

Strategic Business Plan:

Environment, Open Spaces, Recreation & Culture



1. Overview of Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Area

Today, over 30 years of land acquisition by the county have set aside over 12 percent of our natural lands in public ownership, managed for a passive recreation or environmental purpose. The county boasts a world class regional passive park system, a network of managed environmental lands in an otherwise urban county, exemplary recreational boating amenities, an award-winning trail system, and interpretive centers for natural and cultural history that instill a sense of appreciation and stewardship for the county's history and lands among residents and visitor's alike. We are a model of a well-rounded urban community, fortunate to have an extensive natural backdrop to intersperse our larger urban area. The county could not have accomplished this without the unwavering trust and support of its citizens for successive land acquisition referenda and the one cent infrastructure sales tax.

Today though, we are at a pivotal time. Most of the opportunities to buy land are gone, and competition for land is high. A younger population is demanding more active recreation and diversity in recreational options. Becoming a mature urban area brings with it a keen awareness of the value of promoting and interpreting our culture and history. The array of protected lands we worked so hard to secure is being threatened increasingly by activities both in and around them.

With diminished vacant land in our built-out county, our open spaces start to look very attractive – and very developable - for other uses and purposes. Public awareness and concern over the future of this county's parks and preserves is heightening each day. Traditional recreational and waterfront uses are being threatened by escalating taxes, land values, and redevelopment pressures.

While we have amassed an enviable park and preserve system, we did not necessarily plan as comprehensively for the active recreation needs of a built-out county and a population that is getting younger. While we assumed the municipalities would address our active recreation needs, we did not factor in municipal sentiment. The pace of annexation, though, is changing the unincorporated and municipal landscape daily, making the active recreation discussion, and who we are really planning for, ever-changing.

For the Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Area we are fortunate to have several plans that help with our decision-making. For over 15 years, the Countywide Comprehensive Plan has provided direction for resource protection and environmental stewardship, land acquisition and sound management of our parks and preserves. More recently, the Recreation, Open Space and Cultural System Master Plan analyzed active recreation needs and recommended approaches and partnerships for meeting those needs. It also suggested the county take the lead with flagship projects and bold initiatives that will set this county apart from others. But it also emphasizes that we need to protect the lands we have already purchased for their intrinsic natural value. A new emphasis on the value of cultural activates and an amenity, as well as historic preservation, has taken hold and we can build on the results of the Art Council's Community Cultural Plan as well as the Historic Preservation Task Force.

This business plan, therefore, builds upon the plans in place, capitalizing on what is underway, and at what can be accomplished, or set in motion, during the next five years. It also highlights new initiatives and opportunities, as well as cooperation and coordination among departments that will be necessary.

On a final note, the Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Group concluded that the goals of this strategic focus area currently do not adequately address a commitment to the county's environmental programs. It is recommended that the goals for this strategic focus area be amended to broaden the focus beyond the areas covered by the Recreation, Open Space and Cultural System Master Plan.

2. Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Area Summary of Situational Analysis

The primary conditions, or situations, affecting the ability to meet the Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture System goals and desired outcomes essentially amount to money, jurisdictional issues, economics and competition for land, and public sentiment. They cannot be considered as separate situations, as they are intertwined in their impact and scope.

Funding: This strategic focus area is dependent on the funding necessary to accomplish the goals established. In past years, the public has consistently supported taxation for the acquisition of passive parks and open spaces. Few other local governments in Florida have as lengthy a track record of public support for such initiatives as we do in Pinellas County. But today, there is not much land left to buy, and the focus for major new funding initiatives is shifting more to active recreation and community-based recreation centers. Other costly new initiatives include attempts to protect and enhance boat access. Implementing new initiatives is largely dependent on the Penny for Pinellas for funding, which means we need to make sure proposed Penny projects continue to represent the public sentiment.

All of our funding needs are not based on new capital expenditures though. Money is also required to sustain, maintain and enhance what we already have. We also need to make sure we allocate the money necessary to maintain high standards of operation, maintenance and programming at our parks and preserves, consistent with public expectations. We need to commit the funding required to support new and exciting cultural ventures in programming and events needed to put us in the ranks of other successful and dynamic urban centers.

