



## Pinellas County Parks and Conservation Resources Advisory Board

### Minutes of the Meeting on July 17, 2025

**PARK BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Mr. Tex Carter, Mr. Miles Croom,  
Mr. Rick Dumont, Mr. Ermal Gigolaj,  
Ms. Kim Hukari, Mr. Steven Ochsner,  
Ms. Julie Vayne, Ms. Heather Vernillo

**PARK BOARD MEMBERS NOT PRESENT:**

Ms. Cynthia Grizzle  
Mr. Dan Savercool

**PARKS & CONSERVATION RESOURCES STAFF:**

Mr. Paul Cozzie, Director  
Mr. Spencer Curtis, Deputy Director  
Dr. Steve Harper, Park Services, Operations Manager  
Mr. Mike Polizzi, Volunteer Coordinator  
Ms. Monette Preston, Visitor & Services Outreach  
Ms. Deann Baker, Administrative Support  
Specialist II

A regular Pinellas County Parks and Conservation Resources (PCR) Advisory Board meeting was held at the Pinellas County Extension Building at 12520 Ulmerton Rd. Largo, FL 33774 on April 17, 2025.

**I. Open Meeting/Introductions**

- Heather Vernillo, PCR Advisory Board Vice Chair, called the meeting to order at 9:30 am.
- Introductions were made. Rick Dumont introduced himself as a new member of the Advisory Board, appointed by Commissioner Nowicki.

**II. Approval of Minutes – April 17, 2025**

- A motion was made by Tex Carter and was seconded by Julie Vayne, approving the minutes with no corrections from the meeting held on April 17, 2025.

**III. Citizens to be Heard**

None

**IV. Old Business**

**a. FY26 Budget Update**

- The department performed a thorough review of the budget, and several "decision packages" were submitted that were above and beyond the current year's budget.
- Some of the decision packages were approved.

- **New Parks Opening:** Two new parks are scheduled to open next year: Ray Neri Park and Dansville Park.
- **Staffing for Ray Neri Park:** Two new Park Rangers will be hired to handle Ray Neri Park upon its opening. This is expected to relieve the current pressure on Park Rangers from Sawgrass Lake Park, who are currently addressing concerns at the open portion of Raineri Park and Lealman Community Park.
- The two new positions will be in Lealman, which will save Sawgrass staff time spent traveling, thus increasing the level of service at Sawgrass Lake Park.
- **Staffing for Dansville Park:** A request was made for two additional Park Rangers at the new Dansville Community Park (being built off Wilcox). Only one Park Ranger position was approved.
- The new Park Ranger will be added to the park group that covers Ridgecrest Park and will assist with maintenance activities at Dansville Park.
- **Total New Staff:** The department is adding three additional full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members, bringing the total FTEs in the next year's budget to approximately 204.2 or 4. (The current FTE is a little over 201.2 or 4).
- **Sewer Line Inspection Funding:** The department requested and received \$512,000 in one-time funding for mapping and inspection of sewer lines at eight regional parks.
- **Infrastructure Concerns:** Many parks are old (50-70 years of age), and the condition of the infrastructure is not fully known. One example is Philippe Park, where restrooms had to be closed due to failing septic drain fields and severely corroded pipes.
- The \$512,000 will be used to hire a contractor to perform a full assessment, make recommendations, and prioritize replacements.
- **Inter-departmental Cooperation on Infrastructure:** The Parks department receives assistance from Public Works and Utilities for things like running cameras down lines, but those departments often use contractors themselves.
- **Tierra Verde Community Association Property:** The new FY26 budget includes funding for the Tierra Verde Community Association property, which the association turned back over to the County in January. The County is now responsible for the property.
- Approximately \$173,000 is allocated to cover the additional labor cost for maintenance, mowing, and general repairs for the property.
- **Tierra Verde Baseball Field Discussion (Community Feedback):** The baseball field at the Tierra Verde property is mainly used by one group on Saturday mornings. A community member noted that many residents are retired and play pickleball.
- The community association had previously requested to add pickleball courts.
- Southwest Little League originally built the baseball field, but they are no longer using it due to a property restriction that prohibits lights. A senior softball league that uses the Gulfport field, which was damaged by a storm, has been practicing there.
- **Future of Tierra Verde Baseball Field:** The Parks Department is not an active recreation department. PCR would rather remove the fencing and other baseball infrastructure. The community, in collaboration with Audrey Ables (South County, Assistant to the County Administrator), will likely hold meetings to discuss the area's future.
- **Condition of the Baseball Field:** There are issues with the field, including exposed wires. The department lacks the equipment to maintain clay infields.
- **Budget Approval Status:** The Commissioners still need to approve the budget, which will involve two public hearings. The current version will be on the Board workshop agenda for July 22nd. The final document will be available on the Commission's meeting and agenda page.

