



Florida Greenways and Trails Council (FGTC) October 2025 Council Meeting Minutes



PUBLIC MEETING: October 08, 2025
TIME: 9:00 am
LOCATION: Jupiter Community Center
200 Military Trail, Jupiter, FL 33458

FGTC Members in Attendance:

Paul "PJ" Marinelli – Governor-appointed Greenway User, Florida Wildlife Corridor
Robin Birdsong – Florida Department of Transportation
Robert Steele – Water Management District, Northwest Florida
Vincent "Chip" Birdsong – Florida Department of State
Stephanie Wardein – Governor-appointed Private Landowner
Tom Lanham – Regional Planning Council, Treasure Coast¹
Jim Couillard – Local Government, Marion County Parks & Recreation
Michael "Mike" Stephens (Chair) – Governor-appointed Trail User
Scott Stryker – Governor-appointed Greenway User
Samantha Adams-- Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission²
Tim Giesecke—Division of Recreation & Parks-Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Tim Baylie—Volusia County³

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

Sam Browne, Bureau Chief
Britney Mulholland, Assistant Chief
John Groves, Regional Coordinator
Cassidy Haney, Regional Coordinator

Other FDEP Staff in Attendance:

Sean Happel, Gubernatorial Fellow
Melanie Orozco, Land and Recreation Grants

Members of the Public and Presenters in Attendance:

Shereen Yee Fong— Community Planning Coordinator, FDOT District 6
Ned Baier--Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation
Patty Huff-Everglades City Trail Town Committee
Karlos Bernart— Singletrack Samurai
Marion Knowles— South Florida RPC
Brian Ruscher-- Deputy Director of Multimodal, Palm Beach TPA

1. Delegate for Chris Rietow
2. Delegate for Rachel Penrod
3. Delegate for Dale Allen

Kim DeLaney- Director of Strategic Development and Policy, Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council

Deb Drum—Palm Beach County Environmental Resources

Stephanie Thoburn—Town of Jupiter

Mayor Jim Kuretski—Town of Jupiter

Tina Jon—City of Coral Springs

Michelle Arola Brown—Naples Pathways

Deb Orton—Friends of BERT

Bonita Schwan -- City Councilor, Marco Island

Kevin Dohm -- Bike/Ped Advisory Committee, Marco Island

Council Welcome – Mayor Jim Kuretski

Announcements: Comment Cards, Sign In

- Council group photo and social activities planned at Jonathan Dickinson State Park.
- Dinner scheduled at the Square Grouper following the meeting.
- Facility information and park activities provided for attendees.

Council Introductions

FLORIDA GREENWAYS AND TRAILS COUNCIL BUSINESS:

Call to Order

Approve Agenda

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Robin Birdsong

SECOND: Jim Couillard

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

Approve the July 2025 Meeting Summary.

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Scott Stryker

SECOND: Paul “PJ” Marinelli

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) Updates

At the recent planning session, a proposal was introduced to rename the Collier to Polk Trail as the Florida Heartland Trail, reflecting a more regional identity. This started a discussion about the potential consolidation of the existing Heartland Trail and the Collier-to-Polk Trail into a single, unified branded system. The idea aims to increase recognition, streamline marketing efforts, and promote a stronger sense of connectivity across the region. OGT agreed to revisit

the naming and branding strategy at the upcoming (current) Heartland Trail Regional Alliance Meeting, where further input and consensus will be sought to guide the final decision.

The Florida Divide: Navigating the Heart of Florida's Greenways and Wildlands

Karlos Bernart shared the story behind the creation of the Florida Divide, a 2,800-mile off-road bikepacking route that spans the length of Florida. Originally developed as a solution while raising his child, the project evolved into a full-time effort fueled by his passion for cycling, conservation, and exploration. The route connects a network of existing trails, forests, and green spaces—from the Alabama border to Key West—highlighting the Florida Wildlife Corridor and offering a safe, scenic alternative for long-distance cyclists. Entirely funded through events and tours, the Florida Divide has attracted riders from around the world and continues to grow as a unique way to experience Florida's natural beauty.

SUN Trail Update

The presentation was delivered by a representative from FDOT District 6 and focused on trail development efforts in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties. Out of the 720 miles originally planned, 240 miles have been constructed to date. Key projects highlighted included the Biscayne–Everglades Greenway and The Underline Trail, the latter of which has generated an impressive \$19.3 million in user spending. The presenter also acknowledged the significant challenges faced in constructing trails in the Florida Keys, primarily due to high costs.

Miami Dade SUNTrail Economic Study

The South Florida Regional Planning Council presented findings on the economic and health impacts of regional trail projects. Their analysis revealed a 14% increase in property values within a quarter mile of the Atlantic Greenway, contributing to an estimated \$39.5 million in property tax revenue per mile. The Underline Trail also demonstrated significant reach, generating 960 trips from as far as Jupiter and beyond. In terms of health and economic benefits, the data showed that an 80% increase in walking translated to a \$700 million benefit, while a 10% rise in cycling yielded \$740 million. Even a modest 1% increase in walking among previously inactive users resulted in \$1 million in savings. The benefit-cost ratios further underscored the value of these investments, with the Atlantic Greenway scoring 2.4 and the South Bay Trail 1.9.

