



Florida Greenways and Trails Council (FGTC) July 2026 Council Meeting Minutes

PUBLIC MEETING: July 22nd, 2026
TIME: 9:00 AM
LOCATION: Austin Cary Forest Campus, Stern Learning Center
10625 NE Waldo Road, Gainesville, FL 32609

FGTC Members in Attendance:

Robin Birdsong – Florida Department of Transportation
Mike Stephens – Governor-Appointed Trail User
Stephanie Wardein – Governor-Appointed Private Landowner
Rachel Penrod – 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
Tara McCue – East Coast Regional Planning Council
Andy Palmer – City of Winter Haven
Lisa Vickers – Senate-Appointed Trail User
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
Camila Reyes Garcia, Regional Coordinator

Other FDEP Staff in Attendance:

Rachel Earlywine, Office of General Counsel

Members of the Public and Presenters in Attendance:

Mayor Harvey Ward
David Baggaley
Bre Ximenes
Drake Arnold
Dr. Tom Hctor
Ken Bryan
Taylor Stein

Ema Olmos
Danny Rohan
Jason Lauritsen
Benjamin Rangel
Laurie Crittenden
John Crittenden
Mark Heller
Alison Stettner
Karen Klena
Scott Weeks
Jenna Lane
Tina Jou
Seth Wood

Announcements:

Council Introductions

FLORIDA GREENWAYS AND TRAILS COUNCIL BUSINESS:

Call to Order – 9:01 AM

Council Welcome – 9:03 AM

Mayor Harvey Ward addressed the Council on behalf of the City of Gainesville to welcome them and provide a framework for the city's continual commitment to recreation and to upholding the integrity of Gainesville's natural, cultural, and historical spaces and features for generations to come.

Council Introductions – 9:10

Approve Agenda – 9:15 AM

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Mike Stephens

SECOND: Council Members

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

Approve the April 2026 Meeting Summary – 9:15 AM

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Mike Stephens

SECOND: Council Members

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) Updates – 9:16 AM

Bureau Chief Samantha Browne of the FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) discussed the Trail GO grant program with a recap of funds allocated and reimbursements applied at the current stage. She then reviewed all quarterly alliance meetings, including the Trail Town Alliance meetings, the US-90 Trail Corridor Alliance meetings, the Coast-to-Coast Trail Alliance meetings, and the upcoming Citrus Ridge Trail Alliance meeting. She also discussed potential trail towns, such as Montverde, Kissimmee, Bonita Springs, Stuart, Port Salerno, and more. Browne reminded the council to share community events with OGT to put on the community calendar. There were questions about the Coast-to-Coast meeting, which were answered by OGT's Delaney Goins. Samantha went on to mention upcoming webinars, various communication projects- such as the Unpaved Trail Guidelines, the economic flyer, monthly campaigns, Greenways and Trails month, and the OGT website overhaul.

Trail Town Program Updates– 9:30 AM

Samantha Browne presented an overview of the Florida Trail Town Program and the Trail Town Alliance, highlighting how designated Trail Towns strengthen local economies, expand recreation opportunities, and build partnerships between communities and trail users. The presentation explained what defines a Trail Town, program goals, and key focus areas such as revitalizing downtowns, supporting local businesses, enhancing visitor amenities, and connecting trails to communities. Samantha Browne summarized Alliance activities—including increased statewide participation, peer-learning, and common needs identified across communities (branding, trail access, business engagement, funding support, and improved coordination). She introduced the new Florida Trail Town Guide, a roadmap that helps communities prepare for designation through strategic actions in organization, design, economic vitality, and promotion. The guide outlines tools for needs assessments, community engagement, action-planning, and continuous improvement. The presentation closed by emphasizing the Alliance's growing statewide collaboration and the resources available to help communities strengthen trail-based tourism and quality of life.

Florida Greenways and Trails System Ranking – 10:04 AM

Samantha Browne provided an overview of the revised Florida Greenways and Trails System (FGTS) evaluation criteria, emphasizing the goal of creating a transparent, consistent framework for prioritizing statewide trail projects. She reviewed the eight criteria—covering connectivity, community support, public investment, safety, strategic alignment, connections, conservation, and economic benefits—and noted that the scoring system has been updated to a simple 100-point scale. Council feedback centered on improving clarity, distinguishing current conditions from future benefits, standardizing project information, and ensuring criteria remain objective and do not favor advocacy-driven projects. Key revisions included reducing the weight of connectivity (C1), clarifying definitions, and identifying which criteria evaluate present versus future impacts. The presentation concluded with next steps to refine criteria, integrate updated data, and improve consistency in project evaluations.

