

East Hillsborough Tribune

Brandon
Plant City
South County

Tuesday, December 9, 1986

AN EDITION OF THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Shadow Run homes connected once again by new dam and road

Construction to
replace the dam and
road began in late
June.

By CHERYL MICHAELS
Tribune Staff Writer

Shadow Run subdivision residents no longer are separated by a broken dam in an empty, 180-acre lakebed. A new road, above a new dam and a lake now 8 feet deep in some places, was opened Saturday.

"It's just super duper," said sub-

division resident Frank Leone, who lives on Lake Grady. "I can see water coming back in again."

"We are much relieved," said Ann Waldron, who lives near the new dam. "We're glad to see it open."

Peter Ware, a commissioner who oversaw construction for the Lake Grady Road and Bridge District, said the district's next move is to try to persuade Hillsborough County to assume maintenance of the dam and road.

He said the district likely would consider such a request at its next

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Lake

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meeting, which had not been scheduled.

Although Ware was positive about the district's chances of having the county maintain at least the road, county officials in five departments said they were unfamiliar with the issue.

Ellen Underwood, a spokeswoman for the Southwest Florida Water Management District, said the district's Alafia River Basin Board already rejected a proposal to take over the dam. The reason, she said, was because the lake was created for recreational purposes, not water management.

Construction to replace the dam, which broke three years ago, began in late June. Ware said Monday the \$450,000 project was completed, except for installing meshing to keep boats from the dam.

He said it should be installed in a week and there is no problem waiting because the water level is 4 feet below the dam.

Building a dam to replace a steel dam constructed 10 years ago, and build a road over it, was a major project for the special taxing district southeast of Riverview.

A 1985 tax levy, amounting to \$1,400 an acre, was authorized to pay for the dam and help repay the district's \$1.5 million debt on \$2.3 million in bonds sold in 1974 to build roads and sidewalks.

Ware said district officials were hoping they could finish the project before they were forced to spend their revenues on something else, such as legal expenses.

"The major concern was that some other litigation would come up," he said.

The district is in court defending special tax assessments levied on property within the district. Some of the district's landholders claim the district did not have the authority to levy special assessments against their property.

Commissioners say they do, except under special circumstances such as those involving a Southeast Bank subsidiary, Sylvan Properties Inc.

East Hillsborough Tribune

Brandon
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Saturday, November 22, 1986

AN EDITION OF THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Lake Grady board OKs new strategy

Members of the road and bridge district said court help was the best solution for the district's debt problem.

By CHERYL MICHAELS
Tribune Staff Writer

The Lake Grady Road and Bridge District, a special taxing district near Riverview facing a \$1.5 million debt, authorized its attorney Thursday night to begin financial reorganization through federal court.

Its aim is to restructure the debt and repay all of it, if possible. The measure passed only after

Commissioner Bill Gasparino persuaded other commissioners the court proceeding was the best way to handle the problem.

"There's no genius game plan, other than (that), to force somebody to tell us what to do," Gasparino said, "because there's no guidance."

The district, which includes the Shadow Run Subdivision, hasn't paid for five years on a debt from the 1974 sale of \$2.3 million in bonds to build roads and sidewalks. Commissioners say there isn't a sufficient tax base to raise the money because the district is largely undeveloped.

Although commissioners advertised for a bankruptcy attorney, there still were doubts a bankruptcy proceeding was the best solution to their financial problems.

"I have very little confidence it (bankruptcy case) will be handled any time soon," commissioner Peter Ware said. "My inclination is not to proceed at this point."

Commissioners considered refinancing, but Gasparino told them it would be difficult because of the small amount of money involved.

He said the district had to do something to "eliminate the stigma" associated with the debt and allow

the subdivision to grow.

"The place will never develop so long as the cloud hangs over the district," he said.

The vote to proceed was unanimous. The district attorney, Robin Trupp, who was asked Thursday to continue serving the district's legal needs refused to comment on when a financial plan could be filed in fed-

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Debts

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eral court or how long it might take to reach a conclusion.

However, he and other attorneys seeking to represent the district in

the case have described the legal mechanism planned as complicated and unusual.

