

Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park

Advisory Group Staff Report

The Advisory Group meeting to review the proposed land management plan amendment for Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park was held at the Gilchrist Woman's Club in Trenton, Florida on Wednesday, October 23, 2018, from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Mr. Michael Roth, Ms. Jenny Welch, Mr. Jason O'Donoghue, Mr. Jim Tatum, Ms. Merillee Malwitz-Jipson, Mr. Brett Crawford, Mr. Charles Houder, Mr. Mitch Sapp, Mr. Thomas Weller, and Mr. Todd Gray were not in attendance. Mr. Matthew Barker represented Mr. Matthew Pollock, Mr. Edwin McCook represented Mr. William McKinstry. All other appointed Advisory Group members were present. Attending staff were Mr. Clif Maxwell, Mr. Gabby Paxton, Mr. Brooke Doran, Mr. Rick Owen, Mr. Dan Pearson, Ms. Yasmine Armaghani, and Ms. Sine Murray.

Ms. Murray began the meeting by explaining the purpose of the Advisory Group and reviewing the meeting agenda. She provided a brief overview of the draft unit management plan. She then asked each member of the advisory group to express his or her comments on the plans.

During the two-week public comment period following the advisory group meeting, the Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) received additional comment from members of the public about the proposed land management plan amendment for Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park. These comments expressed support for the proposed facility improvements such as the campground and new park drive.

Summary of Advisory Group Comments

Matthew Barker (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission)

Mr. Barker expressed support for the protection and restoration of the park's remnant sandhill habitat, a critically imperiled natural community. Mr. Barker stated that the presence of existing native groundcover within the sandhill provides desirable fuels for burning and can "jump start" the habitat restoration. He expressed that sandhills are also important for aquifer recharge. He noted that the park's sandhill already provides habitat for critically imperiled species such as gopher tortoise and increasingly rare species like the eastern diamondback rattlesnake. Mr. Barker was opposed to the proposed alignment of the new park drive. Mr. Barker stated that the proposed alignment would fragment the remaining sandhill habitat and be detrimental to the proposed sandhill restoration. He recommended that the existing entrance road should be utilized before expanding into natural areas as the financial and environmental costs are too high. He stated that continuous habitat is more efficient for burning and a new road alignment will exacerbate edge effects such as littering, noise, and wildlife mortality and harassment. Mr. Barker stated that paving the existing drive could provide dust and noise reduction, save the taxpayers money, and protect habitat. Mr. Barker was not concerned with the proposed campground location as it is an area of fire suppressed sandhill and attached to the core day use areas. He was also not opposed to construction of the proposed boardwalk along the spring as this is within

Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park

Advisory Group Staff Report

an existing disturbed area and would help protect the spring-run and its and submerged aquatic vegetation.

Doug Longshore (Florida Forest Service)

Mr. Longshore wished to commend the DRP for the proposed visitor use management approach outlined in the plan. He speculated that this could set an example for other land management agencies who need to address visitor use impacts to sensitive resources like springs. Mr. Longshore asked for clarification on monitoring procedures, as this was the primary aspect of the proposed visitor use management approach. Rick Owen and Dan Pearson from DRP responded with clarification on monitoring for submerged aquatic vegetation and turbidity and how the monitoring will take place at the park. They explained that this will include training for the park staff to recognize what to look for daily. Sine Murray from DRP described the iterative nature of the new visitor use management approach. Ms. Murray indicated that the DRP will document resource conditions, the monitoring efforts, and the relationship between these efforts and recreation impacts and adjust the strategy as needed. Ms. Murray stated that DRP will engage with stakeholders regarding the implementation of the visitor use management strategy and clearly communicate results, outcomes, and any proposed modifications as necessary.

Robert Knight (Florida Springs Institute)

Mr. Knight offered compliments and support to the plan to limit recreation activity within certain springs. He stated that this park provides an excellent opportunity to study springs and their recovery and that the recreational changes proposed for Gilchrist Blue Springs could provide valuable information to inform management actions at other spring state parks. Mr. Knight offered to help support the proposed monitoring with data gathered by his organization. He stated that replacing the boardwalk would assist the monitoring effort, as docents or volunteers could walk the boardwalk and provide information and outreach to visitors. Mr. Knight discussed the potential impacts from various recreational activities and different causes of natural turbidity. He stated that springs impacts are the result of a wide variety of factors. He supports the closure of some springs to swimming, but park plans should include an observation area for Naked Spring. He also supports removing tubing from the spring run as Ichetucknee Springs State Park provides a similar tubing experience. Mr. Knight questioned how the new visitor use management strategy will work operationally but understood that this was a pilot project and that adjustments to the strategy may need to occur. Mr. Knight thought it is was a good idea to have some areas in the spring bowl closed off to encourage establishment of submerged vegetation as there is probably seed bank present in the existing sediment. Mr. Knight suggested that removing some of the excess sand present in the main spring bowl might be an acceptable strategy to address ongoing sedimentation issues. Mr. Knight stated that nitrate levels are still rising around the springshed as the result of agricultural land uses. He commented that the state should be preventing nitrate pollution and that the water management district should limit consumptive use permits. He mentioned that there is data that

Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park

Advisory Group Staff Report

shows a reduction in flows, at Gilchrist Blue Spring. He stated that the Santa Fe River is running darker because of the reduced flows and that the springs are flowing well right now but will drop again. He requested that the Florida Park Service work with the leadership of DEP to address these ongoing challenges. He expressed thanks to the staff for the plan and that the plan is exciting.

Peter Butt (Local Private Property Owner)

Mr. Butt thought that the advisory group member from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) had brought up some good points about the proposed alignment for the new park drive. He discussed work that he had completed for Alachua County concerning submerged aquatic vegetation, that he could provide that data and that his work had established transects within Gilchrist Blue spring and spring run that can be replicated. He stated that there is more turbidity in areas with more people and more foot traffic. He encouraged the use of some type of attractive stakes, or string, to discourage visitors from walking in sensitive areas within the spring bowl and along the spring run. He stated that these mucky areas are not that tempting to people and roping them off might encourage the vegetation to return and to protect any supplemental plantings. He also thought that excluding visitors from these areas could reduce the turbidity as tubers tend to drift into to these muddy areas, and inadvertently drift into the muck and then cause turbidity when they get out of the tubes. He believes that most of the damage is happening when people are walking back up the spring run. Mr. Butt suggested that replacing the boardwalk would establish a terrestrial trail so people could access the Santa Fe River without having to walk back up the spring run to return to the day use area. He recognized that this would be expensive, but construction of the boardwalk could create conditions that might make tubing and snorkeling in the spring run possible in the future.

Georgia Schemitz (Audubon Florida, Four Rivers Chapter)

Ms. Schemitz stated that the purpose of Audubon is to advocate for ecological sound wildlife habitat and therefore she strongly supported the comments from FWC about the proposed road alignment. She did not want "to wreck the sandhill habitat" with a new road and that as a taxpayer she also felt the road would be too expensive. Ms. Schemitz offered support for establishing recreational access to the Santa Fe River by reestablishing the boardwalk. She suggested that we make efforts to allow access to the river so that visitors can understand the dynamics of the natural resources of the park. She stated that public education and outreach would be very important to implementation of the proposed visitor use management strategy. She stated that DRP needs to educate the public and enlist their cooperation or they are just going to be "annoyed and mad."

Fay Baird (Suwannee River Water Management District)

Ms. Baird indicated that Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) will compile their agency comments and submit in writing. Ms. Baird commented on the recently installed SRWMD monitoring station within Gilchrist Blue spring run and

Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park

Advisory Group Staff Report

that data could be collected every 2 hours or on any interval requested. Ms. Baird suggested that no management changes be implemented for at least a year until you have more data and a better understanding of the impacts, particularly the reasons for fluctuations in turbidity. Rick Owen and Dan Pearson from DRP responded that the plan does not point to one potential issue but rather that we will monitor a range of potential recreational impacts. Mr. Pearson also stated that due to the sensitive nature of this ecosystem, DRP felt it prudent to make some preemptive decisions in the absence of absolute data. Mr. Pearson pointed out as an example that foot traffic is at least one source of impact and that it is prudent to remove the foot traffic as quickly as possible to give the SAV a better chance to reestablish.

The Honorable Nancy Lavin (City Commissioner, City of High Springs)

Commissioner Lavin stated that the springs and Santa Fe River are very economically important to the area. She stated that many businesses rely on the visitors that come to experience the area's natural resources and that people come from all over the world because of the springs and the river. She also had a question about the impacts of visitors coming up the spring run and that she has witnessed visitors out of their boats in the spring run. She suggested that you could have a camera installed in this area to help rangers monitor visitor behavior. She mentioned that the City of High Springs has benefitted greatly from grant money provided by DEP for springs protection and that the City has supported upgrades to a lot of septic systems and is putting in a second sewage treatment plant. She stated that she had no scientific background but learned so much through the planning process for Gilchrist Blue Springs and by visiting the state parks and learning what the state parks do to educate visitors. She appreciated the state purchasing this property and making this investment in the area.

