/agricultural lands and concentrate development in serviced areas.

County	Tools/Strategies Implemented	Outcomes / Results
Montgomery County, MD	Agricultural Reserve, TDR, PDR, easements, strong agricultural zoning	Protected 93,000 acres of farmland; limited sprawl; high-quality soil preserved; strong community support
Sonoma County, CA	Agricultural zoning, conservation easements, TDR, public-private partnerships	Preserved 50,000+ acres; protected vineyards and farmland; focused growth in urban centers; strong eco-tourism economy
King County, WA	Purchase of easements, TDR, conservation partnerships, urban growth boundaries	Protected thousands of acres of farmland and forest; maintained wildlife corridors; avoided suburban sprawl
Loudoun County, VA	Conservation easements, rural/ag zoning (AR-1, AR-2), prime soil protections,	Over 85,000 acres preserved; formal protection of prime soils;

County	Tools/Strategies Implemented	Outcomes / Results
	cluster subdivision controls, land-use tax assessment	sustained rural economy; intact heritage landscapes

2. Counties Using Major Public Acquisition Tools (Sales Taxes, Open-Space Funding, Bonds)

These counties rely heavily on publicly financed land conservation to secure open space permanently.

County	Tools/Strategies Implemented	Outcomes / Results
Boulder County, CO	Open space sales tax, conservation easements, zoning overlay, growth boundaries	Preserved 36,000 acres; maintained rural buffers; protected watersheds; expanded public recreation
Marin County, CA	PDR, agricultural zoning, conservation easements, urban growth boundary	Preserved dairy and ranchlands; prevented suburban sprawl; rural identity embedded in county culture

3. Counties with Highly Effective Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Programs

These counties excel at voluntary, incentive-based farmland protection.

County	Tools/Strategies Implemented	Outcomes / Results
Lancaster County, PA	PDR, agricultural zoning, farmland preservation programs	Protected 80%+ of farmland; strong ag economy; family farms remain viable; heritage landscapes maintained
Dane County, WI	Agricultural zoning, farmland preservation, conservation easements	Protected rural lands; reduced fragmentation; preserved scenic/ecological values; coordinated countywide planning

The national models reviewed reveal that successful rural-land preservation typically relies on a combination of regulatory protection and incentive-based tools, rather than any single strategy. Counties with robust agricultural zoning paired with TDR programs such as Montgomery,

Loudoun, Sonoma, and King demonstrate how shifting development away from farmland can permanently protect working landscapes while directing growth to areas with urban services. Counties that utilize substantial public funding mechanisms, like Boulder and Marin, show that dedicated revenue sources can secure large blocks of open space, safeguard watersheds, and reinforce strong urban–rural boundaries. Meanwhile, counties with highly effective PDR programs, including Lancaster and Dane, illustrate the long-term stability created when landowners are compensated for keeping land in agriculture. Together, these models highlight a path forward for Martin County: adopt a multi-tool framework that integrates agricultural zoning, conservation easements, targeted land acquisition, and a functional TDR or PDR program to maintain rural character, support working farms, and protect environmentally sensitive lands.

Evaluation of Martin County's Existing Conditions

To translate these national lessons back into Martin County's context, it is important to assess where the County currently stands relative to the tools and frameworks used successfully elsewhere. The following section summarizes Martin County's major areas of progress, alongside persistent gaps that continue to limit the effectiveness of its rural land-preservation strategy.

Key Areas of Progress:

- **Land Conservation:** Through programs like Martin County Forever, the County has successfully preserved thousands of acres of sensitive lands, wetlands, and wildlife corridors. Overall, Martin County has approximately 98,860 acres in conservation – of which 3,780 acres are County-owned, 89,620 acres are under State protection, 4,340 acres are federally conserved, and 1,120 acres are protected through private conservation efforts—representing about 28% of the County's 355,840-acre land area.²
- **CRA & Design Standards:** Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) planning has incorporated urban design standards that reflect sustainability goals.
- **Water Quality and Storage Projects:** CERP and BMAP have delivered major infrastructure (e.g., C-44 STA, Caulkins Water Farm) supporting estuary health and flood mitigation.

