

16 *Vision of the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Cultural System*

Studies throughout the United States have consistently shown that businesses and residents place a high value on quality of life when choosing a place to live or work, including the quality of the community's parks and preserves, trails, arts and cultural facilities, historic resources, schools and other elements of the public realm. The desire to provide quality facilities and recreational experiences was a driving force behind the creation and adoption of the *Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan*.

The Master Plan was developed from November 2003 to June 2005 and adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in the autumn of 2005. It recognizes the unique challenges of a highly-developed, continually urbanizing county. Its purpose was to develop a long-range (15-year) vision toward the provision of the quality facilities and experiences county residents need and desire. The goal is to create a more livable and sustainable place to live, work and raise a family. Toward that end, seven major initiatives emerged that serve as focal points. They are:

1. Leading the Development of Outstanding Countywide Systems,
2. Increasing Protection of Regional Parks and Environmental Lands,
3. Strengthening Connections to the Water,
4. Providing an 'Urban Level' of Facility-Based Recreation in Unincorporated Areas,
5. Promoting the Arts, Culture and Historic Preservation,
6. Injecting Life, Color and Energy into Regional Parks and Environmental Lands,
7. Promoting a Sustainability Ethic in Pinellas County

The essence of the Master Plan vision flows from the Planning to Stay Principles that form the foundation of Pinellas County's strategy for growth management (see the *Planning to Stay Element* of this Comprehensive Plan for more detail on the Planning to Stay Principles). The following bedrock concept was particularly influential towards its development:

"Pinellas County should be the kind of place where families and businesses will want to stay, and where children will want to remain or return once they become adults. This idea of people and businesses planning to stay in Pinellas County because they desire to live and work nowhere else is foundational to an overall vision for the future of Pinellas County".

Melding the Master Plan goals and initiatives into the Comprehensive Plan furthers this ideal and provides a stronger foundation for success. The seven major initiatives are further discussed throughout the following pages.

LEADING THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUTSTANDING COUNTYWIDE SYSTEMS

Pinellas County has long been recognized for its outstanding parks, environmental lands and cultural systems. In Florida's most densely populated county, residents and visitors are still able to enjoy thousands of acres of resource-based parks, pristine environmental lands and beautiful beaches, as well as outstanding cultural amenities such as Heritage Village and the Florida Botanical Gardens. National recognition for these systems includes being named inaugural winner of the *2005 County Leadership in Conservation Award* presented by the Trust for Public Lands and National Association of Counties (NACo); Fort DeSoto County Park's North Beach being named *America's Best Beach* in 2005 by internationally renowned beach expert Dr. Stephen Leatherman, aka "Dr. Beach"; receiving the *2006 Gulf Guardian Award* by the United States Environmental Protection Agency for the Fort DeSoto Park Recirculation Project; and numerous local and state awards for environmental stewardship.

In addition, the Pinellas Trail continues to be the premier example of a successful "Rails to Trails" program for urbanized areas. The County's outstanding land-based trails system will soon be complemented by the Progress Energy Trail, providing over 30 additional miles of non-motorized transportation and recreational activity. Work is also underway on a comprehensive Blueways trail system for paddlers, covering almost all of the County's waterways.

In 2005, Pinellas County initiated its first comprehensive *Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan* (cover shown at right) to chart its future development, enhancement, and protection of its valued resources. The plan encourages the County to continue doing what it does best: leading the development of first-class countywide parks, environmental lands, historic and cultural sites, resource-based regional parks, greenways, blueways, multi-use trails, beach access, transit and roadways.



Many of the County's parks, environmental lands, and cultural systems were first initiated over 25 years ago as part of the Penny for Pinellas Program. Much has changed since these facilities were first envisioned. Pinellas County has become increasingly urbanized, creating new challenges and opportunities for the future. Remaining a "leader in the development of outstanding Countywide systems" requires the ability to integrate the recreation, open space and culture system components into a comprehensive planning effort involving transportation, communications, and future land use planning.

