



Pinellas County Parks and Conservation Resources Advisory Board Minutes of the Meeting on October 16, 2025

PARK BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:	Mr. Tex Carter, Mr. Miles Croom, Mr. Rick Dumont, Ms. Cynthia Grizzle, Ms. Kim Hukari, Mr. Steven Ochsner, Ms. Julie Vayne, Ms. Heather Vernillo
PARK BOARD MEMBERS NOT PRESENT:	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 October 16, 2025.

I. Open Meeting/Introductions

- Cynthia Grizzle, PCR Advisory Board Chair, called the meeting to order at 9:30 am.
- Introductions were made.

II. Approval of Minutes – July 17, 2025

- Heather Vernillo noted the misspelling of her last name occurred in the previous minutes and questioned her appointment as the Advisory Board's Vice Chair. Elections were held on April 17, 2025, and she was approved by a vote. The minutes will be updated to reflect Ms. Vernillo's correct spelling of her last name.
- A motion was made to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion moved by Tex Carter, seconded by Heather Vernillo. The vote was all in favor, the motion carried.

III. Citizens to be Heard

None

IV. Old Business

a. FY26 Budget Update

The FY26 budget for Parks and Conservation Resources was approved as submitted.

• Key Budget Changes/Additions:

- Two new Park Ranger positions will be assigned to the soon-to-be-completed Ray Neri Park.
- One additional Park Ranger position was approved for Ridgecrest to assist with maintaining the new Dansville Park.
- The Rangers at Ray Neri Park will work 4-day, 10-hour shifts: Sun-Wed and Wed-Sat.

- **Tierra Verde Community Park:**
 - \$250,000 in funding was secured for a new playground.
 - Additional funding was allocated for necessary repairs to restrooms and electrical systems, and for storm recovery efforts.
- The overall budget was characterized as primarily a maintenance budget.

b. Astrophotography Event (Monette Preston, Visitor Services and Outreach Manager)

- **Event Details:**
 - **Name:** Starlight and Shutter
 - **Date/Time:** Saturday, January 10, 2026, from 9:00 PM to 10:30 PM.
 - **Location:** Fort De Soto Park, East Beach Lot.
 - **Capacity:** Capped at **150 people** for the first time hosting to ensure manageability and safety (due to staffing limits and dark park conditions).
 - **Fee: \$10 per person**, pre-registration required via Eventbrite (no on-site payment). Fee will help support costs and staff overtime.
 - **Entry/Exit:** Gates will close to incoming traffic at **8:45 PM** to prevent headlights from disrupting night vision.
 - **Lighting Rules:** Patrons are invited to bring red or amber lights only to preserve night vision.
 - **Equipment:** Bring your own gear (cameras, telescopes).
- **Discussion & Action:**
 - Monette will reach out to local astronomy/telescope clubs to invite them and explore the possibility of them bringing larger telescopes for sharing with the public.
 - The event will be re-evaluated after the initial run for potential future expansion.

V. New Business

a. Renaming of Philippe Park (Paul)

The County recently updated its naming rights policies, which allows for the potential renaming of County facilities. The Board was asked to serve as the required advisory board to oversee the public process for the renaming of Philippe Park.

- **Background:** The request originated from a citizen, Lou Claudio, who previously asked the Board several years ago to rename the park after the Tocobaga Indians due to the historical association of the park's namesake (Philippe) with slave ownership.
- **Proposed Process:** If the Advisory Board agrees to take the role, they would hold a public meeting early next year (2026) in the vicinity of Safety Harbor.
- **Concerns Raised by Board:** The public impetus seems based on only one citizen's request. Concerns were raised about the potential high cost of renaming and the park's current storm recovery status.
- **Staff Response:** Staff will prepare background materials detailing the actual cost of renaming and the policy specifics. The Board's role would be to listen to public input and make a formal recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners.
- **Archaeological Tour Note:** A free tour focusing on the park's archaeological history, led by Dr. Thomas Pluckett, will take place on **Saturday, November 1st, at 11 AM** at the foot of the mound.

b. Chief Ranger Dan Jost

Chief Ranger Dan Jost (Group 6) was introduced to the Board.

- **Area of Responsibility (Group 6):** Taylor Park, Ridgecrest, Pinellas Trail, Belleair Boat Ramp, and Chester Ochs.
- **New Assets:** Group 6 recently acquired two electric bikes (e-bikes) for patrolling the Pinellas Trail to address safety issues and speeding. The reception has been positive.
- **Future Outreach:** Staff intends to continue inviting Chief Rangers and other staff members to subsequent meetings.

