



MANAGEMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS FOR THE PUBLIC

Brooker Creek Preserve

Brooker Creek Preserve is the last major natural area in the most densely populated county in Florida. As such, it is the last significant habitat for a very great diversity of plants and animals. Development has occurred on nearly every parcel adjacent to the Preserve's current boundaries. Consequently, land acquisition is a priority in this area when the opportunity arises. Every remaining parcel that the County can purchase permits the buffering of impacts from the developed landscape on the Preserve's ecological integrity. This will become increasingly important over time.

Brooker Creek Preserve is more than a managed natural area. Pinellas County, with the assistance of several agencies, is committed to an innovative program of land management, restoration, preservation, and research. It is also committed to providing an enlightened approach, data driven, that will ensure that these resources will be protected for future generations.

Pinellas County has committed itself to using this setting for the greatest diversity of education. By establishing a biological field station approach to research, a commitment has been made to use the Preserve setting to further knowledge of natural systems, species ecology and impacts of land management practices and urbanization. Research will benefit land management of natural areas throughout Florida. The Preserve setting also permits researchers, students, and intern assistants to gain first-hand experience and knowledge. The County's research program serves to foster understanding and knowledge far beyond the confines of the County or the Preserve staff. The education center provides a great variety of experiences in environmental education. Distance learning experiences will be at the cutting edge of technology and will provide international opportunities to learn from the Preserve. Technology is used to create hands-on, innovative experiences to learn about Florida's natural systems. Staff will be developing programs to educate educators, and using the Preserve setting to provide outdoor experiences that cannot be duplicated elsewhere in the region. The Preserve's award-winning summer field camp for youth is planned for expansion. It immerses students in the experience/study of real wild Florida, and this can only be done in wild lands. There are also over nine miles of equestrian trails in the Preserve, the most significant horse trail in Pinellas County.

Because the Brooker Creek Preserve is located in the densely populated Tampa Bay region and because this area is a significant tourist destination, the Preserve programs are easily reached by the public, and are positioned to have great potential impact because of their accessibility. The County will balance visitation pressure by directing resource-based activities to the education center and the least fragile areas of the Preserve. Overall, the County expects to provide a unique educational setting that will further an understanding of natural Florida, while protecting the natural resource.

Pinellas County has spent more than a decade purchasing property and engaging others to assist with the purchase of property in this region to protect this critical, environmentally sensitive area. It has committed a great amount of resources to staff and fund this program, and the depth and breadth of the land management, research and educational programs are truly significant. By making the Preserve lands accessible, the County's intent is to not only preserve, enhance and restore the County's natural environment, but also to promote environmental stewardship and appreciation of Florida's wildlands by both citizens and visitors alike.

Weedon Island Preserve

The Weedon Island Preserve is a mosaic of rich mangrove forests, open mud flats and salterns, pine/scrubby flatwoods, and marine hammocks. Visitors enjoy the many natural wonders of this coastal preserve, rich with wading and water birds, native plants, and listed species such as the gopher tortoise. Formerly home to prehistoric people, the type-site of the "Weedon" Island culture, the Preserve has a long and colorful history with many changes. What remains today is the direct result of a long-term commitment by volunteers, citizens, industry and governments to protect this land for its ecological and cultural richness. In July 1972, Weedon Island was put on the National Register of Historic Places. It officially opened as Weedon Island State Preserve in 1980. In 1993, the State and Pinellas County entered into a lease agreement bringing the management of the Preserve under the direction of the County. Today the Preserve balances ecological and cultural conservation and protection with the resource-based recreational needs of the public.



The Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center

The Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center opened its doors in December 2002, and over 15,000 visitors enjoyed this beautiful facility in 2003. The center continues to draw both residents and tourists with an array of educational programs, presentations and workshops, including professional meetings and special events. Guided hikes and canoe trips, boardwalk and special tours, an environmental art gallery, and archaeological and natural exhibits continue to promote the mission to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the special relationship between the natural and Native American cultural aspects of Weedon Island.

PINELLAS COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL FOUNDATION

The Pinellas County Environmental Foundation (PCEF) represents a landmark partnership between the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners. Established in 1998, the Foundation brings the advantages of a national, not-for-profit agency to County-level programs and activities. It also provides tax-deductible opportunities for other governmental agencies, environmental non-profit groups, schools, universities, and corporations wishing to contribute to Pinellas County's environmental programs, achieving the County's conservation goals and enhancing local nature-based tourism.

