

T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park

William J. "Billy Joe" Rish Recreation Area Management Plan Amendment



**STATE OF FLORIDA
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL
PROTECTION**

**Division of Recreation and Parks
October 14, 2022**



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF Environmental Protection

Marjory Stoneman Douglas Building
3900 Commonwealth Boulevard
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Jeanette Nuñez
Lt. Governor

Shawn Hamilton
Secretary

October 18, 2022

Mr. Brian Fugate
Division of Recreation and Parks
Department of Environmental Protection
3900 Commonwealth Boulevard, MS 525
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-3000

RE: T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park – Lease No. 3533

Dear Mr. Fugate,

On **October 14, 2022**, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) recommended approval of the **T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park** management plan amendment. Therefore, Division of State Lands, Office of Environmental Services (OES), acting as agent for the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund, hereby approves the **T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park** management plan amendment. This approval amends the July 7, 2014 management plan. That management plan is due for update on July 7, 2024. Please include these management activities in the next update.

Pursuant to s. 253.034(5)(a), F.S., each management plan is required to “describe both short-term and long-term management goals and include measurable objectives to achieve those goals. Short-term goals shall be achievable within a 2-year planning period, and long-term goals shall be achievable within a 10-year planning period.” Upon completion of short-term goals, please submit a signed letter identifying categories, goals, and results with attached methodology to the Division of State Lands, Office of Environmental Services.

Pursuant to s. 259.032(8)(g), F.S., by July 1 of each year, each governmental agency and each private entity designated to manage lands shall report to the Secretary of Environmental Protection, via the Division of State Lands, on the progress of funding, staffing, and resource management of every project for which the agency or entity is responsible.

Pursuant to s. 259.032, F.S., and Chapter 18-2.021, F.A.C., management plans for areas less than 160 acres may be handled in accordance with the negative response process. This process requires small management plans and management plan amendments be submitted to the Division of State Lands for review, and the Acquisition and Restoration

Mr. Brian Fugate

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Council (ARC) for public notification. The Division of State Lands will approve these plans or plan amendments submitted for review through delegated authority unless three or more ARC members request the division place the item on a future council meeting agenda for review. To create better efficiency, improve customer service, and assist members of the ARC, the Division of State Lands will notice negative response items on Thursdays except for weeks that have State or Federal holidays that fall on Thursday or Friday. The Division of State Lands will contact you on the appropriate Friday to inform you if the item is approved via delegated authority or if it will be placed on a future ARC agenda by request of the ARC members.

Pursuant to s. 259.036(2), F.S., management areas that exceed 1,000 acres in size, shall be scheduled for a land management review at least every 5 years.

Conditional approval of this land management plan does not waive the authority or jurisdiction of any governmental entity that may have an interest in this project. Implementation of any upland activities proposed by this management plan may require a permit or other authorization from federal and state agencies having regulatory jurisdiction over those particular activities. Pursuant to the conditions of your lease, please forward copies of all permits to this office upon issuance.

Sincerely,

Deborah Burr
Office of Environmental Services
Division of State Lands

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INTRODUCTION



The William J. “Billy Joe” Rish Recreation Area of T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park straddles Florida State Highway 30E (Cape San Blas Road) along the middle stretch of the St. Joseph Peninsula. The recreation area encompasses 100 acres of prime Forgotten Coast conservation and recreation space. Approximately 71 acres of white-sand Gulf beaches and dunes comprise the park’s western half, while approximately 29 acres face the ecologically significant and scenic St. Joseph Bay on its eastern half. The peninsula is located hours away from major metropolitan areas and is a quiet vacationing destination with widely dispersed, mostly seasonal residential development.

Establishment and designation as a recreation area with various features designed especially for persons with disabilities came to fruition in June 1978 after Florida Governor Reubin Askew signed Chapter 78-458 into the Laws of Florida.

Former Florida State Congressman William J. Rish, who was elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1970 and represented the Eighth District from 1972 to 1978, is now recognized for his efforts with his incorporation as the park’s namesake. During his time in office, Congressman Rish was a tireless advocate for outdoor recreation opportunities for persons with disabilities. The establishment of Rish Recreation Area represents one of his crowning achievements as a lawmaker.