Friends of San Felasco – 10:19 AM

Dave Baggaley, with the San Felasco Citizens' Support Organization (CSO), presented an overview of its role supporting San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park, a 7,000+ acre natural area in Alachua County featuring diverse habitats, 50+ archaeological sites, and 64 miles of equestrian, cycling, and hiking trails. The CSO outlined its mission to assist park management by building and maintaining a sustainable trail system while minimizing environmental impacts. Major fundraising events—including the Tour de Felasco, Gate-2-Gate, and various cycling, running, and equestrian events—provide essential financial support for trail maintenance, infrastructure improvements, and equipment. The Tour de Felasco, the largest event, draws 500 riders and relies entirely on volunteers for planning, logistics, and safety. Funds raised support vehicles, tools, materials, bridge replacements, fencing, and other infrastructure, along with gap-filling assistance for park operational needs. The presentation emphasized that the CSO's work is 100% volunteer-driven and essential for sustaining the park's extensive trail network and visitor experience.

Cross Florida Greenway Updates – 10:49 AM

Bre Ximenes provided an overview of the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, highlighting its history from the halted Cross Florida Barge Canal project to its transformation into one of Florida's largest conservation and recreation corridors. The presentation emphasized the Greenway's scale and impact, including 340+ miles of multi-use trails, 110-mile corridor, 3.4 million annual visitors, and an estimated \$415 million economic impact. Key points included the Greenway's role as a living wildlife corridor, its significance for local economies through tourism, trail-based spending, and job creation, and its value as a community asset that enhances quality of life and attracts residents and businesses. Bre underscored the importance of partnerships, volunteer engagement, public access, and collaborative stewardship in building "tomorrow's Greenway," noting that people protect what they experience.

Art on the Cross Florida Greenway – 11:30 AM

The presentation emphasizes the artist's, Drake Arnold's, significant contributions to the Cross Florida Greenway, where at least nine trail-side kiosks have been activated since 2023, each featuring custom artwork of native species. These installations blend conservation storytelling with immersive technologies such as augmented reality, creating engaging interpretive experiences for trail users. Drake highlights a personal connection to the Greenway, having biked there while growing up, and views these trail-focused artworks as a civic contribution. Public interaction with the kiosks is strong, reflected through user-submitted photos, positive feedback, and growing community interest in expanding art to additional sites. Beyond the Greenway, past conservation-aligned mural projects include large-scale wildlife installations such as the 416-foot Free the Ocklawaha mural, depicting 30+ native species to support regional river conservation efforts. Looking forward, the artist proposes several ideas relevant to trail systems statewide, including enhanced AR educational layers on existing kiosks, featuring photos, narration, or videos from biologists and park rangers; trail-based scavenger

hunts or geocaches linking multiple kiosk locations with digital rewards; expansion to larger trail infrastructure, such as underpasses or long linear trail corridors, and the pursuit of grant funding to scale public-art storytelling across greenways and trail networks.

Florida Ecological Greenway Network Updates 2026 – 11:50 AM

The 2026 Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) update highlights more than three decades of statewide conservation planning, beginning with early corridor mapping in the 1980s and evolving into a legislatively supported, data-driven network that informs Florida Forever and other land acquisition programs. The presentation outlines the role of the Technical Advisory Group in maintaining scientific rigor and details the methodology behind recent updates, including removal of newly developed areas, refinement of corridor priorities, and identification of critical bottlenecks essential to long-term ecological connectivity. The update shows notable changes from 2025 to 2026, including increases in Priority 2 and Priority 3 corridors and a reduction in Priority 4 acreage due to refined criteria and land cover revisions. Key ecological areas—such as the Santa Fe River and Payne’s Prairie to Goethe corridor—were emphasized for their biodiversity significance and connectivity value. The Center also introduced new online tools to make FEGN data more accessible, underscoring that protecting Florida’s ecological future is a time-limited opportunity requiring strong partnerships and continued investment.

BREAK – 12:16 PM

The Cracker Country Trail – 12:24 PM

Ken Bryan Sr. Strategist for External Relations, Rails to Trails Conservancy, presented an overview of the “Hidden Gem in Florida’s Heartland” concept focused on the SR 70 corridor and its potential as a significant statewide trail connection. The presentation highlighted how the Cracker Country Trail, LOST Trail, Heartland Trail Planning Corridor, Gulf Coast Trail, and East Coast Greenway intersect to form a regional network. Findings emphasized the 97.25 miles of planned or existing improvements funded through SIS, connecting multiple priority trail and paddling corridors and contributing to a broader 763-mile system. Local ranchers support trail development and see value in preserving and sharing the area’s history. Challenges noted include the current lack of amenities, the need for deeper community involvement, and opportunities to leverage OGT’s Trail Town Program, promote segments on mapping platforms, plan enhancements, and prioritize last-mile connections. Potential Trail Town candidates include Arcadia, Lake Placid, and Okeechobee. The presentation concluded with visual examples of the corridor and discussion of future engagement and planning needs.

Austin Cary Memorial Forest – 12:50 PM

Professor Taylor Stein provided an overview of the Austin Cary Forest, a 2,606-acre University of Florida property managed for teaching, research, outreach, and sustainable forest stewardship. The forest hosts 30 courses, supports 26 active research projects, and welcomes over 10,000 visitors annually through events, demonstrations, and stakeholder partnerships.