Frenchman's Forest Natural Area Designation

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Robin Birdsong

SECOND: Jim Couillard

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: APPROVED

BREAK

Recreational Trails Program (RTP) Update

There are currently 38 active trail projects underway across the state, although progress has stalled because of delays stemming from hurricanes and the government shutdown. Looking ahead, the next funding cycle will open in 2026, offering new opportunities for project proposals and development. To support applicants, a webinar is scheduled for January that will cover the application process in detail, including guidance on meeting project diversity requirements.

Paved Trail Best Practices Discussion

The presentation introduced a comprehensive trail design manual that places strong emphasis on accessibility, safety, and enhancing the overall user experience. Key topics addressed in the manual included effective signage, appropriate lighting, safe crossings, incorporation of public art, and integration with nearby Trail Towns. A central theme throughout the presentation was the importance of providing consistent information to users and providing clearly differentiated bike lanes to improve navigation and safety for all trail users.

Palm Beach Metropolitan Planning Organization Update

The Palm Beach Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) presented an overview of urban redevelopment and active transportation initiatives currently underway in the region. Key projects include improvements along Lake Worth Road, which feature lane narrowing and the addition of bike lanes, the development of the Clear Lake Trail, and the creation of the Emerald Necklace, a connected network of green spaces and trails. The presentation also addressed efforts to enhance community engagement and public safety, alongside updates on an ongoing autonomous vehicle pilot program in West Palm Beach aimed at exploring innovative mobility solutions.

LUNCH

Trail Towns – Marco Island Assessment

The presentation highlighted Marco Island's successful application to become a designated Florida Trail Town, emphasizing its strategic location near the Florida Heartland Regional Trail and future plans to connect with US-41. The city undertook a self-assessment in January followed by a site visit in March, during which local representatives met with evaluators and showcased trails and attractions. While Marco Island does not currently host a physical segment of the Sun Trail, it lies within the FGTS corridor and supports non-motorized transportation through its Public Works program, which maintains bike lanes, shared-use paths, and multi-use trails. The island offers a range of amenities including bike racks, water fountains, restrooms, and educational signage at nature preserves. It also serves as a passage for the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail, with access points at Tigertail Beach, Goodland Boat Park, and Paxanthus Park. Community engagement is strong, demonstrated by bike rental services, route maps, and popular events such as the weekly Farmers Market at Veterans Community Park and the annual Tour de Marco cycling event. The Trail Town Designation was officially endorsed and celebrated, with a focus on fostering future collaborations among Florida's Trail Towns.

Florida Trail Town Economic Impact Analysis

Kim Delaney of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council presented a statewide study examining five key trail segments: Capital Cascades, East Central Florida Rail Trail, Pinellas Trail in Dunedin, Archer Braid in Gainesville, and the Biscayne-Everglades Trail. The findings revealed that these trails collectively generate \$30 million in annual GDP and contribute \$127 million in property value gains across Florida. The Pinellas Trail in Dunedin alone accounts for \$20 million in GDP and \$61 million in property value growth each year. The economic impact analysis incorporated user expenditures from local residents, day-trippers, and overnight visitors. To support accurate measurement and future planning, the study emphasized the importance of data collection through trail counters to establish reliable baseline metrics.

Florida Wildlife Corridor – Conservation Easements

The Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation led a discussion focused on the balance between expanding public access and respecting landowner rights when developing trails on conservation easements. The presentation underscored the importance of providing liability protections for private landowners who permit public access, aiming to reduce legal concerns and encourage participation. It also cautioned against making public access a mandatory condition for easement funding, noting that these requirements could discourage landowners from engaging in conservation efforts. Instead, the Foundation advocated for educational outreach and the use of flexible, voluntary incentives over rigid mandates. A proposal was introduced to offer financial incentives or enhanced compensation to landowners who choose to provide access. Finally, the discussion emphasized the need to integrate wildlife corridors and priority trail networks into broader state planning initiatives to ensure ecological connectivity and recreational opportunities.

Public Comment

Patty Huff thanked the group for Marco Island's recent designation as a Florida Trail Town and shared her excitement for the upcoming Trail Town Alliance meeting. The discussion included ideas for expanding the Trail Town program deeper into South Florida, aiming to bring more communities into the network. She also shared personal cycling experiences from Marco Island to Everglades City, highlighting the scenic journey and voicing optimism about future improvements in trail connectivity throughout the region.

