



USING GREENWAYS TO LINK OPEN SPACES

The Florida Greenways Commission has defined a greenway as "...a corridor of protected open space that is managed for conservation and/or recreation. The common characteristic of greenways is that they all go somewhere. Greenways follow natural land or water features, such as ridges or rivers, or human landscape features like abandoned railroad corridors or canals. They link natural reserves, parks, cultural and historic sites with each other and, in some cases, with populated areas. Greenways not only protect environmentally sensitive lands and wildlife, but also can provide people with access to outdoor recreation and enjoyment close to home."

Greenways are important because they provide connections between natural, historic, cultural, and recreational facilities. In addition, they are important as conservation and recreation areas in and of themselves. Three major functions of greenways include the following: protection and enhancement of natural, historic, and cultural resources; the provision of linear open space areas that are compatible for human use; and the provision of connections between conservation lands, parks, and other recreational facilities. Greenways that link parks provide valuable recreational opportunities. Greenways that link conservation areas help to prevent the fragmentation of valuable wildlife habitat.

Ecological, social and economic benefits are derived from greenways. Greenways help to maintain the health of native ecosystems and landscapes. They also provide for public recreation and outdoor education. Greenways such as the Pinellas Trail act as alternative transportation facilities and provide a focal point for community pride and identity. All of these benefits help to assure the economic prosperity, connectivity and overall well being of the community.

Individual greenways and greenway segments are also an important component of an overall Greenway system or network. Greenway systems act to link significant community "hubs" and smaller sites such as regional parks and preserves, ecological sites, and cultural and historic resources. The Greenway system makes up the "green infrastructure" of the community.

SIGNIFICANT GREENWAYS IN PINELLAS COUNTY

The following discussion concerns those lands considered to be functioning as, and designated to date as, significant greenways in Pinellas County (depicted by **Figure 9**). This list is expected to grow over time as more attention is given to evaluating, and providing more formal recognition to, the extensive and functional network of conservation and resource-based recreation lands throughout Pinellas County.

FIGURE 9
PINELLAS COUNTY SIGNIFICANT GREENWAYS

The Brooker Creek Preserve

The East Lake area of the County contains the Brooker Creek Preserve, an 8,300-acre natural area that has been purchased by the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners and the Southwest Florida Water Management District in order to provide for natural resource protection and limited resource-based recreation and education. The Preserve was officially recognized by the State as a greenway in 1995.

The original concept for the Preserve, which was wellfield protection, has since been expanded. The Preserve now provides for limited resource-based recreational uses as well as protecting native habitats and natural resources. In 1993, the Brooker Creek Preserve Management Plan was completed. It includes a physical and biological description of the Preserve and a management plan. Facilities and programs at the Preserve include a biological inventory of plant and animal species, an Environmental Education Center, a Biological Research Station, and controlled group camping. Hiking and equestrian trails are currently available, and the Preserve (in particular the Educational Center and associated amenities) will be ultimately accessible by connection to the Pinellas Trail upon completion of the Brooker Creek spur.

A regional approach to Brooker Creek Preserve is evident in the development of the Florida Greenways West Coast Task Force recommendations that include a directed effort to link the Brooker Creek Preserve to other regional environmental lands. The value of the Preserve and the need to create a linkage to a wider greenways network was acknowledged. Representatives of a wide variety of state and regional agencies, research biologists and land managers have met in an effort to find a way to link Brooker Creek Preserve with the Starkey Wilderness in Pasco County and provide a future wildlife corridor connection. It is the consensus of this group that such linkages are worth pursuing, as are future land management efforts on behalf of wildlife species. A linkage to conservation lands surrounding the Anclote River to the west is also an important priority.

The Weedon Island Preserve

The Weedon Island Preserve comprises approximately 3,678 acres along the eastern coast of mid-Pinellas County. On October 1, 1993, a long-term lease agreement began between the State of Florida and Pinellas County for the Preserve. The acreage leased from the State was enhanced by an additional 117 acres purchased by Pinellas County. Extensive re-development of the Preserve was completed in 1998, and when re-opened offered such features as raised boardwalks and marked trails through the different plant communities and habitats, remodeled bathrooms, a fishing pier, and easy access to canoe trails. The Cultural and Natural History Center was completed in 2002.

Today, Weedon Island Preserve is a well-known birding, fishing and canoeing site. Weedon Island's fishing pier and the



outlying oyster bars are ideal sites for catching sea trout, snook, and sheepshead. Six miles of self-guided canoe trails permit exploration of the Preserve's islands.