² Florida Natural Areas Inventory. (2025). Acres of Conservation Lands by County (January 2025) PDF. Florida State University. https://www.fnai.org/PDFs/MAXCounty_202501.pdf

- **Growth Containment:** Urban Service Boundary and updated land use policies (e.g., Rural Lifestyle) have helped guide development toward already urbanized areas and fostered a “green belt” around the perimeter.

Challenges & Gaps:

Despite notable progress, several initiatives remain underused or incomplete:

Area	Key Issues
Tracking & Metrics	Sustainability indicators from the 2020 Vision remain uncodified, with no countywide monitoring framework in place.
Agricultural Preservation	No active TDR program or comprehensive agricultural zoning. Incentives are limited and underutilized.
Smart Growth Implementation	Many recommendations from the Development Patterns Study and Regional Land Use Study – such as MMTDs, form-based codes, and infill incentives – are not fully implemented.
Planning Integration	Several studies were never formally adopted or integrated into regulatory code, leaving them as policy references rather than enforceable plans.
Water Policy Gaps	While major projects are in place, BMP adoption remains incomplete, and septic-to-sewer conversions are lagging due to high costs.

In addition to these identified gaps, a critical missing piece across all studies is the absence of a centralized, public-facing Conservation Land Database that classifies, tracks, and updates the status of conserved and high-priority lands. Martin County should create a unified database that organizes conservation lands into categories such as:

- permanently protected public lands
- private conservation easements
- agricultural lands eligible for preservation incentives
- priority acquisition parcels
- wildlife corridors and ecological networks
- existing and potential park and recreation lands

This database would improve consistency across planning efforts, enhance transparency, and serve as a foundational tool for evaluating conservation progress, prioritizing acquisitions, and integrating rural, ecological, and recreation planning.

Recommendations Moving Forward:

Conclusion Regarding Future Studies

Based on the comprehensive review of more than 25 years of planning efforts, this analysis finds that Martin County does not suffer from a lack of information, data, or policy guidance regarding its western lands. The issues, challenges, and appropriate tools for rural land preservation, agricultural viability, and smart growth have been repeatedly identified, refined, and reaffirmed through numerous County, regional, state, and national studies.

Accordingly, no additional western lands studies are recommended or necessary at this time. Further study would largely duplicate existing work and risk delaying meaningful action. The primary deficiency identified through this review is not analytical, but implementation-based.

The County's efforts should now be directed toward codifying existing recommendations, strengthening regulatory frameworks, securing sustainable funding mechanisms, and executing adopted policies. Measurable progress will be best achieved by focusing on implementation, coordination, and accountability rather than initiating new planning studies.

Implementation Priorities

To align the County's vision with future challenges, especially population growth, land availability, and climate resilience, Martin County should:

1. Codify and Unify Planning Vision

Adopt a countywide Master Plan that consolidates goals from past studies into enforceable policy, including sustainability indicators, TDR frameworks, and resilience planning. Create a unified Conservation Land Database to track protected lands, priority acquisition areas, agricultural preservation targets, and existing and potential recreation corridors in one coordinated, transparent platform.

2. Formalize Agricultural Tools

Develop and implement a countywide TDR program, cluster zoning options, and agricultural land retention incentives that are predictable and appealing to landowners.

3. Enhance Implementation Capacity

Establish a dedicated planning coordinator or urban designer role to help shepherd policy into action and support cross-departmental collaboration.

4. Prioritize Smart Growth Mechanisms

Accelerate formal designation of Multimodal Transportation Districts (MMTDs) along the US1 corridor to encourage infill development in lieu of western development, implement community-scale zoning overlays, and refine the Rural Lifestyle policy to strengthen conservation outcomes. Impact fee structures should also be updated to reflect the true cost of development, with higher fees for projects in the far western areas where no infrastructure currently exists and substantially greater public investment would be required.

5. Improve Public Engagement and Accountability

Reinstitute regular community visioning workshops, use public-facing dashboards to track plan performance, and explore a regional stewardship council to oversee long-term goals.

Martin County is not starting from scratch – it has decades of thoughtful planning and high public support for conservation. The challenge now is to refine, codify, and implement those ideas in ways that are legally enforceable, economically viable, and environmentally responsible. Reliance on regulation alone will not achieve the desired results, especially in the current environment of state pre-emptions and erosion of home rule authority.