



Florida Greenways and Trails Council (FGTC)

April 2026 Council Meeting Minutes

PUBLIC MEETING: April 8th, 2026
TIME: 9:00 AM
LOCATION: St. Petersburg Distillery
855 28th Street South, St. Petersburg, FL 33712

FGTC Members in Attendance:

Robin Birdsong – Florida Department of Transportation
Mike Stephens – Governor-Appointed Trail User
Robert Steele – Water Management District, Northwest Florida
Vincent “Chip” Birdsong – Florida Department of State
Stephanie Wardein – Governor-Appointed Private Landowner
Jim Couillard – Local Government, Marion County Parks & Recreation
Scott Stryker – Governor-appointed Greenway User
Samantha Adams – Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission
Tim Giesecke -- Division of Recreation & Parks-Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Dale Allen – Senate-Appointed Greenway User
Shawn Thomas – United States Forest Service
Morgan Wilbanks – Governor-Appointed Greenway User
Chris Rietow – FRCA
Lisa Vickers – Senate-Appointed Trail User
PJ Marinelli – Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation
Oscar Anderson – Senate-Appointed Greenway User

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

Samantha (Sam) Browne, Bureau Chief
Delaney Goins, Regional Coordinator, Staff to Council
Cassidy Haney, Regional Coordinator

Other FDEP Staff in Attendance:

Rachel Earlywine, Office of General Counsel

Members of the Public and Presenters in Attendance:

Dr. Evangeline Linkous
Tara Hubbard
John Barkett

Patricia DePlasco
Savanah Battreall
Cheryl Stacks
Jensen Hackett

Announcements:

Council Introductions

FLORIDA GREENWAYS AND TRAILS COUNCIL BUSINESS:

Call to Order – 9:03 AM

Council Introductions – 9:04 AM

Approve Agenda – 9:08 AM

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION:

SECOND:

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

Approve the December 2025 Meeting Summary – 9:08 AM

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION:

SECOND:

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

Re-elect Mike Stephens as Chair and Stephanie Wardein as Vice Chair – 9:09 AM

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION:

SECOND:

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

Florida Greenways and Trails Council Duties – 9:11 AM

Rachel Earlywine from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Office of General Counsel (OGC) reiterated the duties, roles, and responsibilities of the Florida Greenways and Trails Council (FGTC) as established by the Florida Greenways and Trails Act and in accordance with Florida Sunshine Laws.

Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) Updates – 9:26 AM

Bureau Chief Samantha Browne of the FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) provided the FGTC with a comprehensive progress report. This included an overview of the Florida

Greenways and Trails System (FGTS) and FGTS plan, along with implementation goals. This overview will be instrumental in the upcoming OGT five-year plan. Chief Browne also provided a recap of the TRAIL GO program. She included relevant legislative funding cycle information and precise examples of projects completed using TRAIL GO grant money.

Transfer of Development Rights for Land Conservation in Florida – 9:44 AM

Dr. Evangeline “Van” Linkous of the University of South Florida (USF) shared a presentation on the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) for the purpose of land conservation in the state of Florida. She established that TDR, which is a method of marketplace enablement for development rights, is a strongly supported practice across hundreds of communities nationwide for a variety of purposes, including affordable housing and growth management among other things. Dr. Linkous included that this growing method reflects a shift away from bureaucratic approaches. She cited successful TDR examples in the state of Washington, which resulted in over 100,000 acres of protected land and involved interagency cooperation. Also highlighted were several counties in Florida wherein TDR has had general success as a practice. Dr. Linkous expanded on this presentation by recommending policy updates in the state of Florida.

The Sunline Coalition – 10:11 AM

Tara Hubbard of Wonderfield Farms, Hubbard Enterprises, and the Sunline Coalition discussed the ongoing efforts in St. Petersburg to turn the vastly popular Pinellas Trail into an interactive and vibrant bicycle and pedestrian thru-way similar to the Underline in Miami, the Atlanta Beltline, or Manhattan’s Highline. Tara emphasized the effort of the St. Petersburg community in envisioning what the Sunline could be and helping to make it a reality through restoration, beautification, and education. She pointed to post-hurricane greenspace rejuvenation- specifically the replanting of shade trees along the Pinellas Trail, which was encouraged and supported by local businesses. The Council, as well as members of the public and subsequent speakers, were highly receptive to Ms. Hubbard’s plans for the Sunline.

Transit Oriented Development/Trails Crossing – 10:31 AM

John Barkett of Barkett Realty gave a presentation on the importance of Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), as well as his involvement in the Friends of Trails Crossing organization which is working to revitalize city blocks bisected by the Pinellas Trail. Barkett emphasized the economic potential of TOD as a mainstay instead of an afterthought. Barkett and associates envision the Trails Crossing project as a bastion of mixed-use infrastructure, business development, and public art. He also described the Trails Crossing tiered-partnership system wherein individuals and organizations donate and collaborate for a series of escalating perks and recognition.

