

Pinellas County Parks and Conservation Resources Advisory Board

Minutes of the Meeting on January 15, 2026

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, Mr. Ermal Gigolaj
PARKS & CONSERVATION RESOURCES STAFF:	Mr. Paul Cozzie, Director Mr. Spencer Curtis, Deputy Director Mr. Lyle Fowler, Section Manager II Dr. Steve Harper, Park Services, Operations Manager Ms. Monette Preston, Visitor & Services Outreach Ms. Maria White, Assistant County Attorney 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 – October 16, 2025

- The meeting minutes from the October 16 meeting were approved. A motion was made by Mr. Carter, seconded by Ms. Vayne. Motion carried to approve the minutes.

III. Citizens to be Heard

None

IV. Old Business

a. Starlight and Shutter Astrophotography Event

- Monette Preston, Visitor Services and Outreach, provided a recap of the inaugural astrophotography event held at Fort De Soto Park.
- The event was a success, selling out all 150 tickets in approximately 1.5 months.
- Community Outreach: Feedback was gathered from attendees who heard about the event through the St. Pete Astronomy Club, MOSI, and St. Pete College.
- Feedback & Recommendations: Attendees suggested recommending stargazing or sky-mapping mobile apps for future events.
- There is a need for more photography experts on-site to assist beginners with camera settings.

- A survey will be sent to attendees to determine the schedule for future events.
- Media: Photos from the event will be featured in "The Wave," the county's newsletter.

b. Renaming of Philippe Park

The board engaged in an extensive discussion of a long-standing request to rename Philippe Park to better represent the Tocobaga tribe.

- Presentation by Lou Claudio: Mr. Claudio, an advocational archeologist, presented historical evidence suggesting that the park's namesake, Odet Philippe, was not a French count but a mixed-race individual who enslaved people.
- Historical Context: Claudio emphasized that the site is on the National Register of Historic Places primarily due to the Tocobaga archeological presence, including one of the last remaining Temple Mounds in Tampa Bay.
- Naming Rights Policy: The Board of County Commissioners directed that the process must involve a committee tied to the facility to review public commentary.
- **Board Action: The Advisory Board voted unanimously to assume the role of the committee responsible for taking public comment and formulating a recommendation for the potential renaming.**

V. New Business

a. Fort De Soto Gulf fishing Pier – Entangled Birds

Resident Park Manager Dave Harshbarger presented on efforts to reduce bird entanglements at fishing piers.

Regulation Changes:

- Fishing is limited to two supervised rigs per person to ensure fishers can actively manage their lines.
- The sale of multi-hook and Sabiki rigs has been banned at the Gulf pier bait shop and written into the new concession contract.
- A seasonal fishing closure is in effect for the rock revetment area (a known bird "choke point") from August 1st to March 31st.
- Education & Enforcement: All park rangers have taken the FWC Skyway education course.
- The park is actively recruiting Peer Steward Volunteers to educate fishers on how to unhook birds safely.
- Pier trash cans were replaced with closed-top models to prevent birds from scavenging.
- Fishing piers now close at sunset to give birds undisturbed rest.

b. Chief Ranger Carol Gray

North District Update

- Chief Ranger Carol Gray provided an overview of her 25-year tenure and current responsibilities.
- Brooker Creek Preserve: 8,700 acres, primarily focused on public open space and education.
- John Chesnut Park: 255 acres featuring 13 shelters, a dog park, and Lake Tarpon access.
- Philippe Park: 92 acres featuring the historic mound, eight shelters, and a boat ramp.

VI. Parks and Conservation Resources Director's Report

a. Parks Construction Updates

New Park Openings:

- Dansville Park: Completion expected late February or early March.
- High Point Park: Completion expected in late April, with an opening in early summer once turf is established.
- Raymond H. Neri Park: Grand opening scheduled for Saturday, February 7th, at 11:30 AM.

- Budget & Infrastructure: * The 2026 budget will be a "flat budget," prioritizing existing infrastructure over new initiatives.
- Planning for "Penny for Pinellas" (Penny 5) extension projects will begin this year.
- Storm Recovery: * FEMA-compliant concrete floating docks are being designed for Fort De Soto and War Veterans boat ramps.
- Repairs to the Fort De Soto seawall and East Beach road are ongoing but delayed by federal assessment requirements.

VII. Other Business

UF/IFAS Extension Funding

The board discussed recent Commission debates over funding UF/IFAS positions.

* Cost Sharing: The county currently pays roughly 40% of agent salaries (approx. \$440,000 total) while UF pays 60%.

* Value: Board members noted the immense value provided by Master Gardener volunteers.

* Strategic Review: Future discussions will focus on whether other departments (Public Works/Stormwater) should share the funding burden, given the educational support IFAS provides for county ordinances.

Action Items:

- Schedule Public Meeting in Safety Harbor for Philippe Park renaming discussion. | Department Staff | Within 90 Days
- Develop signage with QR codes linking to the FWC bird de-hooking course. | Park Management | Ongoing
- Compile "Penny 5" project recommendations for board prioritization. | Advisory Board | Late 2026 |
- Recruit additional Pier Steward Volunteers for the Fort De Soto piers. | Volunteer Coordinator | Ongoing

With no further business, a motion was made by Heather Vernillo to adjourn, and was seconded by Tex Carter. The meeting was adjourned at 10:50 a.m.

The next meeting of the PCR Advisory Board is scheduled for April 16, 2026