A service disruption at the beloved park occurred beginning on October 10, 2018, while still under the administration of the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, as

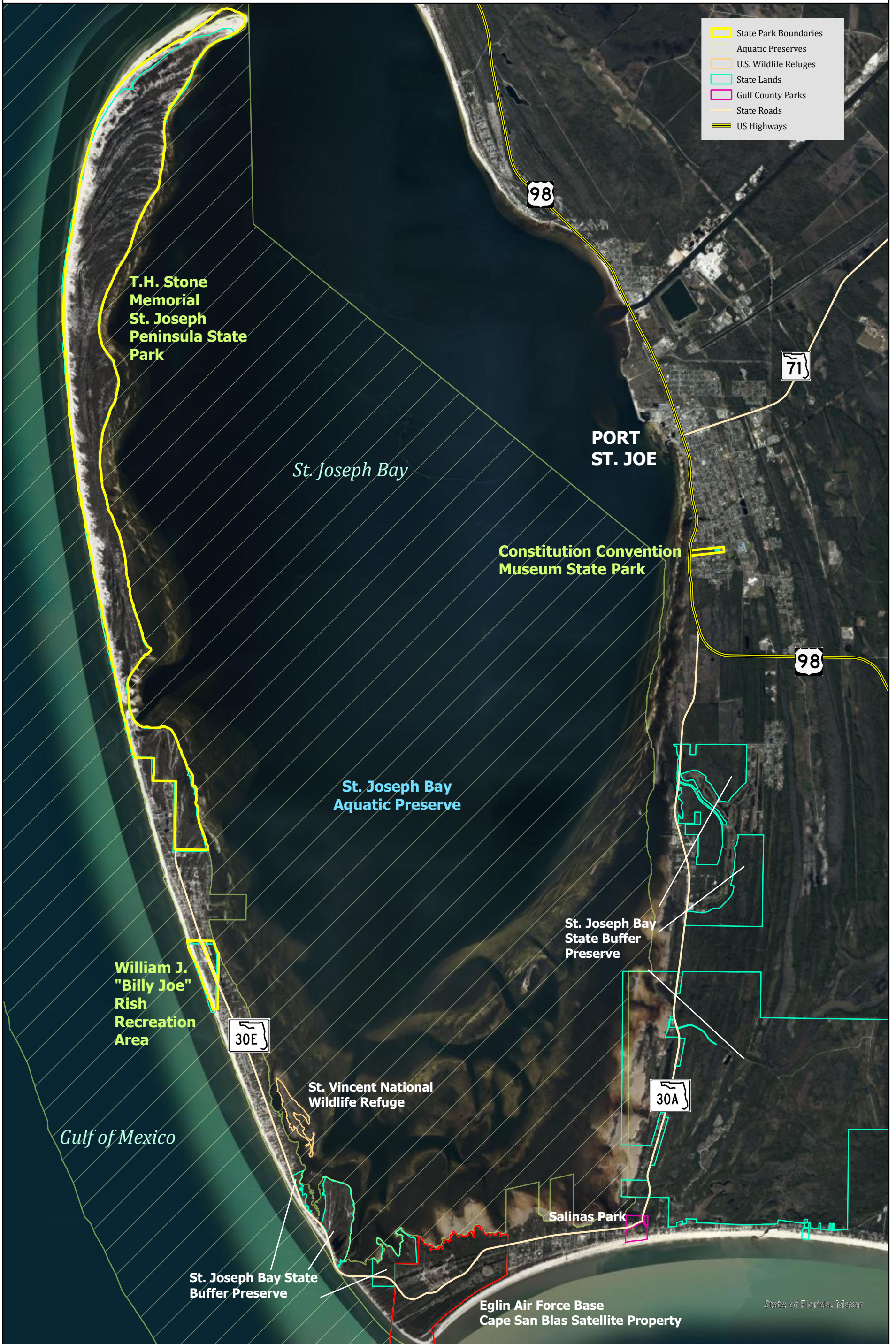
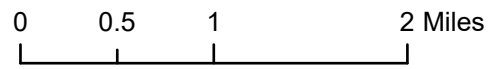
the park bore the brunt of historic Category 5 Hurricane Michael and suffered extensive infrastructural damage. Following the disaster, the park remained closed for more than three years.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection assumed management of the property after transfer from APD on December 1, 2021. Department efforts to restore the park to an active operational state culminated with a grand re-opening of the recreation area on January 28, 2022.