As Pinellas County continues to urbanize, demand on recreation, open space and culture systems will evolve. Appreciation and demand for the arts and preservation of the County's past will require increased funding and facilities. Balancing the need for facility-based recreation with the need to protect remaining open spaces will require partnerships and collaborative efforts with municipal stakeholders and other public partners. Though they serve a select population, special interest facilities such as golf courses and marinas contribute to the quality of life that makes Pinellas unique among many Florida counties. As such, they need to be recognized, valued and preserved.

Opportunities for conflict between segments of the population demanding strict protection of existing green spaces and those wanting more urbanized programs and facilities will undoubtedly arise. Protection of our existing resources is best accomplished through the

cultivation of new resources to meet urban demands. Requiring new development to address these types of facilities may be one way to soften these conflicts, as may County investment in municipal recreation facilities, increased protection for atypical open spaces such as golf courses, and development of non-pristine areas such as Toytown to meet the need for more urbanized facilities.

Keys to success will include broad consumer engagement and close coordination between County departments, local governments, and other agencies to maximize benefits and minimize conflicts of every public and private project and initiative. Success will be determined by how well the County is able to preserve and protect the limited remaining green spaces while still being able to meet the needs of an evolving community and urban lifestyle.

INCREASING PROTECTION OF REGIONAL PARKS & ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS

A common theme during the evaluation of the Comprehensive Plan during 2004 and 2005, and a common theme during the development of the Recreation, Open Space, and Culture System Master Plan during this same time, was the need to ensure adequate protection of the County's extensive system of regional resource-based parks and environmental lands from the threats of encroachment by incompatible uses.

Pinellas County is unique in how it has built its parks and environmental lands system. Beginning in the 1970s, a continuous series of citizen-supported referenda provided a consistent pot of money for environmental land acquisition. Essentially, once the Red Flag Charrette was completed (see discussion in the 'Promoting a Sustainability Ethic' section) the County set about systematically acquiring the lands identified as "Red Flag" properties – meaning they had important environmental value and were likely to be otherwise developed if they were not acquired.

As Pinellas County approached build-out and property values skyrocketed, the County held the course, and increasingly leveraged its acquisition dollars with State grants so critical properties could still be acquired. Today, out of about 140 properties originally identified for acquisition, only one was not acquired. This diligence generated consistent public support for the land acquisition referenda, including the original and two subsequent Penny for Pinellas tax referenda. Because of citizen support, and thanks to an unwavering course by elected officials and staff, Pinellas County has a world-class system of regional resource-based parks and environmental lands, beach accesses and multi-use trails. Therefore, while it is easy to call Pinellas County 'urban', due to good planning and sound development policies, the County is interspersed with large publicly accessible natural areas – its very character is definable by the open spaces and recreational opportunities that abound.

However, the County is at a critical time. A large open space can look quite attractive, to both the private developer and the public developer, when there are a myriad of competing wants and needs – but very few areas are left to accommodate those wants and needs. Where can the County put a sports field or a community center? Where can the County put the fire station? Where can the high tech manufacturer expand his or her business? Where can the County put affordable housing? Where can the County increase density? Where can the road project go? The list is exhaustive. But there is one fundamental point that must be interjected into the scramble to find enough land for everybody – once open spaces and natural areas

begin to get nibbled away, they will inevitably be lost, plain and simple, and they will not be coming back. These concerns have traditionally been a focus of this Comprehensive Plan, and they are echoed by the Recreation, Open Space, Culture System Master Plan.

The County's parks and environmental lands are also impacted by what goes on around them. Most residents are familiar with the Brooker Creek Preserve and the Weedon Island Preserve, and have probably been to one or more of the regional parks, but do they stop to think about how their own actions contribute to the viability of these natural areas? The management of the uses around the parks and environmental lands can be as important as management of what is inside, and informed citizens can perhaps be the best advocates for an 'ecosystem' approach based on the premise that contributory lands do not stop at the park or environmental land fence.