Weedon Island Preserve remains one of Florida's most important natural and cultural resources, and its protection remains a priority of Pinellas County as caretaker of the Preserve. The Indian mounds are patrolled daily to prevent the disturbance of these historical sites. The County is committed to returning the island to its natural state and educating people about the pre-history and ecology of the area, so that Weedon Island Preserve may be enjoyed by the people of Florida and its visitors for many generations to come. Because of its importance, in 1999 the Preserve was officially designated by the Board of County Commissioners as a significant Pinellas County Greenway and the desire to link the Preserve to the Friendship Trail Bridge was formally recognized.

The Gateway Preservation Area, now managed as part of the Weedon Island Preserve, was jointly purchased by the Board of County Commissioners and the State of Florida through the Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) program. It extends along the shoreline of Tampa Bay from the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport to Gandy Boulevard.

Friendship Trail Bridge

The Friendship Trail Bridge (the Old Gandy Bridge) spanning Tampa Bay between Pinellas and Hillsborough counties was formally designated as a significant greenway by the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners in December of 1999. Likewise, Hillsborough County designated the Trail Bridge as a significant Hillsborough County greenway in 2000. What is particularly notable about the Trail Bridge is the fact that it provides a greenway connection between two counties, and is perhaps the longest over-water trail in the Country. The Trail Bridge is managed by the Pinellas County Park Department.

The Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail

A paved asphalt trail that extends 34 miles from Tarpon Springs in the north to St. Petersburg in the south, the Pinellas Trail is discussed in the previous section of this Element on multi-use trails in Pinellas County.

McKay Creek Greenway

In order to continue their commitment to enhancing greenways networks, the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners passed a resolution (96-159) officially designating the McKay Creek Greenway in 1996. This is a developing facility for uniting several existing parks, and generally follows McKay Creek as it flows northward to Taylor Lake. The proposed greenway route courses over four miles along new and existing trails off of existing streets, stream or canal rights-of-way, and County land from 85th Avenue, through Walsingham Park, Pinewood Cultural Park, Ridgecrest Park, and Taylor Park. By providing a clearly defined walking and bicycle route, and enhancing key intersections to accommodate pedestrian crossings, the new greenway will make it easier and safer for community residents and visitors to travel between these facilities and the Pinellas Trail. The *Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan* includes the conceptual Plan for the McKay Creek Greenway.

PINELLAS COUNTY BIKEWAYS PLAN

The Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization maintains the Pinellas County Bikeways Plan. Pinellas County staff, and municipal staffs, participated in the development of the Plan by contributing information on their existing and planned bicycle facilities. The purpose of this Plan is to continue to identify and plan for the trail network throughout the County. The Bikeways Plan is a combination of existing facilities, primarily the Pinellas Trail, and proposed facilities that are either extensions to the Pinellas Trail, trails in their own right, or connectors to other trails. Depending upon the individual facility, its development may be overseen by either a City, the County or the State. See the 'Multi-Use Trail' section of this Element for more information.

FUTURE DIRECTION OF THE GREENWAYS PROGRAM

Pinellas County is committed to continuing to enhance its recreational and resource-based greenway network. In practice, the County's Greenways Program is exemplified by the following: an aggressive land acquisition program, its ongoing and nationally-recognized trail development program, the strong backing of the Comprehensive Plan which directs sound environmental management of the County's land, including requirements to plan for connectivity of those lands, and a corresponding commitment to using those lands to educate citizens and visitors alike about the County's natural and cultural history. In all, the County's Greenways Program is accomplished through the combined and coordinated efforts of many different County departments including the Department of Environmental Management, the Park Department, the Real Estate division of General Services, and the Planning Department.

All of the environmental and parklands comprising the County's greenspace/greenway network are not individually and formally designated as a greenway at the State level. For example, in addition to those greenways that are recognized by the State (e.g., Brooker Creek Preserve and The Pinellas Trail), there are times when the Board of County Commissioners may choose to formally recognize, by resolution, certain County lands as a significant local and/or regional greenway. This may be done to commemorate an event, such as the grand opening of the Friendship Trail Bridge, or to recognize a significant addition made to a larger greenspace (e.g., the McKay Creek Greenway). Overall, the County's approach to acquiring and managing its environmental lands, resource-based parks and cultural resources fully complements State greenway principles. The County considers not only those lands that are formally designated at a State level, and not just those lands designated by local government, but also the many other natural and preserved lands, and trails, and cultural resources, and the recreational and environmental connections between them. Even small lands serving a recreation/open space or preservation function may be valued for their contribution to incrementally filling in the gaps and working towards a larger contiguous and connected network of lands, trails, and other amenities.