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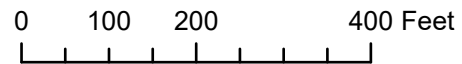


St. Joseph Bay and Cape San Blas Vicinity Map





Rish Recreation Area



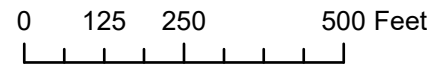
Base Map - Current Infrastructure









Rish Recreation Area

St. Andrews Beach Mouse Critical Habitat



-  Walkways and Structures
-  Park Boundary
-  St. Andrews Beach Mouse Critical Habitat
-  Tunnel

St. Joseph Bay

Gulf of Mexico

Cape San Blas Road

CONCEPTUAL LAND USE PLAN

The conceptual land use plan for Rish Recreation Area describes several proposals pertaining to visitor use infrastructure development and improvement, construction of multiple park staff support facilities, and natural community restoration efforts. These park improvement efforts are intended to facilitate the Florida Park Service in advancing in its mission to provide resource-based outdoor recreation while preserving, interpreting, and restoring natural and cultural resources.

Overnight accommodations at the park are a significant focus of the conceptual land use plan. Several octagonal cabins, connected by a lengthy system of accessible boardwalks, were constructed at the recreation area in the 1970s, and the Florida Park Service plans to not only renovate and reopen these structures but construct additional cabins for the enjoyment of persons with disabilities and their families. Additionally, guests will be provided a new overnight accommodation option with the construction of a campground providing convenient access to the Gulf of Mexico and St. Joseph Bay.

To accommodate an anticipated increase in park visitation following development of additional amenities, unit management plans call for improvements to the parking area, construction of a permanent restroom facility, addition of shade structures, bayside dock and pavilion construction, and continuation and improvement of a nature trail network through the eastern (bay) side of the recreation area. All park improvements will be designed with accessibility as a primary characteristic.

In addition to the emphasis on accessibility, planning for development at Rish Recreation Area requires particular attention to coastal resilience and the federally designated critical habitat area for the endangered St. Andrew beach mouse that comprises the ambient dune landscape. Habitat monitoring, maintenance, and restoration efforts should be continual.

Subsequent plan sections describe efforts in more detail, including improvements to overnight accommodations, revitalization and expansion of park infrastructure, and restoration efforts of the surrounding sensitive natural communities. To assist with spatial references and park locations connected to these proposals, numbered items on the conceptual land use plan map on Page 21 correspond to the numbered items in the following sections. Improvement efforts in these areas should be geared to facilitating accessible resource-based recreation at this unique unit of the state park system.

1. 30-Site Campground

The eastern portion of Rish Recreation Area, north of the bay-access boardwalk, includes a 5.8-acre upland clearing where other recreation facilities previously existed during early iterations of the park. This site is well suited for a campground with approximately 30 sites. Advantages to a campground on the eastern side of SR 30E include viewshed toward St. Joseph Bay, avoidance of impacts to intact wildlife habitat, and minimization of storm hazards to infrastructure.



Photo of proposed campground site adjacent to Cape San Blas Road (State Road 30E).

Unique design elements in the campground should prioritize privacy and convenience of access to amenities and recreation opportunities. Options may include a specially designed bathhouse or multiple small bathhouse structures rather than a single large bathhouse, which could be located strategically to maximize convenience to campsites. Given the road frontage and bayfront proximity of the proposed campground, campsites should be oriented toward the east to maximize visual access to the bay, minimize the distance to the bay, and allow for visual/auditory buffering from SR 30E. Bathhouse and utility structures may be best situated closer to SR 30E.

To augment operational support, a limited number of spaces within the proposed campground can be utilized for volunteers.