BREAK – 10:52 AM

All About Keep Pinellas Beautiful – 11:08 AM

Executive Director of Keep Pinellas Beautiful (KPB), Patricia DePlasco, gave a presentation about KPB on behalf of Education Program Coordinator Devon Francke. DePlasco described KPB's affiliation to Keep America Beautiful, which is a large nonprofit dedicated to community improvement. KPB's mission is to further conservation and beautification through community outreach. DePlasco discussed how KPB engages community members in Pinellas County to participate in projects across hundreds of miles of coastline, several local parks, and state lands among other locales. KPB's outreach encompasses education initiatives, student involvement, cleanups, events, partnerships, and community improvements. According to DePlasco, KPB has partnered with over 20,000 volunteers and has saved close to \$2,000,000 in taxpayer dollars that would otherwise be directed towards community improvement labor costs. DePlasco concluded by discussing the KPB Adoption Program in which people can contribute to the cause by adopting a mile of the Pinellas Trail and other pedestrian thoroughfares across St. Petersburg and Pinellas County at large and donating their time to clean-ups and other events. DePlasco mentioned youth involvement in this program and shared KPB contact information with the council and meeting attendees.

Clean Air Program – 11:36 AM

Savanah Battreall, Sustainability Planner for the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council, prepared a presentation on the progress of the Clean Air Tampa Bay Program and the Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CCAP). Battreall gave the history of the program, which was established through the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Climate Pollution Reduction Grant Program. The mission of CCAP is to reduce emissions, enact mitigation projects, maximize benefits, and strengthen regional capacity and coordination. Battreall described the methodology utilized in the CCAP, including the Greenhouse Gas Inventory (GHG). The GHG examined several everyday sources capable of producing greenhouse gases, including Transportation, Agriculture, Industrial Processes, and more. Of the possible sources, the biggest share of gas came from Stationary Energy (49.60%) and Transportation (44.64%), whereas the least amount of gas was produced by Agriculture (4.67%). They recommended countermeasures, such as a shift to alternative fuel or electric vehicles accompanied by the expansion of transportation services, updated infrastructure, and the creation of a master plan. TBRPC found through cost analysis that the countermeasures, though not directly comparable, have lower upfront costs than construction projects. The results show within the Transportation sector when these measures are implemented. There is a 2026-2027 Action Plan expected.

Trail Town Next Steps – 11:50 AM

Cheryl Stacks, the Transportation Manager for the City of St. Petersburg, stepped in front of the Council again to give an update on St. Petersburg's next steps as a community after their recent Trail Town designation in December of 2025. Stacks gave an overview of the St. Petersburg Greater Arts District (GAD), highlighting its vibrancy and sense of community. Since December, St. Petersburg Trail Town champions have looked towards the future of the program by giving presentations to city officials, distributing Trail Town passports to businesses in the community, and furthering partnerships with different stakeholders. Stacks discussed permit development

for trail access, which would allow businesses to create trail connections, as well as neighborhood trail connections. Stacks tied in the Trails Crossing project mentioned by John Barkett earlier in the day. She spoke about the city's efforts to carry this designation forward and improve trail quality and accessibility, as well as business support.

LUNCH – 11:55 AM

Trail Towns: Gulf Breeze Assessment – 1:30 PM

Office of Greenways and Trails' North Region Coordinator, Cassidy Haney, presented on behalf of Director Roger Jackson and Manager Madison Simmons of Gulf Breeze Parks and Recreation for consideration as a Florida Trail Town. Haney gave a timeline of Gulf Breeze's effort and recounted her visit to the town, describing the various amenities available for residents of Gulf Breeze and visitors alike to enjoy. The amenities include a dog park, a patio with a fireplace that is available for reservation four times per month but otherwise free for people to use, a dock, hiking trails, and more. While Gulf Breeze is a residential town, Haney emphasized their position along the Great Northwest Coast Connector Regional Trail Corridor and proximity to Pensacola Beach as a means of economic opportunity and revenue from tourism. The Council was supportive of designating Gulf Breeze as a Trail Town, but they also provided guidance and communicated that Gulf Breeze should seek out partnerships and chances to collaborate with the City of Pensacola. Ultimately, Gulf Breeze was designated as the FDEP's 24th Trail Town.

FDOT D7 Updates – 1:48 PM

Jensen Hackett, the FDOT Bike/Pedestrian Planning Program Manager for District 7, gave the council an update on SUN Trail. He discussed gap closures, ongoing projects, and plans. A major update involved a crucial segment of the Coast-to-Coast (C2C) Trail Corridor stretching from US 301 to the Sumter County Line on SR 50, known as Cortez Boulevard. A wide shared-use path was constructed and completed in December of 2025, closing the final C2C gap in FDOT D7. Hackett also touched on critical access points and safety improvements on the regional SUN Trail system in D7, including the soon-to-be completed Courtney Campbell Causeway Trail Overpass, the Howard Frankland Bridge Trail, Interchange connections, trailhead studies, signage, and more. The council was highly receptive to these updates and expressed approval for the multitude of projects FDOT is completing in D7.

FDOT Updates – 2:11 PM

Robin Birdsong, the Statewide Coordinator for the FDOT SUN Trail program, gave a presentation on general FDOT updates. She reminded attendees of FDOT's mission, as well as the purpose of the Shared-Use Nonmotorized (SUN) Trail program. She also discussed the purpose of the Transportation Alternatives (TA) Set-Aside program. Birdsong highlighted FDOT's collaboration efforts within the agency, with stakeholders, and with communities. She went over the various tools FDOT has developed to track progress across the SUN Trail network, as well as construction milestones, resurfacing and realignment projects, and surveying among other things. Before concluding, she also touched on the upcoming SUN Trail Legislative Report, which encompasses the period from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2026.

Public Comment – 2:28 PM

MEETING ADJOURN – 2:49 PM

Chris Rietow moved to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded by Ned Baier.