Foremost, we need to use our dollars wisely. For example, money is being parceled out for annual grants and incrementally to offset active recreation fees for unincorporated residents. Is this the best way to spend our money? Is this going to produce the biggest bang for our buck? Regardless where we stand on those issues, collaboration, partnership and creativity are essential to the Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture System funding strategy.

Finally, we must not forget that while there is a need to implement new active parks opportunities, protecting the investment in our passive parks and preserve lands is as important.

Political Jurisdictions: Annexation and jurisdictional issues fundamentally interfere with the ability to do good planning for active recreation needs. The pace of annexation changes the landscape daily. So who exactly are we planning for? Making decisions solely on the basis of meeting unincorporated needs is not sufficient. What monies might we use to meet an unincorporated need, and is the unincorporated investment lost if the area is annexed? The dialogue with the county's municipalities needs to be ongoing. Creative deals and partnerships need to become the mainstay in meeting the needs of both unincorporated and municipal residents. But while the larger question may still loom regarding who exactly we are planning for, the Recreation, Open Space and Cultural System Master Plan provides some direction in that it suggests that, while we look for partners to help us with our active recreation ventures, we continue to focus, on the whole, on what we do best, which is countywide systems concerning best meeting our community's recreational, cultural and environmental needs.

Economics and Competition for Land: While little vacant land remains, there are open space and recreational holdings in our local golf courses and marinas. Changing economics are forcing property owners to re-think their investment and commitment to these uses. Therefore, we need to be financially poised when the opportunity arises, with the ability and flexibility to acquire these

properties for their public open space or recreational value. We also need to think creatively about where we can find land for our active recreation ventures. For example, redevelopment of defunct commercial areas may provide substantial opportunity, but potentially at a great cost. Protecting waterfront uses is particularly challenging due to the cost of land and the desirability of the location for other purposes. In this regard, legislative, land use and taxing solutions are going to be required to change the dynamics of conversion and loss.

Public Sentiment: When it comes to the Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Area, the citizens of this county are passionate. The county has had a long-standing relationship with its citizens in this regard, and has been able to accomplish much with their trust and support. But too much complacency in judging the sentiment of the public and a series of decisions affecting our public lands has put us in a very new place. We are now dealing with erosion of that trust and suspicion of our motives. Our re-building of that trust is critical to accomplishing the goals of the Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Area. But, equally as important, the county's key leaders must not waver and over-react with each new criticism. Open and honest communication with the public is essential. Input from the public must be thoughtfully considered. At the end of the day, the county also needs to value staff input and know when to place its trust in that staff and allow them to do their job.

Life used to be a lot simpler. Today, the pressures of redevelopment are foundational to this situational analysis. As we move forward, how we fund and plan for the components of this strategic focus area, and whether we continue to elevate the intrinsic value of recreation, open space and culture in all discussions of redevelopment, will determine in large measure whether we retain the characteristics of a quality community and remain a place where people will 'plan to stay.'

3. Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture (EOSRC) Strategic Focus Area Goals

The Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture goals are:

EOSRC-1 – Promote a Sustainability Ethic in Pinellas County.

The foundation of this goal is to ensure that ecological limits and environmental impacts are considered during all aspects of community design, from energy efficiency in buildings to transportation system solutions. Sustainability principles, practices and indicators will be brought into policy debate and decision-making on a broad basis.

EOSRC-2 – Strengthen Connections to Water.

Outstanding water bodies uniquely surround Pinellas County. For many residents, the water was a main reason for coming, and then staying, in Pinellas. The county will promote and expand recreational access to the surrounding waters, and utilize this natural asset as a keystone community attribute.

EOSRC-3 – Lead the Development of Outstanding Countywide Systems.

The county's preserves, historical and cultural sites, and regional system of recreational and environmental systems span nearly every corner of Pinellas County. This goal seeks to ensure that the system is updated and improved as the County transforms into its final built-out state. Trail, roadway and sign design standards are among the first components of upgraded features sought in this goal.