In addition to campsites with full water and electric utilities, the campground may also accommodate park-model cabins, a type of small modular cabin that fits into constrained landscapes and integrates well with campground footprints. Placement of park-model cabins in the eastern portion of the park would increase the total number of cabins offered in the near-term and provide an alternative experience for overnight stays. Comparisons of the functionality and popularity of the cabin types and campsites will guide long-term planning decisions.

2. Cabin Renovations and/or Replacements

The cabins were originally built in the 1970s, prior to the 1998 designation of the St. Andrew beach mouse as critically endangered. As such, the cabins are currently surrounded by dune ecosystem designated as critical habitat area.

The northernmost cabins are located a considerable distance from the main parking area, separated by 865 feet of boardwalk, while the southern cabins are separated by only 380 feet of boardwalk. It should also be noted that the northern cabins are more vulnerable to storm surge than the southern cabins, which are protected from the Gulf by higher dunes immediately to the west (see Item 3).

The existing cabins are octagonally shaped and constructed seven feet above grade in a low-lying area behind a series of dunes. Capacity is for seven guests with roll-away beds for additional guests. Reservations are strictly for guests with disabilities, caretakers, and family members, requiring self-attestation that at least one guest with a disability is present for the entire duration of the cabin stay.

Renovation of the existing cabins has been ongoing post Hurricane Michael. To resume offering high quality overnight accommodations for persons with disabilities, all cabins are currently planned for renovation.

Eventual replacement of cabins is anticipated. While renovations are intended to support the near-term needs of park visitors, the age of the structures and stressors of the coastal environment may necessitate altogether new structures. If replaced, the cabins must adhere to the boundaries of the critical habitat area as designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The approximate footprints of the existing cabins may be utilized while accounting for potentially increased structural elevation requirements. Acknowledging the interior spatial limitations of the octagonal design, an alternative shape should be considered to maximize space efficiency and accessibility.

Within the constraints of the critical habitat area, replacement cabins may be arranged to maximize convenience to the various park amenities and Gulf access. If feasible, additional cabins may be constructed (see Item 3) within the allowable area to meet the expected growth in demand for overnight accommodations at this unique park.

3. Construction of Additional Cabins

The renovated cabins are expected to generate considerable demand. Depending on the volume of the demand, additional cabins may be needed. New cabins (in addition to the existing group of eight cabins) may be constructed on either the bay or Gulf sides of the recreation area. If located on the Gulf side, considerations should include the availability of space among the other cabins, proximity to visitor amenities/recreation opportunities, buffering from the support facilities at the north end, quality of viewshed, and architectural congruence with the other cabins. If located on the bay side, considerations should include compatibility with potentially adjacent campsites and alternative cabin type.



View to north of three of the six cabins in the southern cluster.

Given the spatial constraints of existing facilities and critical habitat area, construction of additional cabins on the Gulf side (Map Item 3a) may be limited to approximately three.

Given the large space of the existing clearing and the absence of critical habitat, there is greater opportunity and flexibility for construction of cabins on the bay side (Map Item 3b). Since cabins on this side of the park are not adjacent to existing cabins, cabins may be in the style of park models.

4. Redesign Main Parking Area for Space Efficiency and Accessibility

Currently, the primary visitor parking area for Rish Recreation Area is a gravel and sand lot on the west side of SR 30E. Adjacent infrastructure includes the ADA-accessible walkway connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the St. Joseph Bay, activities center, and two small maintenance and storage buildings, which are situated behind a white fence.

Entrance gate improvement is recommended. A new gate with an arm and payment station would be ideal. A small ranger-manned entrance station could provide additional revenue generation and office space. Rate and volume of daily visitation and related operational considerations should ultimately dictate whether the entrance station is designed for active staffing.



Main guest parking area as of June 8, 2022.

Paving of the parking area is recommended, recognizing the benefits to visitors with disabilities. If paved, stormwater retention may be required. Given the limited space in this portion of the park, allocating space for stormwater may preclude paving. If left unpaved, the parking area must be maintained for maximum stability and alternatives to asphalt striping should be considered to ensure that spaces are clearly demarcated and efficiently organized.