## V. New Business

### a. Adoption of State Bridge Properties

- **State Bridge Properties (Tierra Verde & Bunces Pass):** As a community member, Rick Dumont presented an issue regarding trash and poor maintenance underneath state-owned bridges, specifically Bunces Pass and Tierra Verde.
- **Idea for State Bridge Properties:** The idea is for Pinellas County to ask the State for authorization to use the areas under the Tierra Verde and Bunces Pass bridges as part of the Parks and Conservation Resources system, attaching them to the nearest park (e.g., Fort De Soto). The State would need to provide seed money to install things like parking machines and a Ranger position for monitoring and cleanup.
- **Current Issues at Tierra Verde Bridge:** The area has become a crime issue with homeless people sleeping there, resulting in excessive trash, bonfires, and illegal dumping. It also has water pollution issues.
- **Motorized Hang Gliders:** People are launching motorized hang gliders from these two spots, which results in them diving in on nesting terns and skimmers, knocking them off their nests, allowing crows and gulls to kill the chicks. This is also a major issue at Fort De Soto.
- **Why People Go There:** People go to the bridge areas because they can consume alcohol, they don't have to pay the \$6 parking fee for Fort De Soto, and there is no one policing them.
- **Parks Department Position on Bridge Properties:** Bridge properties are not the Parks Department's purview. The State collects tolls to maintain those areas and should be doing more.
- **Previous Similar Issue:** The County previously assisted with a beautification grant for the Bayway landscaping with the expectation that the community association would cover maintenance; however, the community stopped, and the County is not staffed to take over.
- **Potential State Solution:** The State previously closed off the area near the Walsingham Bridge, making it a "no trespassing" area, which may be the ultimate solution for the Tierra Verde/Bunces Pass areas if people cannot be responsible.
- **DOT and Public Use Areas:** A staff member was recently contacted by a consultant working with the Department of Transportation (DOT) to establish formal public use areas near Howard Franklin Bridge, Skyway, and Tierra Verde.
- **County's Stance on DOT Proposal:** The County informed the consultant that it would not be interested in taking care of dispersed areas. However, a dialogue began, and DOT is aware of the issues. The County's position is that they would need resources and would have to take over all similar areas.
- **Action Taken by DOT:** Law enforcement was brought in to remove commercial activity (kayak rentals) that was a source of trash.
- **ACTION ITEM: Michael Lenhart (DOT):** Paul will send Michael Lenhart's contact information to Rick.
- **ACTION ITEM: Agenda Item for Next Meeting (Tierra Verde/Bridge Properties):** A request was made to keep the discussion of the bridge properties on the agenda for the next meeting.
- **Boat Launch Issues:** People are launching boats illegally because the boat launch areas at Fort De Soto are limited (only three are currently operational).
- **Revenue Idea: Night with the Stars:** A suggestion was made to have one night a month, especially in cooler months, where the park allows access to photographers/astrophotographers for a fee (e.g., \$25) as a source of revenue, as Fort De Soto is the darkest place in Pinellas County.

- **Response to Revenue Idea:** Something similar is done at Brooker Creek Preserve. The event could be organized as a special event with limited access and a fee to cover staff time.
- **ACTION ITEM: Night with the Stars:** Monette will investigate the feasibility of a special event for astrophotography, particularly outside of turtle nesting season and during the cooler months.

## VI. Parks and Conservation Resources Director's Report

### a. Parks Construction Update

- **Ray Neri Park:** The contractor expects to finish in early to mid-August, with turf establishment taking 60 days, so the projected grand opening is early to mid-October.
- **Dansville Park:** The contractor's completion date is October 15th, and it will take 2-3 weeks for staff to complete final preparations, with a projected opening in early November.
- **High Point Park:** The joint project with the School Board and City of Largo is moving slowly due to subcontractor issues. The anticipated opening is in the spring or early summer of next year.

### b. Recovery Efforts Updates – Spencer Curtis

- **Madeira Beach Access:** Safety issues have been addressed, and the parking lot is re-established. A temporary reopening is planned, and the restroom will be returned to service temporarily until full repairs (sidewalk and seawall) can be completed.
- **Fort De Soto/War Veterans Boat Ramps:** Designs are complete. The department is using a job-order contracting process to expedite the work. A contractor has been selected and is providing a price estimate. The purchasing department is increasing the Purchase Order to accommodate the estimated \$3 million project. Fabrication for the docks will take about two months.
- **Beach Parking Accesses:** All beach parking accesses, including Sand Key, will be refurbished.
- **Fort De Soto Seawall:** The FEMA-approved design is almost complete for a full replacement, estimated at \$900,000.
- **Beach Accesses/Dune Walkovers:** Projects impacting public use are moving quickly. Other projects are in the design stage.
- **Shelters:** Repairs/replacement are needed for severely damaged shelters, including one at Philippe that may need to be torn down.
- **Howard Restroom:** Crews are working to return one restroom to service and will do a temporary repair on the lift station. A complete replacement of the restrooms (single, raised structure) and a full rebuild of the lift station (bringing it above ground) is planned. A new potable water line will also be run to the island to replace the old corroding line.
- **Cross Bayou Park:** The project is expected to go out for advertisement by the end of the month. It is a design-build project, and the total timeline, including the construction, is estimated for an early 2027 completion.
- **Weedon Island Boardwalks:** The ongoing capital improvement project to repair and replace fishing piers and boardwalks is continuing, with the next stop being Eagle Lake. The project started with Brooker Creek and has included Weedon Island, Sawgrass, and the full replacement around the Walsingham Springs.
- **Weedon Island Nature Center Exhibits:** A refresh of the exhibit halls is moving forward.

## VII. Other Business

### **Philippe Park Water Quality Grant:**

- The department received a wastewater grant for water quality improvement for Philippe Park, over \$2 million, which will convert the entire area from septic to a sanitary sewer system.
- **Philippe Park Construction Coordination:** There are five or six different projects scheduled for Philippe Park over the next two years, so scheduling will be a challenge. A new playground is also needed to replace the one near the burial mound, but the design will wait for the sanitary sewer system design to avoid conflicts.
- **ACTION ITEM: Modular Restroom Information:** Staff will follow up with the company in Tarpon Springs that manufactures DCA-approved prefab restrooms.
- **West Coast Preserve Memorial:** A memorial for a big donor is ordered and expected in about two months. Work is being done on the fence to prepare the location.

With no further business, a motion was made by Tex Carter to adjourn, and was seconded by Julie Vayne. The meeting was adjourned at 10:28 a.m.

The next meeting of the PCR Advisory Board is scheduled for October 16, 2025