Donna Creamer (Gilchrist County Visitors and Convention Bureau)

Ms. Creamer praised the state parks and mentioned that DRP does a great job. She expressed concerns that the limited staff at the park may not be able to effectively monitor the resources as described in the visitor use management strategy. She pointed to other reasons for poor water clarity, i.e. storms, and that turbidity is not only caused by visitors. She inquired if we would be limiting the types of floats people could use within the spring and if it would affect families with small children. Clif Maxwell responded that DRP has limited the types of floats that can be used at other springs and that these limitations do not adversely impact families. Ms. Creamer agreed that the proposed alignment of the new park drive seemed unnecessary. She stated that the road has been around for at least 30 years and that DRP could save the money for the proposed road construction for the other projects identified in the draft plan like replacing the boardwalk. Ms. Creamer stated that Gilchrist County is very involved with issues that concern the Santa Fe River and actively promotes the county as the "springs capital of the world." She stated that protecting the springs is important but there is a need to invite visitors to the area to "love it for what it is and preserve it." She encouraged cooperation at

Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park

Advisory Group Staff Report

all levels of government to work together to maintain the springs but also encourage visitors.

Kim Davis (Local Private Property Owner and former owner of Gilchrist Blue Springs)

Ms. Davis questioned how the proposed visitor use management strategy will work with limited park staff, people entering the park from the river and the parking area reaching capacity so early on busy days. She asked if there was any plan to increase the number of rangers at the park. Clif Maxwell stated that DRP could use volunteers, and that reestablishing the boardwalk would also help. He also stated that after a park is acquired, DRP works to establish additional funding, through the annual agency budget process. Ms. Davis also inquired about the length of time needed for plants to reestablish in the spring and discussed her past experiences managing the property. She stated that she witnessed river flooding have a negative effect on the submerged vegetation and when there was a long flood it was much worse. She agreed that erosion and sedimentation have been issues in the past. She mentioned that she had considered pumping the excess sand out of the spring bowl and talked about why the wooden retaining wall was installed. She stated that at times runoff on the slopes around the spring bowl was measured at over 40 mph and that the terracing was installed to try to slow down the erosion. Ms. Davis stated that the long-term threats to the spring are increasing nitrate pollution and over pumping of the aquifer due to the expansion of agriculture fields and water wells in the area. She stated that the expanding agriculture use effects everything. She supported bringing back the boardwalk along the spring run and asked if motorboats were allowed along the spring run. Mr. Maxwell responded that DRP worked with FWC and that only boats with electric motors are allowed and that the outboard must be out of the water. Ms. Davis expressed her appreciation to DRP for making Gilchrist Blue Springs part of the state park system and she was very pleased by the recent name change.

Gabby Paxton (Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park)

Mr. Paxton thanked everyone for attending the meeting and participating in the planning process. He stated that everyone at the meeting had made their life's work about conserving this state in one way or another and he said that the Florida Park Service was going to make it the best state park it can.

Summary of Written Comments from Advisory Group Members

Jason O'Donoghue (Division of Historical Resources)

Mr. O'Donoghue was not able to attend the advisory group meeting but did submit written comments (see attached).

Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park

Advisory Group Staff Report

Staff Recommendations

The staff recommends approval of the proposed management plan Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park as presented, with the following modifications:

- Language will be added to the plan to consider the use of the existing entrance road footprint for the proposed alignment of the new park drive. Plan language will be reviewed and strengthened as necessary to direct that the design of new park entrance drive minimize impacts to the restoration and long-term management and protection of the park's sandhill community.
- Language will be added to the conceptual land use plan to install protective fencing and overlooks or other protective measures at the park's springs that are closed to recreational activity.
- Language discussing the roping and closing sections of the spring run and spring bowl will be added to clarify that this activity is taking place for vegetation reestablishment.

Notes on Composition of the Advisory Group

Florida Statutes Chapter 259.032 Paragraph 10(b) establishes a requirement that all state land management plans for properties greater than 160 acres will be reviewed by an advisory group:

"Individual management plans required by s. 253.034(5), for parcels over 160 acres, shall be developed with input from an advisory group. Members of this advisory group shall include, at a minimum, representatives of the lead land managing agency, co-managing entities, local private property owners, the appropriate soil and water conservation district, a local conservation organization, and a local elected official."

Advisory groups that are composed in compliance with these requirements complete the review of State park management plans. Additional members may be appointed to the groups, such as a representative of the park's Citizen Support Organization (if one exists), representatives of the recreational activities that exist in or are planned for the park, or representatives of any agency with an ownership interest in the property. Special issues or conditions that require a broader representation for adequate review of the management plan may require the appointment of additional members. The Division's intent in making these appointments is to create a group that represents a balanced cross-section of the park's stakeholders. Decisions on appointments are made on a case-by-case basis by Division of Recreation and Parks staff.