To date, some of the activities co-sponsored by the Foundation, the County, and others include the annual Florida Birding Festival. The goal of the festival was to showcase the County's habitats and birdlife, and to demonstrate that nature-based tourism can be economically viable in an area typically associated only with its urban resorts and beaches. Proceeds from the event were used to purchase environmental lands, including the highly significant Shell Key – one of the last remaining intact ecosystems of this type in the State. In May of 2000, the PCEF helped to host the Spring on the Flats – Fishing for Conservation in Pinellas County tournament. This purpose of the fundraiser was to raise monies to be used for the improvement and management of the County's estuarine environment and contributing watersheds. Overall, the County's environmental programs and goals are expected to benefit tremendously from this strategic partnership.

PINEWOOD CULTURAL PARK



*Kids celebrate Earth Day at
Pinewood Cultural Park*

Comprised of the Gulfcoast Arts Center, the Botanical Garden, Cooperative Extension and Heritage Village, the Pinewood Cultural Park represents a unique County venture combining education and resource-based recreational opportunities. The intent is to educate, inspire, and highlight the arts, history and the environment in campus surroundings that motivate the visitor to practice techniques for sustainable living. The emphasis is on providing interactive and readily accessible education and recreation, in a 192-acre setting that serves as a model of conservation and sustainable site practices.

EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS

Pinellas County's parks and environmental lands provide unique opportunities for combining recreation with environmental and cultural education. This type of nature and culturally based recreation is becoming increasingly popular with both residents and tourists. Importantly, as park and preserve visitors learn more about these resources, they become stewards for their preservation. In addition to the extensive educational commitment underway in the Brooker Creek and Weedon Island Preserves, the County's regional parks provide resource-based educational programming as well. Notable examples of where the County is promoting resource-based recreation and education together include the following:

Sawgrass Lake Park

Sawgrass Lake Park houses the Anderson Environmental Education Center and an outdoor classroom providing resource-based recreation and environmental education to over 400,000 people each year. A small museum is on site with interpretive signage and informational brochures. The Park has hosted numerous workshops and learning labs for area students.

Fort De Soto Park

Fort De Soto Park offers beaches as well as other recreational amenities like nature and bike trails. Guided nature walks are available throughout the year and provide informal educational opportunities for local residents and tourists. Not only does the park provide a setting for environmental education, including excellent bird watching opportunities, it also contains the historic fort and associated interpretive exhibits.

Philippe Park

Philippe Park contains prehistoric Indian mounds, which are on the National Register of Historic Places, and interpretive educational signage for the public. Explore Philippe Park Day is an event where visitors can learn about Philippe Park's past and present through talks, hikes and displays.



A day of learning at Weedon Island Preserve

RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS AND OTHER VENTURES



The African-American Heritage Celebration

While Pinellas County is prominently known for its resources-based regional park system, some forms of facility-based recreation and structured recreational programs are actually underway in most of the parks and environmental lands. For example, a summer youth day camp operates out of the Brooker Creek Preserve. Pinellas County Parks and Recreation has offered various summer nature camps for kids the past few years at Boca Ciega Millennium Park, Sawgrass Lake Park and Wall Springs Park. Family events and festivals are conducted at many of the County's parks, and include the African-American Heritage Festival at Pinewood Cultural Park. Educational activities and

programs for children are conducted at Sawgrass Lake Park, in coordination with the School System and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. Canoe trails are used daily at Weedon Island Preserve, Fort DeSoto Park and Boca Ciega Millennium Park. Dogs can romp

and play with other dogs and their owners at Paw Playgrounds in multiple facilities, and pick-up football, soccer and baseball games can occur at all of the County's parks. The Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail offers over 37 miles of facility-based recreation opportunities in the County, and the Friendship Trail connects Pinellas County to Hillsborough County on a unique and scenic trail across Tampa Bay. Horseback riding is allowed at the Brooker Creek Preserve. The County operates many of the beach access parks and boat ramps throughout the County. Most of the County's parks have a children's playground. These are just some examples of how the County's resource-based park system also serves a more family activity-oriented purpose.



Paw Playground at Fort DeSoto Park



The Pinellas Trail

In addition, Pinellas County owns several neighborhood-scale (versus regional) parks (see section on pocket parks). The County has recently added the development and ongoing maintenance of the pocket parks to the Park Department budget. In the not too distant future, Live Oak Park, Pop Stansell Park, and the Ozona Preserve are planned to be rehabilitated, refurbished and maintained by the County so they can serve as true community and neighborhood focal points. Lealman Park was the first neighborhood park to under go this revitalization effort and it re-opened in late 2002 with new playground equipment, as well as landscaping and refurbished grounds. This is a true step towards recreation and open space on a neighborhood scale.

Through the work of the Pinellas County Community Development Department, and the assistance of community development block grant funds, ballfields and swimming pools have been constructed in Ridgecrest, as well as a YMCA-operated recreation center and pool at High Point. Recreational programs and sports opportunities have been brought into several communities through partnerships with non-profit providers such as the YMCA, and facilitated by the Community Development Department.

