



Florida Greenways and Trails Council (FGTC) June 2024 Council Meeting Minutes



PUBLIC MEETING: June 25, 2024
TIME: 9:00 am
LOCATION: Brooksville City Hall

FGTC Members in Attendance:

- Brooks White – Florida Forest Service
- Chip Birdsong – Florida Department of State
- Chris Rietow – Regional Planning Council Representative
- Dale Allen – Senate President Appointed Greenway User
- Danielle Terrell – Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
- Edwin McCook – Water Management District Representative
- Jason Lauritsen – Senate President Appointed Greenway User
- Jim Couillard – Local Government Representative
- Matt Michelini (Rep. James Buchanan's delegate) – House Speaker Appointed Trail User
- Mike Stephens – Governor Appointed Trail User
- Rachel Penrod – Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
- Rep. Cindy Stevenson – Speaker of the House Appointed Trail User
- Robin Birdsong – Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)
- Scott Stryker – Governor Appointed Greenway User
- Traci Deen – Speaker of the House Appointed Greenway User

Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) Staff in Attendance:

- Samantha Browne, Bureau Chief
- Britney Moore, Assistant Bureau Chief
- Katie White, Regional Coordinator
- Anna Hopkins, Regional Coordinator
- Doug Alderson, Outdoor Recreation Specialist

FLORIDA GREENWAYS AND TRAILS COUNCIL BUSINESS:

Approve Agenda

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Jim Couillard

SECOND: Traci Deen

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve Agenda

Approve the March 2024 Meeting Summary

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Chris Rietow

SECOND: Scott Stryker

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve Meeting Summary

Bylaws Update and Vote

The Council considered an update to the bylaws that would change the language regarding duties of the Council to reflect the language in 260.0142, F.S. Dale Allen raised questions regarding specific verbiage used in the statute and how it should be interpreted. Samantha Browne addressed the questions and Traci Deen offered that deliberation over interpretation of the Council duties as listed in the statute should be saved for when items come to the Council concerning those duties.

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Cyndi Stevenson

SECOND: Danielle Terrell

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve proposed updates to bylaws.

OGT Update

Council members were given a reminder of the process for travel reimbursement and the status of all appointments. New print materials were highlighted that OGT will be distributing at outreach events including a Kids Activity Book, Florida Mountain Bike Guide, Explore Trail Towns Booklet, and four new rack cards covering Designations, an OGT Overview, the Coast-to-Coast Trail, and the Capital City-to-the-Sea Trail. Upcoming Outdoor Florida webinars include Volunteering in State Parks, Outdoor Adventure with Paddle Florida, and Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Paddling trail story maps have now been completed for all the regional paddling trail systems and are viewable on the OGT website. Samantha Browne concluded the update with a presentation about TRAIL-GO, the new Local Trail Management Grant Program created in Chapter 2024-58, Laws of Florida. More information about TRAIL-GO can be found on the OGT website. The application opens on August 1st, 2024.

Venice Trail Town Presentation

Darlene Culpepper with the City of Venice presented about the history, wayfinding signage, trails, beaches, parks, dining options, events, festivals, accommodations, safety, and bicycle shops/groups within Venice and why the city would make a good addition to the Trail Town program. Following the presentation, the Council endorsed Venice as the 20th Trail Town.

Conservation Florida Update

Traci Deen provided an overview of Conservation Florida's work across the state. Conservation Florida has conserved over 35,000 acres of wild and working lands supporting 200 at-risk plant and animal species and serving 67 counties. Traci shared a few clips from *Protect Our Paradise*, a video series presented by Conservation Florida available on the Discover Florida channel.

After the presentation the Council discussed ways in which to improve public access to conservation easements, specifically for trails. Public access is often not discussed during the negotiation process, yet many private landowners may be interested in the chance to showcase their agricultural lands. Some council members shared that they see this as a top issue that should be prioritized. It was agreed that educating private landowners on the benefits of public access as well as working with the Division of State Lands and Florida's various land trusts would be a start in the right direction to improve public access to conservation easements.

Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation Update

Jason Lauritsen updated the Council on the work of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation. Topics of discussion included conversion hotspots and bottlenecks, Mind the Gap workshops, corridor compatible communities, advocacy work, and recent/upcoming expeditions. Mind the Gap workshops will be held in Polk, Marion/Levy, Volusia, and Collier/Lee/Hendry counties this year, and in 2025 additional workshops will be held in Lake/Orange, Citrus/Hernando, and Leon/Jefferson counties. Jason also reviewed some of the critical connection areas around the state including the nearby Brooksville Ridge Gap. Brooksville is now home to a Wildlife Corridor mural by artist Justin Alsdek featuring a black bear and other wildlife on the side of the City Hall building.

Brooksville Update

Jordan Metzel, Brooksville Parks and Recreation Community Programs Manager, and Richard Weeks, Brooksville Public Works Director, addressed the Council to share their excitement for the newly extended Good Neighbor Trail. Completion of the Good Neighbor Trail this past May closed one of the last remaining gaps along Florida's 250+ mile Coast-to-Coast Trail.

Lake Park Scrub Natural Area Designation + Vote

Katie White, OGT South Regional Coordinator, presented Lake Park Scrub Natural Area (LPSNA) to the Council for Designation consideration. Lake Park Scrub Natural Area is a 54.6-acre property owned and managed by Palm Beach County. Current activities include walking, jogging, and nature viewing on two miles of existing natural surface management accessways. The primary purpose of LPSNA is preservation of the native vegetation, wildlife populations, groundwater resources, and archeological resources. Secondary purposes of the property include passive recreation, environmental education, and scientific research. Future plans include new amenities such as kiosks, a small parking area, and two trails.