The total number of parking spaces and their classifications as accessible or non-accessible should be determined operationally and in conjunction with planned parking lot improvements. Overall, the redesign of the parking area must be focused on maximum accessibility. In planning for parking lot redesign, maximum occupancy rates of the eight cabins and a need for designated spaces for cabin guests should also be a primary consideration.

Other improvements to the parking area should include the relocation of the existing storage structures to a new support area (see plan concepts for support area). This will increase the available space in the parking area and adjacent to the activities center and ensure that park support operations are not overlapping with the visitor experience.

For stormwater management and attenuation of shifting sands and sediment, the wall that abuts the west side of the pedestrian tunnel under SR 30E needs to be extended westward to better impound the adjacent entrance drive.



Maintenance/storage area in southeastern corner of main parking area.

5. Day-Use Restroom Building

Restrooms on the west side of SR 30E are currently limited to those located inside the Activities Center and a temporary portable restroom in the main visitor parking lot. A new permanent restroom should be constructed. Structural height requirements may entail a ramp for access. Given the footprint of an access ramp, considerable space in the parking area may be allocated. Potential restroom locations include the southern perimeter of the cabin area or the east side of the pool area.

If elevated, a new day-use restroom building may provide the necessary space for storage of beach mobility devices that may be provided at the park for visitor access along the Gulf beach. Such storage would otherwise be available in the maintenance shop area but likely with limited space.

Outdoor showers are currently available for beach visitors; however, the need for privacy paneling is indicated. Additional outdoor showers may be incorporated as a feature on the restroom building.



View of pool area connected to the main boardwalk, a potential location for a restroom and concessionaire operating area.

6. Gulfside Shade Structures

Within the pool deck and Gulf-access boardwalk area, up to two medium-large shade structures are recommended. The structures will be installed over the pool area, which is currently situated in direct sunlight with no shade. Shade structures may also be extended over the small picnic area just outside the activities center.

To promote a comfortable traverse of the existing boardwalk to the Gulf beach, additional shade features may be added. Such small shade features may resemble those found at the far west end of the Gulf-access boardwalk.

7. Bayside Shade Pavilions

All pavilions on the St. Joseph Bay shoreline have been demolished and removed following Hurricane Michael, which severely damaged them. Four to six new pavilions are planned. New pavilions should be designed for picnicking, interpretation, and general recreational use, noting that the array of pavilions are positioned within an immersive scenic bayside landscape. Ideally, they should extend in a north-south alignment along an arterial ADA-accessible pathway, which should be built off the existing decking that already approaches the bay/boat ramp. This artery could potentially extend both north and south from the eastern terminus of the boardwalk.



A bayside boardwalk to new shade structures and dock should connect to the existing decking pictured above, at the eastern terminus of the pedestrian walkway connecting the gulf to the bay.

8. Bay Access Dock

A dock is proposed to facilitate boating and observation over St. Joseph Bay. The bay is very shallow such that adjacent docks to the north and south of the park property are constructed with extra length in order to reach navigable depths. Although alternative locations along the bay shoreline may be considered, the proposed dock should extend from or near the existing decking of the concession building and connect to the path that is recommended to extend north along the bayshore for access to the proposed shade pavilions. If the dock is constructed as an extension from the concession building, the existing concrete boat ramp (which is currently unused) may need to be removed.



A view to the south from the existing concrete boat ramp.

9. Accessible Interpretive Nature Trail

A nature trail is proposed along the depressional water features located immediately inland and adjacent to the planned array of bayside pavilions. It is recommended that this trail be fully ADA-accessible with stable surfacing that enables various modes of assisted mobility. Auxiliary trails that connect the nature trail to the bayside pavilions and proposed campground should also be considered. Trail designs may incorporate boardwalk, pavement, or other stabilizing elements.



Borrow pit in the northeastern section of the park. A nature trail is pictured on the right.

10. Maintenance/Administrative Facilities

Two alternatives for construction of a new maintenance shop and administration facilities are proposed. The DRP may select one or the other of these two alternatives based on various permitting, zoning, operational, and other logistical factors. For either of the two alternative locations, the maintenance shop is recommended to be a two-bay enclosure and incorporate administrative space and include other miscellaneous support functions.