Trupp's law firm, Nixon and Nixon, was one of three to submit bids to the district. Nixon and Nixon submitted the low bid, quoting a fee of \$100 an hour.

The district was created by Shadow Run's developer, Suncoast

Highland Corp. of Clearwater, in 1973. The bonds were sold, then only half of the roads and none of the sidewalks were built, court records show.

An auditor general's report in 1980 questioned the expenditures made by the district and criticized it for inadequate records and lack of financial control.

Developer asks appeal court to allow suit against taxing district

By ELISABETH McALLISTER
Tribune Staff Writer

Clearwater developer Madison Corp. argued Monday before the 2nd District Court of Appeal in Tampa that it should be able to continue its lawsuit against a Riverview special taxing district over unpaid taxes.

Madison Corp. is asking the appeals court to decide whether its failure to pay the special assessment taxes for five years prevents the company from suing on the validity of the taxes.

Madison's original 1983 lawsuit against the Lake Grady Road and Bridge District was dismissed by a circuit court primarily because Madison had not paid taxes "in good faith" despite its suit, said Madison attorney James Whittemore.

Madison's contention that the taxes are invalid, Whittemore said, is based on a resolution passed in

1982 by a prior group of Lake Grady commissioners that declared the taxes invalid.

As further required by law, Madison's 1983 suit asked that the circuit court "tell us if the resolution is good or bad," Whittemore said.

Furthermore, he said, the lawsuit said the taxes were invalid because the district didn't have the authority to levy the taxes, "and if they did, what happened to the monies renders the special assessment invalid."

But Lake Grady attorney Robin S. Trupp said Monday that Madison was required by state law to pay "something in good faith" despite the suit, "and since they didn't, the court was right in dismissing the complaint."

A decision by the three-judge court is expected within the next three months.

Madison is claiming it should be

relieved of about \$800,000 in special assessment taxes for the years 1979-1983 for about 54 lots it owns in the taxing district.

The district was created in 1973 and the tax levied to repay some \$2.3 million in bonds sold to build roads and sidewalks.

Last May, the 2nd District Court of Appeal found that another road district landowner was entitled to a refund on the special assessment taxes.

In Sylvan Properties Inc.'s case, the court said the district had no authority to levy the taxes in 1980-84. Sylvan had not benefitted from roads built with the tax dollars, the court said.

Lake Grady attorney Trupp said Monday that "Roads were built, not all the roads, but there was some benefit" to Madison.

East Hillsborough Tribune

Brandon
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Tuesday, November 4, 1986

AN EDITION OF THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Taxing district board turns down offer to settle lawsuit

The settlement offer would have put 50 lots in the Lake Grady Road and Bridge District back on the tax roll. The issue of paying back taxes on the lots now awaits a court hearing.

By CHERYL MICHAELS
Tribune Staff Writer

The Lake Grady Road and Bridge District, a special taxing district southeast of Riverview, is playing a waiting game.

The issue is a lawsuit filed by a Clearwater developer who claims he should not have to pay the special taxing district \$920,000 in back taxes for 1979-1984. The stakes also include legal fees.

And the district, which includes the Shadow Run subdivision, already is facing severe financial problems.

So when district commissioners reviewed a Madison Corp. settlement offer last week in the lawsuit contesting six years' worth of back taxes, dollars and cents were crucial.

"I don't know if I can go home and face my neighbors knowing I excused 50 of those 54 lots" with delinquent taxes, said district Commissioner Peter Ware. "So I stand firm (in opposition)."

Arthur Carroll, Madison's Corp. president, said striking the bargain would put the land back on the tax rolls and bring in tax dollars to the district sooner.

Despite reservations of his own, Commissioner Bill Gasparino made a motion to accept Madison's offer. But it died for a lack of a second.

Ware suggested Madison prepare another offer. Carroll suggested the district prepare a counter-offer.

"I came up with the best offer I could," Carroll said last Wednesday.

The case is pending before the 2nd District Court of Appeal and attorneys from both sides are expected to argue the issues in a Nov. 10 hearing in Tampa.

