



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

PUBLIC MEETING: July 23rd, 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
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:

Bre Ximenes
Taylor Stein
Bryan Eastman
Benjamin Rangel
Jamie Stephens
Karla Rodrigues
Scott Wright
Seth Wood
Erica Hernandez
Alison Moss

Jordan Marlowe
Jessica Hurov

Announcements:

Council Introductions

FLORIDA GREENWAYS AND TRAILS COUNCIL BUSINESS:

Call to Order – 9:10 AM

Council Introductions – 9:11

Approve Agenda – 9:12 AM

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Mike Stephens

SECOND: Council Members

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

High Springs to Newberry Rail-to-Trail – 9:13 AM

The Trust for Public Land provided an update on the Newberry–High Springs Rail Corridor project, highlighting its significance as a future multi-use trail connecting Newberry to High Springs and the Santa Fe River. TPL has extensive experience nationally, with over 3,100 trail miles built or conserved and nearly 40 rail corridor acquisitions completed. In Florida, their projects have created access to more than 185,000 acres of public land. The corridor offers strong community and regional value: over 60% lies within High Springs city limits, and more than 27,000 residents live within a 10-minute bike ride of the route. The Santa Fe River Basin and its springs attract about 1 million visitors annually, underscoring the corridor’s potential to enhance recreation, tourism, and local economic activity. A trail would provide a meaningful platform to interpret the area’s natural and cultural history, strengthening connections among trails, nature, and community identity. Community investment opportunities include supporting local businesses, increasing property values, and improving access within the High Springs CRA. The corridor is “shovel-ready”: rail-banked, tracks removed, under contract by TPL, and supported by local governments and businesses. A funding strategy includes state, local, and philanthropic contributions. The presentation concluded by noting that it has been some time since the state completed a rail-trail project, positioning this corridor as a timely and impactful opportunity.

Gainesville: A Trail Town– 9:33 AM

The City of Gainesville presented an update on its Trail Town designation and ongoing trail and cycling infrastructure initiatives, emphasizing Depot Park as the community’s central hub for

active transportation. Depot Park—formerly an industrial rail yard—has become Gainesville’s most visited public space and a key junction where the Gainesville–Hawthorne State Trail, Depot Avenue Trail, and Downtown Connector converge. The presentation highlighted Gainesville’s extensive off-street and on-street bicycle network, including shared-use paths, wide sidewalks, bike lanes, buffered and protected facilities, and multimodal connectors. Recent and notable additions include the NE 31st Avenue Trail, providing a new paved connection between NE 15th Street and NE Waldo Road. Ridership counts across the network help inform planning and distinguish recreation use from transportation demand. Amenities supporting trail users include expanded wayfinding signage and numerous bicycle repair stations—many operated by UF. Looking ahead, Gainesville is advancing multiple trail projects in conceptual and engineering phases, including the SE 8th Avenue Trail, Sweetwater Trails, and the Sweetwater Greenway. These projects aim to improve access to parks, schools, neighborhoods, commercial areas, transit, and nature, while strengthening eastside and citywide connectivity.

Recreational Improvements - Newberry – 9:59 AM

City Manager of Newberry, Jordan Marlowe, introduced the City of Newberry with a presentation primarily focusing on recent recreational improvements. Marlowe discussed current and planned facilities within Newberry. He underscored that tourism, especially from youth competitive sports and the surge that occurs during the holiday season, is a particularly large economic aspect. Plans for the city include more recreational facilities and the acquisition of the old depot, which they hope to revitalize and use for local business operations. Newberry is a town that is focused on preserving the past while adapting for the future.

Alachua County Tourism Initiatives – 10:15 AM

Jessica Hurov from Visit Alachua spoke at length about the economic profile of tourism in Alachua County. Visitors to the University of Florida make up a large portion of Alachua County’s non-residents; however, Hurov emphasized that UF is far from the only driver- as recreational and health tourism also contributed a significant amount of money to the tourist economy. These metrics include overnight stays on non-UF event days, consumer spending, and taxes. In Alachua County, 3,920 hotel rooms are occupied on any given night for an annual reported total of 1.4M total stays, with about \$531 million spent during the visit. Regional visitors made up 17% of consumer spending, whereas outside visitors made up 25%. Hurov also mentioned that Alachua sees a high number of recreation-oriented visitation, especially during the summer months. As a result, Visit Alachua has focused on recreation in their summer advertisement campaigns.

Alachua County Bicycle/Pedestrian Master Plan – 10:33 AM

The presentation outlined progress on the Alachua Countywide Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan, developed to make walking and biking safer, more comfortable, and more convenient for people of all ages and abilities. The project team is currently in the Network & Project Development phase, following extensive data collection on demographics, land use, safety,

roadway characteristics, and existing facilities. Key principles guiding network development include connectivity, route directness, user comfort, density within Gainesville and the urban cluster, and community input. The draft network identifies gaps, preferred facility types (including shared-use paths, buffered bike lanes, separated lanes, and bike boulevards), and refinements informed by public engagement. Project prioritization focuses on safety, active transportation access, network connectivity, disadvantaged communities, multimodal integration, and feasibility considerations such as ROW impacts, utilities, and drainage. The plan features prioritized bike projects, long-distance connectors, Rails-to-Trails opportunities, and draft prioritized crossings based on stress levels and project scores. Next steps include finalizing the master plan and presenting it to the Gainesville & Alachua County Transportation Planning Organization and other boards in September 2026, with continued emphasis on regional connectivity and improved walking/biking conditions across the county.

Council Announcements – 11:17 AM

Shawn Thomas updated the council on more FNST segment progress, including a ribbon cutting in the Florida Keys. Stephanie Wardein reminded the Council that the Bonita to Estero Rail Trail referendum is to go before voters on the 18th of August. She also discussed tourism numbers recovering after Hurricane Ian, and mentioned the increasingly common incidents between cyclists, pedestrians, and motor traffic. Robin Birdsong with FDOT mentioned the end of the fiscal year, and that the dashboards have been updated. There are funding allocations set through 2032. She also mentioned that there are three new SUN Trail segments, and statewide funding for 115.5 miles. Tara McCue of ECRPC announced the ECRPC photo contest, and the Regional Diamond Award. She also updated the council on the Economic Impact Study. Andy Palmer of Winter Haven discussed the upcoming Amendment 3 vote, which would dispose of property taxes for homeowners in Florida. Samantha Browne of the Office of Greenways and Trails reminded the council that comments on her Trail Town Guide are due on August 31st.

Public Comment – 11:30 PM

There were no public comments at this time.

MEETING ADJOURN – 11:33 AM

Mike Stephens moved to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded by Andy Palmer and Stephanie Wardein.