- *10a. Northwestern Location Alternative*

The northwestern option (Map Item 10a) is adjacent to the park manager residence in an existing altered area with vehicular driveway access to SR 30E, incorporating the small laundry/storage building such that the existing structure adjacent to dunes would be removed.

- *10b. Southeastern Location Alternative*

The southeastern option (Map Item 10b) is situated along an existing service road in a small area of existing disturbance, outside of the viewshed of the

bayside recreation amenities. This location is adjacent to a proposed additional staff residence (Map Item 12).

11. Additional Staff Residence

One staff residence in addition to the park manager's residence is recommended. The identified location is adjacent to one of the two locations being considered for the maintenance shop (Map Item 10b).

12. Natural Community Improvement

The natural community between SR 30E and the cabin area is federally designated critical habitat area for the critically endangered St. Andrew beach mouse. Dune replanting and replenishment is needed, especially adjacent to SR 30E.

13. Bayside Viewing Area

An unstabilized sand and gravel driveway currently connects SR 30E to the shoreline of St. Joseph Bay in the northeastern corner of the park. The entrance to this clearing is not open to the public and vehicular traffic is currently blocked from entry. The interface between the driveway and the bay should be allowed to return to its natural state via restoration of natural communities along the shoreline. The bayside nature trail (see Item 9) should allow access to a scenic waterfront viewpoint in this area. Trail routing and design should take into consideration that this northeastern access point is adjacent to a private residence adjacent to the north boundary of the recreation area.



Current bay access road adjacent and parallel to the northeastern park boundary. The vacant area to the right in the photo is the location of the proposed campground.

14. Unauthorized Access Paths

Unauthorized ingress/egress paths have been habituated parallel to the southeastern boundary of the park through the erodible dunes and critical habitat area for St. Andrew beach mouse. Permanent closure of these paths and restoration of eroded or trampled corridors is necessary. Closure and avoidance of repeat trespass may be best achieved by boundary fencing with park signage, and interpretation of the habitat sensitivities and associated park rules.



Entrance to unauthorized trail paralleling the southeastern park boundary. The sign to the left is a heavily faded Gulf County sign.

15. Improvement of Critical Habitat Area

The endangered St. Andrew beach mouse relies upon the fragile dune habitat that characterizes the Gulf side of the park. This habitat must be carefully protected and managed (see closely related Item 13 regarding natural community improvement).

Utilities and vehicular access paths have created bisections and disturbance within the dunes located adjacent to SR 30E. Restorative vegetation plantings are needed in this area. Installation of mess fencing may be indicated to aid sand accumulation and to discourage repeated impacts.



Rish Recreation Area

Conceptual Land Use Plan

0 100 200 400 Feet



- 1 30-site campground
- 2 Cabin renovations/replacements
- 3a New cabins - gulf-side option
- 3b New cabins - bay-side option
- 4 Parking lot improvements
- 5 Day-use restroom building
- 6 Gulfside shade structures
- 7 Bayside shade pavilions
- 8 Bay access dock
- 9 Accessible interpretive trail
- 10a Maintenance/administrative facilities - NW option
- 10b Maintenance/administrative facilities - SE option
- 11 Additional park staff residence
- 12 Natural community improvement
- 13 Bayside viewing area
- 14 Unauthorized access path
- 15 Critical habitat area improvement

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC OPEN HOUSES AND COMMENTS

**Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Recreation and Parks**

William J. "Billy Joe" Rish Recreation Area of T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph
Peninsula State Park
Unit Management Plan Addendum
July 26th (In-Person) and August 3rd, 2022 (Virtual)