Pinellas County has a vast resource in the natural lands and resource-based open space inventory in its parks and environmental lands. This inventory makes the area one of the most important regional flyways for migratory birds, provides strategic habitat, and contributes to sustaining the biodiversity of the region. However, the key to sustaining the resource is management of the resource. Environmental management in the urban environment is challenging, requiring innovation in management techniques, critical habitat protection, and an integrated watershed approach that focuses on net environmental benefit. This management commitment does not come without a substantial cost.



*Bird habitat at Lake
Seminole Park*

Success in protecting the parks and environmental lands can be measured in a variety of ways. Most fundamental is the no net loss of land or conversion to a facility-based purpose or use that cannot coexist compatibly with the overall resource-based purpose of the park or environmental land. However, the measure must also include benchmarks that address the function and health of the natural system. Benchmarks will include the completion of individual management plans, identification of critical habitat in each park and environmental land, with subsequent funded commitments to restoration, enhancement and managed public access, in a manner individual to each location. Importantly, while clearly most large remaining tracts of natural land have been acquired, this does not mean all aspects of park and environmental land acquisition are complete. "Closing the gaps" is an integral part of managing for ecosystem health. The incremental addition of lands to existing areas of open space will enhance both the existing recreational and environmental greenways – that is, they will close the gaps in the system. This idea of acquiring land to "close the gaps," now that most of the big acquisitions are over, has been supported by this Comprehensive Plan since 1998. Funding to take advantage of acquisition opportunities will remain important. The best measure though of success in protecting parks and environmental lands will be found in renewed public trust. The public has trusted Pinellas County since the late 1970s to be a leader in open space and environmental land acquisition and management – arguably, public trust in this regard has been integral to the success of the past three Penny for Pinellas referenda. This message should not be lost.

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS TO THE WATER

The *Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan* recommends that “the County needs to continue to be a leader in waterfront/resource protection, including the role of facilitator/coordinator with Federal, State and municipal agencies. At the same time, the County needs to expand recreational access to the water, including new beach accesses, on and off-beach parking, boat ramps, canoe and kayak launches, and peak season beach shuttles.” The outcome of the master planning process included specific recommendations for both new facilities and new initiatives.

The Evaluation and Appraisal Report for the Comprehensive Plan also emphasized strengthening and protecting the County’s connections to the water. Included actions were directed at preventing the conversion of water-dependent land uses through land use and taxing strategies, enhancing public access through municipal and private partnerships, and emphasizing straightforward acquisition. The Evaluation and Appraisal Report recognized the contribution of water-dependent land uses to the overall economy, and on reinforcing, or strengthening commitments to beach nourishment, stabilization and coastal and marine habitat protection. Therefore, this Comprehensive Plan places a renewed emphasis on such important water access issues as boating and beach access improvements, boat facility siting requirements, and manatee protection. For more information, these topics are further discussed in the *Coastal Management Element* of this Comprehensive Plan.



The Boating Access Task Force convened during the summer and fall of 2005 with the purpose of identifying actions required to achieve the following vision, gleaned from the *Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan*: “To provide the greatest possible access to Pinellas County waters for both recreational and commercial boaters, while protecting the integrity of natural resources, and enhancing the County’s reputation as the pre-eminent boating/diving/fishing center of Florida.” Out of this effort, several specific sites were identified for further investigation into their potential for boat access, and certain regulatory priorities were identified for additional investigation.

In all, a significant amount of recent planning has gone into collecting relevant data, as well as identifying needs and priorities. Throughout these planning processes, coordination among key players has been ongoing, resulting in more coordinated plans. Public involvement and municipal involvement have been components of each planning activity described above, helping to bring a balance of ideas and strategies to the planning efforts. From a strategic perspective, the key outcomes of each initiative must now be coalesced into a clear and coordinated set of deliverables so that Pinellas County can remain a premier boating and

recreational destination, continue to be a leader in marine resource protection, and both retain and capitalize on this County's distinguishing coastal character well into the future.