EOSRC-4 – Provide Urban levels of Active Recreation Facilities in Unincorporated Areas.

In an effort to meet the needs and expectation of residents in unincorporated areas, the county will expand its efforts to develop community centers, community parks and sports complexes to serve the entire county. Concurrently, the county will seek partnerships with municipalities, the School Board and non-profit agencies for ongoing operations and maintenance.

EOSRC-5 – Inject Life, Color and Energy into Regional Parks and Preserves.

The county's regional parks and preserves is a classic system of passive parks. Without compromising the environmental integrity of these facilities, the county will explore ways to build a broader base of compatible activities that will draw in users and be relevant to today's "lifestyles". Examples might include outdoor classrooms, educational exhibits and kiosks, canoe and kayak rentals, public art, gardens and other amenities.

EOSRC-6 – Increase Protection of Regional Parks and Preserves.

The long-term protection of the county's preserves and passive parks is fundamental. The county will ensure that the natural resources of our preserves are guided by pro-active plans that set clear policies for management of these assets. In addition, plans will examine surrounding management zones to minimized off-site influences.

EOSRC-7 – Promote the Arts, Culture and Historic Preservation.

Promote Arts and Culture and Historic Resources through investments and raised awareness for the existing non-profit facilities and programs. Art through design, both in public and private building and infrastructure, can add to the vitality of the county and community.

Overall, the success of this strategic focus area plan will be gauged by the results of the 13 key performance measures that will be reviewed on an annual basis and at the end of Year 5. For each measure, the Environment, Open Space, Recreation outcomes and Culture Strategic Focus Area

Team will establish a data source, methodology for measurement, baseline measurement and performance goals. The measures are:

- Number of acres converted from preserve or preserved resource management to other future land use category
- Number of days air quality index for Pinellas County measures "Good" by the federal Environmental Protection Agency Standards
- % native vegetation as a portion of all park vegetation
- Loss of shade tree canopy in Pinellas County
- Number of miles of bike lanes and bike trails added per year
- Total dollars spent on cultural programs and activities by Pinellas County
- Total number of attendees at county sponsored or supported cultural events, performances, programs and exhibits
- % park areas available to the public as per cent of entire park system inventory
- Number of ball fields, hard courts, swimming pools, community centers, and playgrounds in unincorporated areas
- Number of boat ramp lanes
- Number of parking spaces for beach access
- Acres of land added or adjacent to existing county parks or preserves
- % beach profiles that meet or exceed county standards

4. Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Area Strategy Execution and Proposed Deliverables

Strategies and deliverables related to the defined strategic focus area goals are provided in the following subsections:

EOSRC-1 – Promote a Sustainability Ethic.

Strategy EOSRC-1.1 – Incorporate key policies into the County Comprehensive Plan.

Codify the key policies and visions of the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan in the County Comprehensive Plan (Recreation and Open Space Element)

Strategy EOSRC-1.2 – Review policy options.

Review options for policies regarding open space and golf course land conversions

Strategy EOSRC-1.3 – Coordinate with public and private entities.

Institutionalize Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations regarding close coordination between county departments, local governments and other agencies to maximize benefits and minimize conflicts of every public and private project and initiative.

Strategy EOSRC-1.4 – Link Master Plan to transportation initiatives.

Link Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan into livable community's efforts, transportation CIP plans and transit concept.

Pinellas County government has a long history of environmental leadership, going back at least to the late 1970s when the pace of development and the loss of the natural environment reached a critical point and triggered an awakening to the fragility of our coastal location and supporting environment. Citizens said that enough is enough. In response, Pinellas County launched the Red Flag Charrete, with participation by scientists, environmentalists, municipal and county staff, and area agencies. This task team achieved a myriad of lasting results. In fact, the county's Environmental Management Department was created from this effort. A succession of referenda for land acquisition were also held, with unwavering support by the citizens, resulting in over 140 environmentally sensitive properties being acquired (only 1 targeted property was not acquired out of the entire list). Today, the county's comprehensive environmental program is regarded as a model throughout the State, and other governments often call to see how we have accomplished what we accomplished. In a survey conducted a few years ago by staff at the University of North Carolina, Pinellas County stood out at the very top of all governments surveyed for not only its environmental initiative and planning, but also for its commitment to follow-through and implementation. Now, with the large land acquisitions behind us, and a strong land management program in place, where does that leave us? Can we continue to be an environmental leader in a rapidly changing and redeveloping county? How do we respond as developers start looking at our last large vestiges of open space (most notably, our golf courses) with the idea of redevelopment?