Federal Government Representatives	Kristi Yanchis Ecologist U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
State Government Representatives	<p>Melanie Mowry Etters Agency for Persons with Disabilities</p> <p>Tim Brown Agency for Persons with Disabilities</p> <p>Ben Stewart, Environmental Specialist Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection St. Joseph Bay Buffer Preserve</p> <p>Sandra Chafin Cole, Administrative Assistant Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection St. Joseph Bay Buffer Preserve</p> <p>Michael Sisson Northwest Regional Biologist Division of Habitat and Species Conservation Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission</p> <p>Jennifer Harper, Northwest Regional Administrator Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection</p>
Non-Profit Organization Representatives	<p>Kristi Warren Disability Resource Center, Inc.</p> <p>Cynthia Vollmer, Youth Coordinator Disability Resource Center, Inc.</p> <p>David Jones, President Sportsability Alliance, Inc.</p> <p>Maxwell R. Lee, Ph.D., P.E., President Koogler & Associates, Inc.</p> <p>J.R. Harding, Ed. D Friends of Rish Park</p> <p>Angela Morrison, Senior Attorney Hunton Andrews Kurth, LLP</p>

	<p>Carol Davis, Program and Deaf Services Coordinator Disability Resource Center, Inc.</p> <p>Gordon Palmer, President Sportsability Alliance</p>
Agency Representatives	<p>Chuck Hatcher, Director Division of Recreation and Parks – Central Office Director’s Office</p> <p>Parks Small, Assistant Director Division of Recreation and Parks – Central Office Director’s Office</p> <p>Brian Fugate, Bureau Chief Division of Recreation and Parks – Central Office Office of Park Planning</p> <p>Steven Cutshaw, Bureau Chief Division of Recreation and Parks – District 1</p> <p>Stephanie McDonald, Park Manager Rish Recreation Area</p> <p>Aaron Miller, Park Manager T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park Constitution Convention Museum State Park</p> <p>Daniel Alsentzer, Planning Manager Division of Recreation and Parks – Central Office Office of Park Planning</p> <p>James Gaddis, Park Planner Division of Recreation and Parks – Central Office Office of Park Planning</p> <p>Yasmine Armaghani, Park Planner Division of Recreation and Parks – Central Office Office of Park Planning</p>
Tourism Development	<p>Kelli Godwin, Executive Director Gulf County Tourism Development Council</p> <p>Rebecca Holley, Marketing & Community Relations Specialist Gulf County Tourism Development Council</p>
Individual Citizens	<p>Roger Lawrence Kathleen Lawrence</p>

Staff Report

An in-person public open house was held from 2:00 to 7:00 p.m. on July 26, 2022 at the Activities Center at Rish Recreation Area. Multiple park maps were printed and displayed on easels for public viewing. Feedback received during and after the meeting included a broad desire for the installation of additional shade structures; enthusiasm was for planned improvements at bay access points, including kayak launch, dock, and picnic pavilion construction; broad support for cabin renovation and additional cabin construction; interest in beach mobility device rental concession operations; concern regarding the use of park facilities by the general public, and desire (via email following the meeting) for additional rest areas and seating across the facility.

A virtual public open house was conducted on Microsoft Teams from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. on August 3, 2022 to present park maps, including conceptual land use planning, at Rish Recreation Area. Lively dialogue and feedback followed the presentation in an open discussion forum format.

Park Planner James Gaddis completed a brief introductory presentation, which including the mission statement of both the Florida Park Service and the Office of Park Planning, a brief overview of the Unit Management Plan development and approval process, a summary of feedback and discussion items from the July 26, 2022 public open house at the Activities Center at Rish Recreation Area, and a walkthrough of the St. Joseph Bay/Cape San Blas Vicinity Map and Rish Recreation Area aerial imagery, St. Andrews Beach Mouse Critical Habitat, current infrastructure, and draft conceptual land use plan (CLUP).

The remainder of the meeting was comprised of an open forum to allow for a question and answer session. Virtual open house attendees expressed excitement over planned construction projects, a willingness to initiate Friends of Rish Park operations, interest in the initiation of concession operations, and a desire to increase the number of cabins available for booking at the park.

Suggestions for improvement included cabin amenity and accessibility upgrades, more seating for contemplation and relaxation, and wheelchair and mobility device matting extending off of the western terminus of the boardwalk. Requests were made for construction and self-audit documentation. U.S. Fish and Wildlife staff stressed education and outreach regarding the presence of endangered species at the park.