Success will be measured by increased beach access. In addition, more efficient boat ramp operations and improvements will enable an increase in boating access to the water. The County will become known for an extensive blueways system that is marketed in print and online. The County will work together with the municipalities, making efficient use of dollars, to measurably increase or enhance boat access opportunities. Moreover, the boating and beach-going public will be stewards of area waters, helping to protect one of the essences of Pinellas County's character – its connection to the water.

PROVIDING URBAN LEVELS OF FACILITY-BASED RECREATION IN UNINCORPORATED AREAS

Traditionally, Pinellas County Parks and Recreation has concentrated its efforts on creating and maintaining resource-based recreation areas, which concentrate recreation activities toward unstructured, environmentally-focused recreational pursuits. Changing demographics, including the increase in the number of families with children within unincorporated areas, has brought increased demands for recreation facilities and programs currently available through the county's many municipalities. For the last few years, this demand was assuaged through program fee subsidies provided directly to unincorporated residents participating in municipal programs, and grant programs for construction of facilities and program development to cities and non-profit organizations serving the needs of unincorporated citizens. Funding for these initiatives was provided by municipal services taxing unit (MSTU) taxes assessed on unincorporated residents. Unfortunately, all funding for these initiatives has been eliminated following the State-mandated property tax cuts instituted in 2007.



If designed correctly, playgrounds work well in resource-based parks

Nevertheless, unincorporated demand for these services will continue to rise, as well as the inability for many cities to keep up with the demand created by their own residents. In order to meet this demand, the County will need to contribute to the facility-based recreation inventory through direct or indirect participation. This may include the construction of facility-based recreation facilities, community centers and/or sports complexes on County owned property and additional partnerships with area municipalities, other government organizations such as the local School Board, and non-profit entities including the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs.

PROMOTING THE ARTS, CULTURE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

This goal both embraces and deepens Pinellas County's long-standing commitment to arts, culture and heritage. Portions of the work of at least three countywide groups are included in the goal. They are:

1. The Pinellas County Cultural Affairs Department's *Community Cultural Plan*,
2. The Pinellas County Parks & Recreation Department's *Recreation, Open Space, and Cultural System Master Plan*, and
3. The Board of County Commissioners' *Historic Preservation Task Force*

In Fiscal Year 2005, the Cultural Affairs Department (formerly the Arts Council) developed a *Community Cultural Plan*, which identifies needs and opportunities, defines goals, and recommends funding and actions to strengthen the County's arts, culture, and heritage programs, and to enhance its economic development and the quality of life for residents and visitors. Nearly 1,000 individuals participated in development of the *Community Cultural Plan* through interviews, focus groups, a constituent survey, and random-sample polling. Fifty-eight civic, business, cultural, and education leaders served on an Advisory Committee and five task forces. The assessment phase of the Plan revealed the interesting statistics that seventy-nine percent (79%) of respondent households indicated that it is either a Very Good (39%) or Good (40%) investment for Pinellas County to improve the quality of and accessibility to arts, cultural and heritage programs. The process resulted in the following five major goals:

1. Develop arts, heritage, and cultural resources to enhance Pinellas County's economy and aesthetic environment.
2. Market Pinellas County as a cultural destination to increase participation by residents and visitors.
3. Value and assist artists and creative workers as fundamental to a vibrant community.
4. Ensure lifelong education opportunities to expand knowledge and experience in and through the arts.
5. Achieve increased public and private funding to strengthen Pinellas County's cultural sector.

The completed *Community Cultural Plan* calls for several, specific initiatives, which include the following:

- A cooperative, comprehensive marketing effort that includes non-profit, County and municipal institutions,
- A needs assessment for artist live/work space,
- A study of the economic impact of the arts in Pinellas, and
- The development of a Public Art & Design Master Plan.