The Evaluation and Appraisal Report for the Comprehensive Plan focuses on this very question, and the Recreation, Open Space, Cultural System Master Plan emphasizes the idea of a Planning to Stay ethic, where an exemplary quality of life will be the basis for people staying in Pinellas County, or relocating here, to live, work and play. Building on the concept of Planning to Stay, the county's Comprehensive Plan already proposes to integrate sustainability into the county's long range planning.

The challenge is to weave the ideas and concepts and commitment into every facet of our government operations, and into every aspect of our interactions with the public. As we re-draft our

policies in the Comprehensive Plan and develop new regulations to address redevelopment in an urban environment, we must consider each redevelopment opportunity as an opportunity for environmental improvement. This is likely to require substantial re-tooling of not only our development regulations and development review practices, but more importantly, there needs to be a willingness to let go when we need to of “the way we’ve always done it.” Innovation and collaboration need to be key words in our business culture.

We also need to consider both the visual and environmental impact on the county as a whole should private golf courses gradually be replaced by development. The impact would be dramatic. In this County, golf courses often serve as major greenway connectors. One needs only to look at a land use map to see their functional relationship to existing environmental and preservation lands. Clearly, the preservation of recreation/open space land for a recreation or open space purpose (whether a golf course or not) is vital to a sustainable future.

But sustainability goes beyond the obvious need for continued environmental stewardship; a truly sustainable community requires weaving issues of housing, neighborhoods and community character into the equation. It means addressing transportation alternatives, infrastructure needs and constraints, and recreation requirements in a congested urban county. It requires integrating economic decisions and plans with all of the other sustainability goals. Economic development is not a means unto itself – if it compromises the very character and way of life that attracted people to his county in the first place, then it will not sustain itself in the long run. Sustainability means that, above all, that our own practices, and what we promote to the public, whether through incentives or regulation or education, are a model for quality, follow-through and sustainability.

The key to success is ongoing support by our elected officials and a renewed sense of collaboration and commitment among all of our departments. Equally important will be communication and involvement with our citizens. The past year has clearly evidenced that many of our citizens care very much about the environment around them, and the opportunity for staff and the public to work together towards our sustainability goals will institutionalize the county’s commitment and foster citizen stewardship for the natural and human community around us. The private business sector is also integral to our sustainability commitment; they can be an important and innovative partner.

Our success in becoming a sustainable community will be measured incrementally. It will not really be evidenced by compiling plans, regulations and reports, or by receipt of awards or designations. Instead, it will be measured by looking around – people will want to live here; they will have a place to play, to reflect on nature, and to seek respite from the busy world around them. The air and water will be clean; a diversity of plant and animal life will abound. You will find trees, sidewalks and green space interspersing a myriad of diverse neighborhoods and civic gathering places. People will have a place to work and a way to get there. While we probably never will be able to say we have met one concrete goal of being “officially sustainable,” we can take definitive, constant and measurable steps down the path of sustainability.

EOSRC-2 – Strengthen Connections to the Water

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-2.1 – Incorporate key policies into the Countywide Comprehensive Plan.

Codify the key policies and visions of the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan in the Countywide Comprehensive Plan (Recreation and Open Space Element)

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-2.2 – Promote capital programs.