VI. Parks and Conservation Resources Director’s Report

a. Parks Construction Updates

Project	Status	Estimated Completion/Opening	Key Issues
Dansville Park	Nearing completion (90%+)	Ribbon Cutting planned for December 2025	Waiting on Duke Energy for power easement; removal of a large oak tree that recently died.
Ray Neri Park	Nearing completion (90%+)	Grand Opening planned for January 2026	Installation of multi-purpose sports turf field (needs time to root before public use).
Sutherland Bayou Boat Ramp (Palm Harbor)	Paving is pending.	Before the end of the year (expected)	Expected closure now 3-4 weeks (down from 6-8 weeks) for repaving.
Fred Howard Park Playground	Complete and Open	Recently Completed	The new playground is open.
Fred Howard Park Restrooms	Ongoing Renovation	TBD	The north restroom is undergoing temporary renovation. The south one was damaged and will be demolished. Long-term plan: single elevated, hardened structure (estimated \$1M). Porta-Johns available.
Cross Bayou Athletic Fields	Delayed (Design/Build)	Early 2028 (Construction expected to take 585 days)	Project is significantly delayed; hoped to be out to bid by end of 2025.

- **Storm Repairs:** Tens of millions of dollars of storm damage repairs are ongoing across multiple sites, with the County using its own funds and seeking reimbursement from **FEMA**.
- **North County Parks (Wilds, Four Lakes Hammock):** Budget constraints (\$3.8M original budget) mean that only one project's estimated cost now covers the entire available budget. Staff is considering value engineering, prioritizing, or potentially delaying one or both projects to the next Penny Sales Tax list (**Penny 5 in 2028**).

b. 35th Anniversary of the Pinellas Trail

The 35th Anniversary of the Pinellas Trail will take place the first week of December.

- **Plaque for Fred Marquis:** Working with the City of Dunedin and its Veterans Advisory Committee to create and unveil a commemorative, photographic plaque honoring **Fred Marquis** (former County Administrator after whom the trail is named).
- **Location:** Intended to be placed on the wall of the Dunedin History Museum, which backs up onto the trail.
- **Timing:** Working with Mr. Marquis's schedule for an unveiling ceremony in the first week of December.

VII. Other Business

a. **2026 Meeting Schedule**

The 2026 meeting schedule was noted: the next meeting will be **January 15, 2026**.

b. **Hazard Tree and Avian Issues**

- **Hazard Tree Assessment (Lyle):** Hazard trees identified in the post-hurricane assessment have been removed. A planting plan is being developed with Keep Pinellas Beautiful, using funding from the Tree Bank Fund.
- **Avian Entanglement Crisis at Fort De Soto:** A severe, unprecedented increase in bird deaths was reported due to fishing line entanglement at Fort De Soto's Conception Key (7-8 pelicans per day).
 - **Problem:** Fishermen are using braided line; incidents are high due to cultural/language barriers (fishermen view birds as bad omens and cut the line).
 - **Proposed Solution:** Desperate need for a South County facility to triage and stabilize injured birds. Suggested working with Eckerd College and Beth Forys to potentially use the Nature Academy building at Fort De Soto for a triage.

Action Items and Delegation

Action Item	Delegated To	Deadline/Timeline
Obtain Policy & Background on Philippe Park Renaming	Paul (Director) / Maria White	Before the January 15, 2026, meeting
Prepare Cost Estimate for Philippe Park Renaming	Lyle Fowler	Before the January 15, 2026, meeting
Reach out to Local Astronomy/Telescope Clubs	Monette Preston	Before January 10, 2026 (Starlight and Shutter)
Finalize Ribbon Cutting for Dansville Park	Staff (Paul / Communications)	Targeting December 2025
Finalize Grand Opening for Ray Neri Park	Staff (Paul / Communications)	Targeting January 2026
Notify Board Members of Park Grand Opening Dates	Staff (Communications Team)	As soon as the Commissioner's calendars are confirmed
Explore a partnership with Eckerd College for Avian Triage	Staff (Unspecified)	Ongoing (Desperate Need)
Set up Public Meeting regarding Philippe Park Renaming	Staff (Paul)	Early 2026 (Pending Board approval to take the role)

With no further business, a motion was made by Cynthia Grizzle to adjourn, and was seconded by Julie Vayne. The meeting was adjourned at 10:45 a.m.

The next meeting of the PCR Advisory Board is scheduled for January 15, 2026