During the same time, the Pinellas County Parks and Recreation Department conducted a wide-ranging study that involved input from hundreds of individual citizens as well as a large number of focus groups and user-groups. The data reported in the subsequent *Recreation, Open Space and Cultural System Master Plan* recorded that the County has, in fact, long been

involved in the delivery of heritage, culture and education to residents and visitors through such existing venues as Heritage Village, the Florida Botanical Gardens and the educational centers at Weedon Island and Brooker Creek Preserves.



The Pinellas Folk Festival

The *Historic Preservation Task Force* is currently challenged to review, analyze and facilitate the implementation of preservation policies for historically significant structures, neighborhoods and districts throughout Pinellas County. Comprised of preservationists from all areas of the County, the Task Force is poised to advise the Board of County Commissioners on the implementation of effective preservation, while taking into account the cultural diversity on which this County was founded.

Even without the current plans and studies, Pinellas County has a thirty-year history of providing support to arts and culture through the Pinellas County Cultural Affairs Department. Currently the Department provides services to a cultural industry that includes:

- 110 nonprofit organizations,
- Ten major outdoor art/music/cultural festivals,
- Four major County facilities,
- Six municipal facilities, and
- 800+ artists in all discipline areas and 365 public school art teachers

The Cultural Affairs Department's most recent grants application cycle reflects a vibrant and diverse cultural industry with 33 of the nonprofit organizations that applied to the Department reporting combined operating budgets for Fiscal Year 2005 of \$45.3 million and audiences of 2.1 million.

One of the most significant, immediate actions taken as a result of these studies was the creation of the new Bureau of Culture, Education and Leisure and its assimilation of the Arts Council as the Cultural Affairs Department. This action will more closely align arts, culture, and heritage with future planning in the arenas of economic development, community planning, tourism and infrastructure, and will support the County's "planning to stay" initiative.

INJECTING LIFE, COLOR AND ENERGY INTO REGIONAL PARKS AND ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS

Pinellas County's regional park system and environmental lands are nationally recognized for their high quality native ecosystems in urbanized areas. The residential communities in which parks and environmental lands exist are protective of these areas for their beauty and important habitat for native flora and fauna. Parks and environmental lands offer classic resource-based recreation opportunities, including hiking, nature study, solitude and related activities. As discussed in the *Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan*, however, some of the parks have become "one dimensional" over time, offering a less-than-ideal number of activities and/or areas of interest to hold visitors' attention.

Although many parks have expanded programming opportunities or educational activities, a number of the areas are underutilized. Without compromising the very qualities that make the parks and environmental lands so popular, the County could do more to appeal to a broader range of citizens. Initiatives such as summer camps, special events, or other similar activities are currently underway in several parks and environmental lands. Their growing popularity and appreciation by visitors indicates the departments could do more to satisfy visitors' need to be entertained and/or informed. This goal seeks to broaden citizen support for these facilities by appealing to a larger customer base through the addition of minor programs, activities and facilities, which would inject more 'color, life and energy' into the parks system and environmental lands.

"Energizing" the parks and environmental lands might include the addition of signature special events, permanent and traveling art and sculpture exhibits, environmental education exhibits and kiosks, festivals (such as the 2007 Pepper Fest at Sand Key Park), concerts, etc. Care must be taken to not detract from the primary mission of the parks and preserves. The County must develop management tools that recognize carrying capacity, suitability of uses, potential conflicts, and protection of natural resources.



PROMOTING A SUSTAINABILITY ETHIC IN PINELLAS COUNTY

Pinellas County government has a long history of environmental leadership, going back at least to the late 1970s when the pace of development and the loss of the natural environment reached a critical point and triggered an awakening to the fragility of our coastal location and supporting environment. Citizens said that enough was enough. In response, Pinellas County launched the *Red Flag Charrette*, with participation by scientists, environmentalists, municipal and county staff, and area agencies. This task team achieved a myriad of lasting results. Notably, the County's Environmental Management Department was created from this effort. A succession of referenda for land acquisition were also held, with unwavering support by the citizens, resulting in over 140 environmentally sensitive properties being acquired (only one targeted property was not acquired out of the entire list).

