

Introduction

A LEGACY OF RESOURCE-BASED RECREATION

Pinellas County's focus has traditionally been the provision of larger regional parks in order to meet the needs of all County residents for resource-based recreation. This focus, in turn, has allowed the individual municipalities to concentrate on providing community and neighborhood parks with facility-based, organized recreational programs such as playgrounds, swimming pools, ballfields and golf courses. Traditionally, the programs of the Board of County Commissioners and the twenty-four municipal governments work in coordination to provide a balanced countywide system of resource and activity based recreational and open space opportunities. The focus was to enhance the inventory of facilities and provide linkages between Pinellas County-owned facilities and municipal facilities, working to expand the recreational network within the County.

With Pinellas County's sizable population and its associated urban development, areas of pristine natural beauty have become increasingly limited. Therefore, efforts to preserve areas of characteristic habitats and to set aside property for future recreation and open space needs continues to be extremely important. The County's ongoing commitment to acquiring and managing a system of regional parks and environmental lands remains part of this concerted effort.

The *Recreation, Open Space and Cultural Element* is mutually supportive of the *Natural Resources Conservation and Management Element*, especially in the field of natural system management, as well as the *Coastal Management Element*, in terms of continued acquisition and management of coastal lands and public access to the water. Not only do Pinellas County parks provide a variety of recreational opportunities for citizens and visitors, they provide important habitat for numerous plant and animal species as well.

This joint emphasis on providing quality recreational facilities and preserving its natural resources has made Pinellas County successful in protecting its green space, despite its highly urbanized nature. It is a legacy that has procured one of the most outstanding and award-winning systems of regional parks and environmental lands in the southeastern United States.

A CHANGING RECREATIONAL LANDSCAPE

As of 2007, Pinellas County has become home to over 952,650 people. Of those residents, approximately 17 percent are children between the ages of 5 and 19 years old. Clearly, over the last 25 years the population of the County has been increasing, and getting younger. As the number of children and youth increases, the need for facility-based active recreation has risen concomitantly. In addition, with an increasing trend towards fitness, more adults are also seeking facility-based active recreation and team sport opportunities.

The County's changing demographics mean more competition for limited recreational fields and facilities, and in recent years, several municipalities have begun expressing concern over

increasing numbers of unincorporated residents burdening their municipal recreation facilities. In some cases, municipalities are charging higher rates and fees to unincorporated residents using municipal recreation services. Consequently, in response to increasing questions from citizens, in 2002 the Board of County Commissioners directed staff to determine how to begin to provide more facility-based, active recreation opportunities for unincorporated youth. Active recreation was viewed primarily as organized team/league sports of baseball, football and soccer; although recreation trends evidence increasing interest in youth and adult activities and programs beyond these traditional sports. For example, access to therapeutic recreation is becoming an expectation in well-rounded urban communities; extreme sports are becoming popular among youth and young adults, and associated events are seen as potential moneymakers. The need for after-school and summer programs is a constant and is commonly addressed by municipal recreation programs. Overall, expectations of the community are going to continue to grow while the availability of land in an almost built-out County and the availability of money to meet these expectations will not always be so assured. This pressure is the same for the unincorporated County or a municipality.

Clearly then, solutions to the issue of facility-based active recreation are not simple, mainly because of the limited amounts of vacant land in the County. In addition, many of the municipalities have long established programs offering a wide range of recreational programs and activities. It would be impossible for the County to try to duplicate such a program in the short term. Therefore, both short-term and long-range options to address immediate unincorporated needs, as well as countywide conditions, must rely heavily on partnership and collaboration with other governments, agencies and area recreation providers to ensure quality, diversity and availability of recreational opportunities for all age ranges – a key component to long term quality of life. Importantly, while the County explores the provision of facility-based recreation, the long-standing program of providing regional resource-based parks and environmental lands for all County residents and visitors will continue to be a Board commitment, and is seen as equally integral to Pinellas County's long-term quality of life.

A STRONG EMPHASIS ON HISTORY AND CULTURE

Pinellas County enjoys a long and vibrant history, dating back long before the first European presence in the area. Archaeological evidence of a thriving pre-Columbian society abounds in certain parts of the County. Pinellas County understands the importance of preserving parts of the past. Certain significant areas of archaeological interest are located in regional parks and environmental lands, and thus protected from development and preserved for present and future generations to learn from and enjoy. Vestiges of the much more recent past are also protected. Heritage Village at Pinewood Cultural Park contains a conglomeration of historic buildings and artifacts moved from various areas of the County to one central location where history comes alive. The County also encourages the preservation of the historic neighborhoods and structures that are so foundational to the ambiance and unique character of the area.

A positive side effect of an urbanizing County is the increased desire for a diverse, well-rounded system of cultural facilities and attractions. While the provision of cultural activities has historically been within the realm of municipalities, the County is taking an increasing role by 'filling in the gaps' and providing certain types of cultural facilities and learning opportunities

that were not previously offered in the area. Examples include Heritage Village and the Botanical Gardens at Pinewood Cultural Park. The County is also putting a new emphasis on public art and festivals in some of its regional parks and in certain unincorporated areas. Like with facility-based active recreation, Pinellas County is committed to broadening its cultural offerings and meeting the needs and desires of its continually growing, and changing, population.

PURPOSE OF THE ELEMENT

Recreation is integral to a healthy, happy lifestyle, for individuals and communities as a whole. A comprehensive, well-designed system of parks, open space and cultural facilities is foundational to the well-being of a community and its citizens. The *Recreation, Open Space and Cultural Element* of the *Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan* re-emphasizes the County's traditional commitment to the provision of an outstanding, unparalleled system of resource-based regional parks and environmental lands; strengthens the County's role in the provision of facility-based, active recreation programs and facilities; asserts the County's position as provider of cultural events and activities; reaffirms the County's resolve to protect the historic and archaeological past; and above all, provides strong, foundational policies to shape a world class recreation, open space and cultural system where all residents will want to plan to stay.



Enjoying Pinellas County's Taylor Park