Accept and promote the priority capital programs identified in the Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-2.3 – Review funding proposal for capital program.**

Board of County Commissioners will finalize review of the Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations, including funding proposal for a capital program over a 15 year period through a renewed Penny for Pinellas.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-2.4 – Expand boating access.**

Pursue revenue neutral or revenue-enhanced options for acquiring and expanding additional boating access facilities

The Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommended that “the county needs to continue to be a leader in waterfront/resource protection, including the role of facilitator/coordinator with federal, state and municipal agencies. At the same time, the county needs to expand recreational access to the water, including new beach accesses, on and off-beach parking, boat ramps, canoe and kayak launches, and peak season beach shuttles.” The outcome of the master planning process included specific recommendations for both new facilities and new initiatives.

The Evaluation and Appraisal Report for the Comprehensive Plan, adopted by the Board in November of 2005, also emphasized strengthening and protecting the county’s connections to the water. Actions were included directed at preventing the conversion of water-dependent land uses through land use and taxing strategies, enhancing public access through municipal and private partnerships, and emphasis on straightforward acquisition. The Evaluation and Appraisal Report recognized the contribution of water-dependent land uses to the overall economy, and on reinforcing, or strengthening commitments to beach renourishment, stabilization and coastal and marine habitat protection. For example, major amendments to the county’s Comprehensive Plan are anticipated to address things like boating and beach access improvements, boat facility siting requirements, and manatee protection.

The Boating Access Task Force convened during the summer and fall of 2005 with the purpose of identifying actions required to achieve the following vision, gleaned from the Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan: “to provide the greatest possible access to Pinellas County waters for both recreational and commercial boaters, while protecting the integrity of natural resources, and enhancing the county’s reputation as the pre-eminent boating/diving/fishing center of Florida.” Out of this effort, several specific sites were identified for further investigation into their potential for boat access, and certain regulatory priorities were identified for additional investigation as well.

In all, a significant amount of recent planning has gone into collecting relevant data, as well as identifying needs and priorities. Throughout these planning processes, coordination among key players has been ongoing, resulting in coordinated, and not dis-jointed, plans. Public involvement and municipal involvement have been components of each planning activity described above, helping to bring a balance of ideas and strategies to the planning efforts. From a strategic perspective, the key outcomes of each initiative must now be coalesced into a clear and coordinated set of deliverables so that Pinellas County can remain a premier boating and recreational destination, continue to be a leader in marine resource protection, and both retain and capitalize on this County’s distinguishing coastal character well into the future.

Success will be measured by increased beach access. In addition, more efficient boat ramp operations and improvements will enable an increase in boating access to the water. The county will become known for an extensive blueways system that is marketed in print and online. We will be working together with the municipalities, making efficient use of dollars, to measurably increase or enhance boat access opportunities. And, the boating and beach-going public will be stewards of our waters, helping us protect the essence of Pinellas County’s character – its connection to the water.

EOSRC-3 – Lead the Development of Outstanding Countywide Systems

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-3.1 – Incorporate policies of Master Plan into the County Comprehensive Plan.

Codify the key policies and visions of the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan in the County Comprehensive Plan (Recreation and Open Space Element)

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-3.2 – Revise the county’s Roadway Design Standards

Revise the county’s Roadway Design Standards to require street trees, bike lanes, wide bicycle/pedestrian paths, and safety/ADA features on all public roadways.

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-3.3 – Promote Capital Programs.

Accept and promote the priority capital programs identified in the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan.

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-3.4 – Expand boating access.

Institutionalize Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations regarding close coordination between County departments, local governments and other agencies to maximize benefits and minimize conflicts of every public and private project and initiative.

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-3.5 – Link Master Plan to transportation initiatives.

Link Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan into Livable Communities efforts, transportation CIP plans and transit concepts.

Pinellas County has long been recognized for its outstanding parks, preserves and cultural systems. In Florida’s most densely populated county, residents and visitors are still able to enjoy thousands of acres of passive parks and pristine preserves, and beautiful beaches, as well as outstanding cultural amenities such as Heritage Village and the Florida Botanical Gardens. National recognition for these systems includes being named inaugural winner of the 2005 County Leadership in Conservation Award presented by the Trust for Public Lands and National Association of Counties, being named America’s Best Beach in 2005 by internationally renowned beach expert Dr. Stephen Leatherman, aka “Dr. Beach”, receiving the 2006 Gulf Guardian Award winner by the United States Environmental Protection Agency for the Fort De Soto Park Recirculation Project, and numerous local and state awards for environmental stewardship.