Management activities include prescribed fire, invasive species control, and maintaining diverse forest structure. Operations are primarily self-funded through timber sales, facility rentals, and leases. The presentation also highlighted the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences—its history, program areas, faculty, and student body—and showcased applied research and visitor studies related to recreation, ecotourism, and conservation across Florida. Key themes included recreation management, visitor motivations, conservation planning, and strategies for balancing recreation access with resource protection.

Florida National Scenic Trail Coalition Updates – 1:16 PM

Shawn Thomas of the United States Forest Service presented updates on the Florida National Scenic Trail Coalition. The Florida National Scenic Trail (FNST) is one of only a few long-distance trails situated entirely within one state. The trail is 1,559.6 miles long, with 400 miles of trail gaps remaining. Most of the trail runs through land belonging to the state, county, or private landowners. The FNST Coalition is partnered with the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation and the Trust for Public Lands to acquire and preserve the land that the Trail runs through. Thomas also discussed Gateway Communities, which are towns along the FNST that offer amenities, shelter, and business to users of the trail. They have been isolated as premiere trail-friendly towns, similar to the FDEP Trail Town program. Taylor Stein with UF's IFAS program is conducting research for the FNST about trail usership. Thomas shared that the FNST Coalition is focused on improving user access, with projects spanning the FNST. One such project is the Spring Creek Bridge, which is over 900 feet long, and required 6 years of planning and over 2,400 volunteer hours to build. Another project was the Yellow River gap closure, which will be a large suspension bridge meant to close a critical trail segment and mitigate dangerous traffic crossings among hikers of the FNST.

LUNCH – 1:32 PM

Alachua Conservation Trust: EcoRover Program – 2:35 PM

The Alachua Conservation Trust (ACT) presented its *Accessible Trail Program*, outlining efforts to expand inclusive outdoor access across its preserves. ACT manages 18 public preserves, 8,500 acres, and 28 miles of trails, and described its transition toward accessibility beginning with required accessible trail commitments at Serenola Forest Preserve and subsequent organization-wide improvements such as lowering signage, replacing picnic tables with ADA-compliant models, and expanding detailed trail information online. ACT built a comprehensive Accessibility Webpage featuring trail descriptions, slope and obstacle details, photos, and 4K trail videos to help visitors plan their experiences. The presentation highlighted the launch of ACT's EcoRover Program, funded in part by a \$15,000 Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation grant, which provides tracked all-terrain wheelchairs enabling access to more than 20 miles of trails. Infrastructure upgrades, including replacement of narrow boardwalks and bridges, were completed with support from AmeriCorps teams. ACT reported strong engagement since launch—70 riders, 187 people impacted, across 19 sites—and shared personal stories reflecting profound improvements in access to nature. The program has helped ACT build new partnerships with schools, disability organizations, farms, and state parks. ACT

also noted challenges, including staff capacity, growing external requests, and transport logistics for the tracked chairs.

Trail Coordination Committee Updates – 2:57 PM

The presentation by Jason Lauritsen provided an overview of current planning and analysis efforts related to the Florida Wildlife Corridor and associated trail networks. Key topics included corridor and trail gap assessments, colocation opportunities, sensitivity analyses (habitat, slope, wetlands, uplands), and identification of underserved geographies and user groups. Updates were noted on forthcoming species model revisions from FFWCC and FNAI. Several maps illustrated preliminary service areas for SUN Trail and the Florida National Scenic Trail (FNST) in multiple regions, highlighting walking, cycling, and driving access ranges. Potential Disney-funded trailhead locations are under consideration across the state. The presentation also included information on Wildlife Corridor Access Improvement Grants and NOFO timelines: applications open July 1, due September 30; scoring begins in October with award notifications in November; project start date is December 1, 2026, with completion by December 31, 2027. The Council discussed the possibility of conflicts between previously identified priority trail corridors and the conservation easements being purchased for the Florida Wildlife Corridor. The Council was assured that the trail collaboration team would look into this matter, as easements do not allow for public access.

FDOT SUN Trail Network 2026 Legislative Report – 3:30 PM

Robin Birdsong, with FDOT, presented an overview of the first SUN Trail Network Legislative Report, required under SB 106 (2023), summarizing statewide nonmotorized trail mileage, expenditures, and operational performance. As of February 13, 2026, the SUN Trail Network includes 1,708 complete miles and 3,185 planned miles, with detailed breakdowns of trail segments adjacent to roadways and within or between the Florida Wildlife Corridor. The report also documents more than \$545 million programmed across 2024–2026 for trail planning, design, right-of-way, and construction. Operational measures show 447 monitored trail segments, with 65% pedestrians, 31% bicyclists, and 4% other users, reinforced through statewide trail-user surveys capturing frequency, length of visit, distance traveled, and spending habits. FDOT highlighted upcoming work to expand trail counters, increase survey reach, integrate data systems, and develop interactive dashboards ahead of the next report due June 30, 2029. The presentation closed with emphasis on strong community partnerships essential for building, operating, and sustaining trail segments across the statewide SUN Trail Network.

Public Comment – 4:05 PM

There were no public comments at this time.

MEETING ADJOURN – 4:11 PM

Mike Stephens moved to adjourn the meeting.