The Sheriff's Office continues to conduct their Police Athletic League (PAL) program, and will focus on underserved areas such as Lealman. Other existing County partnerships include those with the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, the Juvenile Welfare Board and the Long Center.

In addition, mutually beneficial partnerships between the County and municipalities have been formed for meeting municipal and unincorporated recreation needs. Such initiatives represent "win-win" approaches to recreation that maximize both resources and benefit. They also

exemplify how incremental and individualized solutions and opportunities are likely to represent much of the future of recreation in this County.

PLANNING FOR FACILITY-BASED RECREATION

Planning facility-based recreation for unincorporated residents versus planning countywide affects what monies are available, or able to be applied, towards a facility-based recreation purpose. Therefore, decisions on funding affect how, and the extent to which, a plan for facility-based recreation is developed. Regardless, moving in a facility-based recreation direction will need to be an incremental and systematic process. Most of the mature facility-based municipal recreation programs in Pinellas County have been institutionalized for twenty to thirty years. The build-out condition of this County, along with the need for fiscal efficiency and optimization of resources, are issues faced equally by the County and the municipalities, making it attractive and effective to plan collaboratively and countywide.

There are different ways the County can delve further into facility-based recreation:

- Use County-owned land; developed, maintained and managed by County staff
- Use County-owned land; developed, managed and maintained by someone else (non-profit, municipality, etc.)
- Use County-owned land; developed by the County, but managed and maintained by others (non-profit, municipality, etc.)
- The County provides money to a municipality (or non-profit, or private provider), who subsequently provides the facilities and services
- Or, more realistically, a combination of all options is used – based on specific and individual opportunities and partnerships

Each option requires a different level of funding and commitment, but no matter what approach is used, facility-based recreation planning cannot be done piecemeal. It requires looking at the full range of issues and opportunities. It must rely on comprehensive data and qualified analysis, and be coordinated with all other master planning, visioning and area studies underway, so that the result is equitable, justifiable and carries the County creatively and progressively into the future.

Recreation Reimbursement and Grant Programs

In September 2001, the Board of County Commissioners directed County staff to research the most effective ways to address the growing demand for facility-based recreation in unincorporated Pinellas County. A special Recreation Task Force was created, consisting of representatives from various County departments, to accomplish this task. The Task Force recommended the creation of a dedicated recreation Municipal Services Taxing Unit (MSTU) assessed on unincorporated residents to fund facility-based recreation endeavors. The Board subsequently included the dedicated recreation MSTU funding in the approved 2003 budget. This funding was earmarked to enhance recreational opportunities to unincorporated residents through a recreational grant and reimbursement program. Due to State-mandated budget cuts, however, the recreational grant and reimbursement programs are no longer being funded.

The Recreational Reimbursement Program utilized a voucher system to maximize efficiency for unincorporated residents. The County Parks and Recreation Department joined

participating municipalities to offer the voucher service. A voucher could be used toward the purchase of a membership or athletic league pass at any participating municipal recreation facility. The voucher covered the differential of fees between the resident and non-resident rates for an equivalent membership. Residents of unincorporated Pinellas County could purchase a recreation membership at any municipal recreation center and receive reimbursement for any additional fees above the resident rate. The differential of fees between the resident and non-resident rate for municipal recreation programs were also eligible for reimbursement.

The Recreational Grant Program worked to increase and enhance recreational opportunities for the citizens of unincorporated Pinellas County. The Program distributed funding for providing programs and facilities for the recreational needs of unincorporated residents and/or to assist those agencies, governments and organizations that could equitably serve both unincorporated and incorporated residents. Any not-for-profit organization (government, private, service organizations, etc.) whose primary mission was to provide recreational opportunities for Pinellas County citizens were eligible to participate. Allocated funds could be used for direct costs associated with: development or improvements of land/areas for recreational use, new construction or recreational facilities, recreational programs, or scholarships for participation in such programs. Grant funding could not exceed \$250,000 per organization per year. Projects had to begin within six months and completed within two years after the grant contract was executed. Proposals were evaluated and ranked by priority on a competitive basis. Programs were evaluated based on the greatest need and recreational benefits provided to unincorporated citizens.

The Recreational Reimbursement and Grant Programs enjoyed five years of funding. They provided important alternatives to having to conduct facility-based recreation programs in regional resource-based parks, where such activities often conflict with the overall purpose and ambiance of the area. Despite certain contracting problems, the programs worked well in general. Though the process was relatively new, some individuals and organizations came to rely on this funding. Even so, the programs were considered non-essential and subsequently removed from the MSTU budget following the State-mandated property tax cuts in 2007. There may, however, be other alternatives that are more cost-efficient and worthy of pursuit in the future. The County should continue to assess new ideas and alternatives toward providing the level of facility-based recreational opportunities that unincorporated residents need and desire.