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Traci Deen

SECOND: Robin Birdsong

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve Designation

Kissimmee River Blueway Designation + Vote

Doug Alderson, OGT Paddling Trails Coordinator, and Dan Cotter, South Florida Water Management District Section Leader, presented the Kissimmee River Blueway to the Council for Designation Consideration. Public use on the Kissimmee River is cooperatively managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the South Florida Water Management District. Doug detailed the history of the river and its restoration, various access points and campsites, and shared several photos of the river and wildlife. A story map of the Blueway is available on the OGT website.

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Dale Allen

SECOND: Rachel Penrod

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve Designation

ROW Discussion

The Council continued conversation brought up at the last meeting about Right-of-Way in the context of trail corridors. Some Council members voiced that it would be helpful to know if gaps within the Regional Trails will require ROW acquisition or not. To determine if ROW needs to be acquired for a specific proposed trail, OGT will need to get that information from the local government or entity who originally submitted the trail for inclusion in the FGTS. It was brought up that determining if ROW acquisition is needed can be challenging, especially for segments where feasibility studies have not been completed since it is unknown what route the trail will take.

FGTS Plan/Goals Review

Samantha Browne, OGT Bureau Chief, reviewed the goals listed within the 2024-2028 Florida Greenways and Trails System Plan and the progress that has been made so far in specific areas. It was explained that structuring the goals around year of completion was not done for this plan since it proved not to be very useful in the prior plan. Much of the work being done in relation to the goals is ongoing over the whole five-year period. OGT would like input and feedback from the Council regarding a draft Unpaved Trails Design Guideline document which will be distributed before the next Council meeting.

Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation Update

Mike Stephens, Council Chair and Treasurer for the Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation, shared the Save the Date for the Foundation's 2025 Summit on February 6th, 2025, in Venice. The Summit recognizes the 10th anniversary of the legislation that created the SUN Trail network and will include speakers, policy and technical sessions, and networking opportunities. More information and a link to register will be available in October.

Public Comment: No public comments.

Next Meeting Location & Date: The next meeting will be September 25th and 26th in Sanford, FL.

Council Updates

Danielle Terrell: DEP would appreciate help spreading the word about TRAIL-GO and at the next meeting we will be able to update on the number of applications received. Some of the other funds allocated to DEP from SB 1638 for resource management will be used for trails within State Parks. The funds must be used within 12 months so it can be challenging to identify what projects are best to invest in within the timeframe. At their April meeting, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) requested more time to review the draft Unit Management Plans for the first batch of 45 State Parks, and then eventually voted to approve the Plan in June. Field visits have been recently completed for District 4, which encompasses 36 parks and will be the next District to update. The Office of Park Planning is working on writing the plans now and then will set up community engagement opportunities. Several subgroups and committees are formed with stakeholders to draft the plans. The tentative schedule is to finish with the District 4 Plans by the summer of 2025 and then move on to parks within District 1, but that may change. The switch to district-wide Plans has saved a lot of time and allowed for more efficient direction of resources.

Jason Lauritsen: No updates.

Robin Birdsong: FDOT is working on the 2055 Florida Transportation Plan which guides Florida's transportation future. Any involvement and feedback from the public and stakeholders is welcome.

Mike Stephens: The Lake County Commission voted to renew a 2004 referendum for conservation and trails. The revised referendum for 2024 upped the percentage of money that will be allocated to trails to 50%, equating to about \$25 million in funding. Mike showed a photo of where the Coast-to-Coast connects from the Withlacoochee State Trail to the next stretch of trail on SR 50. The connection is a two-foot-wide sidewalk. Mike emphasized the importance of needing an overarching "project manager" entity to improve Regional Trails after construction and streamline promotion/marketing, identify issues, etc. It is the hope that the emerging regional alliances will address such issues and then it will be up to the managing entity such as the County to make any changes.

Traci Deen: No updates.

Jim Couillard: No updates.

Edwin McCook: He has enjoyed his time serving on the Council and will be retiring soon. He will still be around within the trail community and is excited about the new Suwannee River Greenway connection by the Ichetucknee River.

Chip Birdsong: No updates.

Matthew Michelini: It was a great experience to learn about the work of the Council.

Rachel Penrod: FWC received \$32 million in funding from SB 1638 and some of that will be used for trails within FWC properties. They are excited to expand the two person staff team who manages 1,000 miles of FWC trails to seven members. This will allow for improved maintenance and management, including trail counter upgrades. They also have a new forestry grant program to improve bridges on the National Scenic Trail. Updates were recently made to a few Wildlife Management Areas, which identified opportunities for some paddling trails connected to the WMAs to be designated into the FGTS.

Cyndi Stevenson: Great meeting, always learn something new every time. She looks forward to all the progress that will be made with the new funding. She often thinks about the environmental degradation that is always happening, but at the same time is hopeful about creative redevelopment opportunities that present ways to reclaim and preserve natural spaces for future generations.

Scott Stryker: There has been some local funding pledged for the Benito-Estero Rail Trail, a segment of the Gulf Coast Trail. The American Bicycle League ranks communities as gold, silver and bronze for cyclists. Out of the 20 designated Trail Towns, four have a silver rating and two have a bronze rating. There are two gold rated cities that are not designated Trail Towns. This could be a great opportunity for synergy between the two programs.

Brooks White: The Mark Schmidt OHV Recreation Grant Program is being wrapped up. They hope to receive more applications in future cycles.

Chris Rietow: No updates.

MEETING ADJOURN:

MOTION: Jim Couillard

SECOND: Cyndi Stevenson

Meeting adjourned.