Madison appealed a Circuit Court's dismissal of the suit.

The suit also will be on the agenda at the district's 5:30 p.m. meeting Nov. 5 at the county courthouse in Tampa. At that time, the district also is expected to consider three bids received for a bankruptcy attorney.

If no settlement is reached in the Madison lawsuit, Carroll said it will just cause more legal fees on both sides.

The problem dates to 1978 when taxes weren't paid on 50 of the 54 lots at issue. In an attempt to recoup tax revenues, the county sold tax certificates on the lots and took them off tax rolls pending receipt of back tax payments.

Madison acquired the land in 1984 from Harbison Cove Estates, which initiated the lawsuit against the district. Madison then took over the lawsuit.

Carroll says fees needed to restore the lots to the tax rolls, plus additional expenses, will cost him \$600,000.

The district would be paid \$4,600 for 1980 assessments on all 54 parcels, full payments for assessments on four unencumbered parcels at \$8,770, and a settlement fee amounting to \$13,419.

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Taxing

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Commissioners said the \$13,419 was insufficient to cover legal fees on the suit filed in 1983.

Commissioner Ware says the district also needs to collect 1985's \$1,400-per-acre special assessment to repay bonds and rebuild the subdivision's dam over Lake Grady.

Shadow Run Homeowner's Association President Susan Mountain told the board she didn't know why paying the \$1,400-per-acre assessment would hurt Carroll that much.

However, Suzy Brewer, a real estate agent selling land in Shadow Run, urged commissioners to resolve the problem so the land could be returned to the tax rolls now, instead of after they're auctioned by the county in three or more years.

"This is an opportunity to get something cleaned up out there," Brewer said. "Right now it (the sales picture) is hot."

The district, created in 1973 by Shadow Run developer Suncoast Highland Corp. of Clearwater, faces a \$1.5 million debt on \$2.3 million in bonds sold in 1974. Payments on the bonds, sold to build roads and sidewalks in the 963-acre district, haven't been made since 1980.

Protecting nature

Increasingly rare golden aster winning life-saving support

By KIM KLEMAN
Tribune Staff Writer

Remember the Florida golden aster, the rare spindly flower we have mowed and plowed into near oblivion?

A campaign is mounting to save the forlorn plant, which grows almost exclusively in southern Hillsborough County. There's even a Florida golden aster T-shirt.

"We just wanted to make people aware," said Debbie Butts, of the Suncoast Native Plant Society, which sold the shirts. "It's the whole principle of the thing — not letting the aster go for concrete."

The enthusiasm is timed perfectly, botanists say. The yellow-flowered aster blooms in November and December, and it goes to seed during these months as well.

Planting aster seeds is the best way to continue the species, says David Martin, a botanist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Jacksonville.

"The things will reproduce very easily by seed," he said. "They're not terribly fussy. If you give them a pile of bare sand they will be happy."

He cautions against transplanting the aster — an idea county officials proposed — because of the plant's extensive root system.

"I haven't had any success with it," added Steve Mortellaro, of Hillsborough's Environmental Protection Commission,

who tried transplanting asters that grew in his south county neighborhood.

Also, experienced botanists should probably help with any effort to save the aster, says botanist Richard Wunderlin of the University of South Florida.

"I wouldn't recommend people going out on their own," because the aster needs a certain environment to thrive, he said.

Hillsborough officials have several proposals of their own. They include:

- Growing Florida golden asters in county parks and asking interested groups to help.
- Requiring the plant to be preserved as a condition for rezoning, landscaping or otherwise altering commercial lands.
- Teaching county staff to recognize the aster, so they can impose protective restrictions.

"It's all preliminary now," said county Parks Director Ed Radice. "You've got to understand we're new at this."

Even the best efforts to save the plant will be sticky.

The Florida golden aster grows almost exclusively on private vacant lots in the Shadow Run subdivision near Ruskin and on private land along the southern bank of the Little Manatee River.

Officials admit they have no authority to regulate the aster on private land.

That's why it's so exciting to see residents becoming interested in the flower, Mortellaro said.