Today, the County's comprehensive environmental program is regarded as a model throughout the State, and other governments often inquire as to how everything was accomplished. In a survey conducted a few years ago by staff at the University of North Carolina, Pinellas County stood out at the very top of all governments surveyed for not only its environmental initiative and planning, but also for its commitment to follow-through and implementation. Now, with the large land acquisitions completed, and a strong land management program in place, where does that leave Pinellas County? Can the County continue to be an environmental leader in a rapidly changing and redeveloping environment? What is



Gopher Tortoise

the appropriate response as developers start looking at the last large vestiges of open space (most notably, golf courses) with the idea of redevelopment?

The most recent Evaluation and Appraisal Report for the Comprehensive Plan, adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in November of 2005, focused on this very question, and, as mentioned earlier, the *Recreation, Open Space, and Cultural System Master Plan* emphasizes the idea of a *Planning to Stay* ethic, where an exemplary quality of life will be the basis for people staying in Pinellas County, or relocating here, to live, work and play. Building on the concept of *Planning to Stay*, the County's Comprehensive Plan already proposes to integrate sustainability into the County's long range planning.

The challenge is to weave the ideas, concepts, and commitment into every facet of government operations, and into every aspect of interactions with the public. As new regulations to address redevelopment in an urban environment are developed, each redevelopment opportunity must be considered as an opportunity for environmental improvement. This is likely to require substantial re-tooling of not only development regulations and development review practices, but more importantly, there needs to be a willingness to let go of "the way we've always done it" mentality. Innovation and collaboration need to be key words in the business culture.

Both the visual and environmental impact on the County as a whole needs to be considered should private golf courses gradually be replaced by development. The impact would be dramatic. In Pinellas County, golf courses often serve as major greenway connectors. One needs only to look at a land use map to see their functional relationship to existing environmental and preservation lands. Clearly, the preservation of recreation/open space land for a recreation or open space purpose (whether a golf course or not) is vital to a sustainable future.

However, sustainability goes beyond the obvious need for continued environmental stewardship; a truly sustainable community requires weaving issues of housing, neighborhoods and community character into the equation. It means addressing transportation alternatives, infrastructure needs and constraints, and recreation requirements in a congested urban county. It requires integrating economic decisions and plans with all of the other sustainability goals. Economic development is not a means unto itself – if it compromises the very character and way of life that attracted people to the County in the first place, then it will not sustain itself in the end. Sustainability means that, above all, the County's own practices, and what it promotes to the public, whether through incentives or regulation or education, are a model for quality, follow-through and sustainability.

The key to success is ongoing support by elected officials and a renewed sense of collaboration and commitment among all departments. Equally important will be communication and involvement with citizens. The past year has clearly evidenced that many citizens care very much about the environment around them, and the opportunity for staff and the public to work together towards sustainability goals will institutionalize the County's commitment and foster citizen stewardship for the natural and human community around us. The private business sector is also integral to sustainability commitment; they can be an important and innovative partner.

Success in becoming a sustainable community will be measured incrementally. It will not fully be evidenced by compiling plans, regulations and reports, or by receipt of awards or designations. Instead, it will be measured by looking around – people will want to live here; they will have a place to play, to reflect on nature, and to seek respite from the busy world around them. The air and water will be clean; a diversity of plant and animal life will abound. Trees, sidewalks and greenspace will intersperse a myriad of diverse neighborhoods and civic gathering places. People will have a place to work and a way to get there. While there will probably never be an occasion to say we have met one concrete goal of being “officially sustainable,” we can take definitive, constant and measurable steps down the path of sustainability.