MEETING ADJOURN



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3. Delegate for Dale Allen

Michelle Arola Brown—Naples Pathways

Deb Orton—Friends of BERT

Jenna Lane—Planning Manager, City of Coral Springs

John Maehl—Environmental Resource Administrator, Martin County Public Works

Patrice Gillespie Smith—President & COO, Friends of the Underline

Dennis Markatos-Soriano—Executive Director, East Coast Greenways

Sowande Johnson—Assistant City Manager, City of Parkland

Jackie Wehmeyer—Sr. Director of Strategy & Intergov. Affairs, City of Parkland

Council Welcome – Mayor Jim Kuretski

Announcements: Comment Cards, Sign In

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Coral Springs Trails – Everglades Memorial Loop

The project encompasses multiple segments funded by local, state, and federal sources, with a total investment of \$15 million to date. Features include a 30-foot viewing tower, an Everglades lookout, connections to existing sidewalks and trails, and a public-facing story map for tracking progress. While a target completion year of 2031 has been discussed, securing funding for a critical bridge segment remains the primary challenge. Efforts are underway to coordinate access with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for levee use, as well as with local schools regarding property access. It was also clarified that priority trail status does not require paving, and distinctions have been made between existing trails and future opportunity trails.

Jupiter Riverwalk Update

The project is expected to generate an economic benefit, with an estimated increase of \$515 million in taxable value and \$3.38 million in annual Tax Increment Financing (TIF) revenue. The approach is rooted in a public-private partnership model, supported by Land Development Regulations (LDRs) that ensure continued public access. Plans for future expansion are ongoing, reinforcing commitment to long-term community and economic development.

Palm Beach County Environmental Resource Management (ERM) Update

The project spans 32,000 acres and attracts approximately 550,000 visitors annually. It includes ten designated Florida Greenways and Trails System (FGTS) designated sites, such as North Jupiter Flatwoods and Frenchman's Forest. With over \$500 million invested in land acquisition, ongoing efforts are focused on expanding trail connections and improving public access throughout the area.

Martin County Ecosystem Restoration and Management Division Update

The initiative focuses on ecological restoration and providing smaller-scale recreational access along the Loxahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers, as well as Lake Okeechobee. Eco-tourism efforts include enhancing trail connectivity to downtown Stuart and Port Salerno, improving paddling access, and upgrading signage and wayfinding. A partnership with AllTrails supports this work by offering QR codes for facility information and geolocation, with Halpatiokee Park noted for its high visitation. Land acquisition is a major component, led by the citizen-approved Martin County Forever program, which has secured \$227 million over 10 years, including a recent \$52 million investment for 7,000 acres and a 2,000-acre conservation easement in the Indian River Lagoon South (IRL South) area. Additionally, large-scale infrastructure projects are underway in the Everglades and IRL South to manage water flow, with 35,000 acres already acquired and further acquisitions planned.

The Underline (Miami) Update

The project sees approximately 2.2 million visitors annually and supports around 200 small businesses, with infrastructure improvements including 34 upgraded intersections. It is operated by a nonprofit organization and sustained through a diversified revenue model that includes events, filming, value capture, and food and beverage services. Community engagement is a core focus, with over 200 free programs offered to ensure inclusive participation across a wide range of demographics.

East Coast Greenway Alliance Update

The vision for the project is to create a 3,000-mile route stretching from Maine to Florida, with 1,000 miles already completed and a goal to double biking and walking by 2030. Recent milestones include the addition of new bridges and trail sections in Philadelphia, New Haven, and Maryland. In Florida, the route integrates with the SUN Trails network, featuring new segments such as the Savannah State Reserve Sun Trail. The project has gained national visibility through inspiring stories like Regina Yin's record-setting ride and video, Shan Riggs' long-distance run, and Avery Seuter's unicycle journey, all of which highlight the community spirit behind the effort. For safety and planning, the East Coast Greenway (ECG) provides hazard information, alternative routes, and encourages users to connect with local contacts.

Public Comment

Michelle Arola Brown of the Naples Pathways Coalition extended an invitation to the 21st Annual Iron Joe Turkey Ride & Walk, which will feature breakfast, various ride and walk options, and family-friendly activities.

After the council meeting today, a regional ceremony is scheduled to take place at 2:00 PM at Jupiter Inlet, celebrating bridge designation and trail segment recognition, with a weather backup location at the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Museum. In the evening, the Greenways Trails Foundation will host a dinner gathering at U-Tiki, with a reservation for 15 guests and flexibility to expand.

Confirm December 17-18, 2025 Meeting Date

Council Announcements

Robin Birdsong – Florida Department of Transportation

Sun Trail continues to expand its data collection network with 158 counters already installed and an additional 53 expected by the end of the year.

Vincent “Chip” Birdsong – Florida Department of State

A new Florida Main Street app has launched on both iOS and Android, offering enhanced trip-planning tools for users.

Samantha Adams-- Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission²

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) announced the closure of the Three Lakes Boardwalk Restoration project and previewed the upcoming launch of the Fishing Trail of Florida. In the Ocala National Forest, coordination efforts are underway to reimagine recreation opportunities, including aligning OHV campsites with regional trail systems.

MEETING ADJOURN