"There really isn't a mechanism to preserve these things otherwise."

East Hillsborough Tribune

Brandon
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Tuesday, October 21, 1986

AN EDITION OF THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

With brand-new dam, Lake Grady filling up after three-year wait

The new, concrete dam replaces a steel dam that was built 10 years ago. The old dam was closed in 1983, after officials decided it was unsafe.

By CHERYL MICHAELS
Tribune Staff Writer

Lake Grady is rising.

Since gates were closed on its new dam two weeks ago, rainfall has started collecting in the 180-acre lake drained nearly three years ago when its old dam broke.

"If we have a Hurricane Elena, we'll have it filled up in a weekend," says Peter Ware, a Lake Grady Road and Bridge District commis-

sioner overseeing dam reconstruction. "It could be a couple of months. There's no way of telling."

Lake Grady, located in the Shadow Run subdivision southeast of Riverview, was emptied after a fisherman in November 1983 alerted its special taxing district the dam was unsafe. The road above it was closed, physically separating both sides of Shadow Run Boulevard and

Dam

From Page 1E

forcing residents to drive an extra five to eight miles around the subdivision.

Now the end of their inconvenience is in sight.

Completion of a \$450,000 dam reconstruction project, which began in late June, is planned Nov. 1 when a road above the new dam is paved,

says Matt Koerner, executive vice president of C.P. Ward Inc. of Largo.

"We should be paving in the last week (of October)," he said. "We've been right on schedule all along. But we've got to contend with the weather."

The new, concrete dam replaces a steel dam built 10 years ago.

During construction, problems developed when state Department of Environmental Regulation officials found work was begun without a per-

mit.

However, Chris Person, an environmental supervisor, said Friday the DER and district have negotiated a consent order calling for a \$599 fee to cover damages. That consent order is awaiting approval from DER attorneys, he said.

In the meantime, the dam reconstruction project already has begun reuniting the community, residents say. Neighbors often meet at the dam, where residents daily check on progress.

"They've never done quite as much as you thought they did," Ware said.

He also reports that new construction has picked up at Shadow Run, where about 10 new homes are being built.

And homeowners are preparing to celebrate.

Shadow Run Homeowners' Association members have scheduled a party Nov. 1 near the dam, where they eventually hope to build a park.

Rare plant to be protected by county

By D'ANN WHITE

The protection of the county's endangered Florida Goldenaster plant should be given top priority, county commissioners agreed yesterday.

The Florida Goldenaster (*Chrysopsis Florida*) is an endangered plant species found only in southeastern Hillsborough County, according to Dr. Richard Wunderland of the University of South Florida. In the past, the rare plant did grow in Manatee and Pinellas counties, said Wunderland. However, it now is extinct in those counties "as far as we know," he said.

And there are only two areas in Hillsborough County where the plant grows, according to Wunderland. The largest population is found in Shadow Run subdivision off Boyette and McMullen roads in Riverview and in the general vicinity of Boyette Road. The plant also grows in an area south of Ruskin.

"And this area of Riverview is where a lot of development is taking place because the area is high and dry," said Wunderland. If the plant is not protected, it could be permanently wiped out, he said.

The Florida Goldenaster stands about one foot high and has "white hairy leaves and yellow flowers," said Wunderland. It grows in sand pine scrub where the soil is dry and sandy.

The commission has recommended amendments to the zoning ordinance to protect the plant. In rezonings, applicants will have to indicate whether the plant grows on the parcel and, as a condition of zoning, a special preserve must be established or the plant must be transplanted to a suitable protected site. The same will be required of commercial projects and residential subdivision lots or individual residential parcels.

Since a number of the plants have been sighted in existing developments, the county also will initiate a public education and awareness program so county residents can recognize the plant. In addition, the county hopes to transplant some Florida Goldenaster to suitable county parks to further ensure protection.

Apollo Beach • Mango • Bloomingdale • Dover • Seffner • Sun City Center • Thonotosassa • Valrico • Wimauma • Gibsonton • Riverview • Ruskin

East Hillsborough Tribune

Brandon
Plant City
South County

Saturday, September 27, 1986

AN EDITION OF THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

EAST HILLSBOROUGH TRIBUNE, Saturday, September 27, 1986 5-EH

Lake Grady district debts prompt state visit

By CHERYL MICHAELS
Tribune Staff Writer

The Lake Grady Road and Bridge District, a special taxing district near Riverview facing a \$1.5 million debt, is inviting a Governor's Office representative to Tampa to review district finances.

The action comes in response to a Governor's Office inquiry sparked by bondholders' efforts to collect their share of the debt. The Governor's Office gave the district until Friday to reply.

"District commissioners are unable in the limited time provided... to provide your office with complete responses," states the letter authorized by commissioners Thursday night.

It suggests an audit it is seeking of prior commission actions may help.

The letter was to be mailed Friday to Linda Shelley of the Governor's Legal Office. Shelley could not be reached Friday morning for comment.

In 1974, the district southeast of Riverview sold \$2.3 million in bonds to build 15 miles of roads and sidewalks in the 963-acre district. The

last bond payments were made in 1980, Commissioner Peter Ware says.

When bondholders complained to Gov. Bob Graham, staff members in an Aug. 28 letter asked the district to explain plans to repay the debt.

The letter by Glenn Robertson, director of the Office of Planning and Budgeting, asked for:

- Fair market and assessed values of district land.
- List of property owners.
- Number of property owners who live in the district.
- What taxes have been levied in an attempt to pay the debt.
- Why hasn't the district levied enough property taxes to pay bondholders?
- The district's plan to avoid a "financial emergency."

Governor's staff members have said they were unsure what action they would take to assist bondholders. Their options ranged from doing nothing to taking over the district under Graham's emergency powers.

During a 5:30 p.m. meeting, district commissioners also reaffirmed retroactive budgets and

millage rates initially approved Sept. 4. The action was taken after state officials circulated a memo indicating a second vote was required by law, said the district's attorney, Robin Trupp.

The retroactive budgets and millages are expected to affect only the district's largest property holder, Sylvan Properties Inc. Levying a property tax for the back years is the commissioners' attempt to recoup through ad valorem taxes the special assessment revenues lost in litigation brought by Sylvan.

Sylvan, a Southeast Bank subsidiary which owns 575 acres, successfully contested some \$575,000 in special assessments for 1980 through 1984.

Special assessments are flat tax rates levied against property; ad valorem taxes are based on the land's value.

At a Sept. 4 public hearing, Sylvan protested both the back budgets and millages, saying the district had no power to levy special assessments in the district. Commissioners say an appellate court ruling, entitling Sylvan to a tax refund, was based on special circumstances and doesn't apply to the rest of the district.

East Hillsborough Tribune

Brandon
Plant City
South County

Saturday, September 6, 1986

AN EDITION OF THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

District goes step closer to federal court

Members of the Lake Grady Road and Bridge District also set a tax levy of \$250 per acre.

By CHERYL MICHAELS
Tribune Staff Writer

The Lake Grady Road and Bridge District moved towards federal court Thursday when it unanimously decided to seek bids for a bankruptcy attorney.

The decision came two days after the district's attorney, Robin Trupp, received a letter which could precede state intervention into the special tax district southeast of Riverview.

In other action, the district levied a \$250-per-acre special assessment for the 1986-87 fiscal year — despite the objection of the district's major landholder, Sylvan Properties Inc.

"The district has no power to levy special assessments, currently or retroactively, against district properties," wrote Sylvan attorney Maria Maistrellis in a letter hand-delivered to the board Thursday night. "If the commissioners fail to fully adhere to . . . Florida law, Sylvan will contest taxes or special assessments levied by the district, the district's taxing power and also whether commissioners have acted in good faith."

The district, which includes the Shadow Run subdivision, is about \$1.5 million in debt. It has failed to pay notes on \$2.3 million in bonds since 1980.

The bonds were sold in 1974 to build sidewalks and 15 miles of roads in the 963-acre district.

During a 5:30 p.m. meeting, commissioners voted 4-0 to advertise for bids for an attorney or attorneys to handle a bankruptcy case and other pending litigation involving the district.

Trupp, who will write bid specifications, said after the meeting he was unsure if his law firm would be bidding.

Glenn Robertson, director of the governor's Office of Planning and Budgeting, has given district commissioners until Sept. 26 to answer several questions about the district, how it has attempted to repay its bonds, and how it intends to repay them in the future.

Governor's staff members say it is uncertain what action they will take in response to bondholders' complaints.

About 10 people attending a 2½-hour meeting, which focused on tax issues. Most of the debate involved Maistrellis and commissioners, who have been at odds in

District

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court over back taxes.

Sylvan, a Southeast Bank subsidiary, contested more than \$575,000 in special assessments levied in prior years and won. Commissioners say the ruling applied only to Sylvan based on special circumstances.

Commissioners, who are attempting to recoup at least part of the money, retroactively levied ad valorem tax rates for 1980 through 1984 in an effort to collect from Sylvan.

The taxes don't apply to those who paid special assessments for those years.

Because they could not locate the prior years' budgets, and were unsure they were ever formally adopted by a prior commission,

commissioners reconstructed them based solely on the amount of bond fees due. Millages were set at 46 for 1980, 35 mills for 1981, 30 mills for 1982, 25 mills for 1983 and 25 mills for 1984.

One mill amounts to \$1 for each \$1,000 of assessed property value.

"You can't tonight adopt a budget for five years ago," Maistrellis told commissioners. "You need to use that budget."

She said she also opposed the retroactive assessment and being singled out for taxation.

Susan Mountain, president of the Shadow Run Homeowners' Association, said Sylvan wasn't being singled out. There were the only ones being charged now because the others had already paid, she said.

"I personally object to have anyone think the road and bridge district singled one out."

East Hillsborough Tribune

Brandon
Plant City
South County

Thursday, September 4, 1986

AN EDITION OF THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Bondholders attempt to recoup their share of debt

About \$2.3 million in bonds were sold in 1974 to build sidewalks and 15 miles of roads in the 963-acre Lake Grady Road and Bridge District.

By CHERYL MICHAELS
Tribune Staff Writer

Bondholders have appealed to Gov. Bob Graham in an attempt to recoup their share of the Lake Grady Road and Bridge District's \$1.8 million debt.

But it was unclear Wednesday what steps the governor would take.

"We haven't made a decision on what we'll recommend to the governor," said Mike Richardson, a policy coordinator in Graham's planning and budgeting office.

Some \$2.3 million in bonds were sold in 1974 to build sidewalks and 15 miles of roads in the 963-acre district which includes the Shadow Run Subdivision southeast of Riverview. District Commissioner Peter Ware said Wednesday the last bond payments were made in 1980, which means the district is \$1.8 million in debt.

"The whole problem is we don't have a tax base out there," Ware said.

More than half of the district is undeveloped.

In Tallahassee, Richardson said Wednesday the options ranged from doing nothing to taking over the district under Graham's financial emergency powers.

"I don't know if that (a takeover) is a conceivable possibility," Richardson added. "We're more concerned with trying to rectify the bond payment than trying to take over the district. If they can present a plan to do that, then we're willing to listen."

Glenn Robertson, director of the Office of Planning and Budgeting, has given district commissioners until Sept. 26 to answer questions about how it has attempted — and how it is planning — to repay the debt.

Robertson sought the information in a letter received Tuesday by district commission attorney Robin

Trupp. Trupp would not comment on it Wednesday, saying it had not been seen by Commission Chairman David Leneberg.

Leneberg couldn't be reached for comment.

Trupp said the letter would be discussed at a district meeting scheduled for 5:30 p.m. today at the County Courthouse auditorium.

The district also will be accepting public comment at today's meeting on a proposed \$250-per-acre special assessment tax for next fiscal year and on a proposed retroactive property tax of 100 mills against Sylvan Properties Inc.

The special assessment and retroactive tax were tentatively adopted July 31 in wake of an appellate court decision finding special assessments levied on Sylvan's 575 acres were invalid from 1980 to 1984.

Among the questions asked by Graham's office was:

- Fair market and assessed values of district land;
- List of property owners;
- Number of property owners who live in the district;
- What taxes have been levied in an attempt to pay the debt;
- Why hasn't the district levied enough property taxes to pay bondholders? and
- The district's plan to avoid a "financial emergency."

County is last stand for Florida golden aster

"We're dealing with a plant that could be very easily extinct within the decade," laments one federal official.

By KIM KLEMAN
Tribune Staff Writer

As flowers go, the Florida golden aster grovels near the bottom of the social registry. No poet in the history of the world has referred to it — ever. Florists don't know it exists. Many people mistake its small yellow flowers and spindly stem for a common weed. It grows almost exclusively in — ugh — Hillsborough County's subdivisions.

All this may not matter soon.

The aster has been plowed and mowed to such an extent that practically its entire population is confined now to two areas in Hillsborough County.

It's in such deep trouble that it was added this summer to the federal Endangered Species List. Some botanists say it may be too late.

"We're dealing with a plant that could be very easily extinct within the decade," laments David Martin of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Jacksonville.

"We shouldn't just wipe it out. It holds a genetic storehouse of information. It may hold importance in the future," said noted botanist Richard Wunderlin of the University of South Florida.

To make matters worse, all existing Florida golden asters grow on private property, which means federal and local officials can do little to save them.

"You could cut 'em up and make wine out of them and we'd have absolutely no legal authority to protect them," according to Roger Stewart, director of the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission.

And developers who do encounter these plants seldom know what to look for, let alone how to protect them.

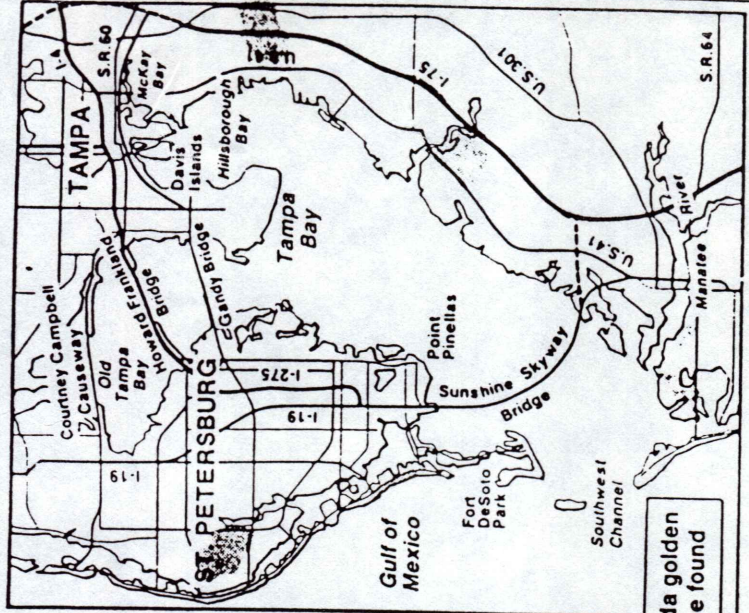
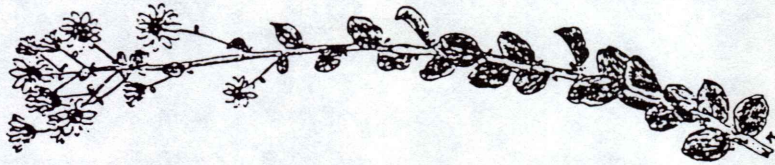
"There's a lot of yellow weeds growing out there," said Art Carroll, who recently sold a 420-acre tract in southern Hillsborough County, the future site of 810 homes. "It causes you a lot of headaches."

The only chance this aster has lies with Hillsborough County commissioners and an obscure county ordinance that protects endangered habitat, experts say.

County Commissioner Jan Platt is optimistic the board will keep the flower in mind, and in Hillsborough County.

The last of the golden asters

Practically the entire population of Florida golden asters is confined to two areas in Hillsborough County, with a few patches of the plant growing in Pinellas and Manatee counties.



Where Florida golden asters can be found

See ASTER, Page 7B