In addition, the Pinellas Trail continues to be the premier example of a successful “Rails to Trails” program for urbanized areas. The county’s outstanding land-based trails system will soon be complemented by the Progress Energy Trail, providing over 30 additional miles of non-motorized transportation and recreational activity. Work is also underway on a comprehensive Blueways trail system for paddlers in almost all of the county’s waterways.

In 2004, Pinellas County initiated its first comprehensive Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan to chart its future development, enhancement, and protection of its valued resources. The plan encouraged the county to continue doing what it does best: leading the development of first-class county-wide parks, preserves, historic and cultural sites, passive regional parks, greenways, Blueways, trails, beach access, transit and roadways.

Recognizing many of the county’s parks, preserves, and cultural systems were first initiated over 25 years ago as part of the Penny for Pinellas Program, much has changed since these facilities were first envisioned. Pinellas County has become increasingly urbanized, creating new challenges and

opportunities for the future. Remaining a “leader in the development of outstanding County-wide systems” requires the ability to integrate the recreation, open space and culture system components into a comprehensive planning effort involving transportation, communications, and future land use planning.

As Pinellas County continues to urbanize, demand on recreation, open space and culture systems will evolve. Appreciation and demand for the arts and preservation of the county’s past will require increased funding and facilities. Balancing the need for active recreation facilities with the need to protect remaining open spaces will require partnerships and collaborative efforts with municipal stakeholders and other public partners. Special interest facilities such as golf courses and marinas, though serving a select population, also contribute to the quality of life that makes Pinellas County unique among many Florida counties and need to be recognized, valued and preserved.

Opportunities for conflict between segments of the population demanding strict protection of existing green spaces and those wanting more urbanized programs and facilities will undoubtedly arise. Protection of our existing resources is best accomplished through the cultivation of new resources to meet urban demands. Requiring new development to address these types of facilities may be one way to soften these conflicts, as may county investment in municipal recreation facilities, increased protection for atypical open spaces such as golf courses, and development of non-pristine areas such as Toytown to meet the need for more urbanized facilities.

Keys to success will include broad consumer engagement and close coordination between county departments, local governments, and other agencies to maximize benefits and minimize conflicts of every public and private project and initiative. Success will be determined by how well the county is able to preserve and protect the limited remaining green spaces while still being able to meet the needs of an evolving community and urban lifestyle.

EOSRC-4 – Provide Urban Levels of Active Recreation Facilities in Unincorporated Areas

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.1 – Consider revisions to County Land Development Regulations.**

Consider revisions to the County’s Land Development Regulations to require the construction of neighborhood parks in new developments.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.2 – Review open space and golf course conversion options.**

Review options for policies regarding open space and golf course land conversions.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.3 – Promote Capital Programs.**

Accept and promote the priority capital programs identified in the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.4 – Review Master Plan and funding proposal for capital program.**

Board of County Commissioners will finalize review of the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations including funding proposal for a capital program over a 15-year period through a renewed Penny for Pinellas.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.5 – Utilize MSTU grants and partnerships.**

Continue to utilize municipal services taxing unit grants and partnerships with municipalities who provide recreational services to unincorporated residents.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.6 – Forge new partnerships.**

Forge new partnerships with municipalities and non-profits to manage and operate active recreational facilities constructed with principally County resources to improve efficiencies and equitably share burdens.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.7 – Review parcels for recreational development.**

Review options for Toytown and Struthers parcels for active recreational development and redevelopment, including a review of all recreational components.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-4.8 – Partner with other public and private entities.**

Institutionalize Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations regarding close coordination between County departments, local governments and other agencies to maximize benefits and minimize conflicts between proposed projects or initiatives.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC- 4.9 – Coordinate with School Board.**

Coordinate with the School Board to provide for after hours use of school parks, playgrounds and gymnasiums.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC- 4.10 – Use Master Plan recommendations to forge new partnerships.**

Consider Pinellas County’s Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations to forge new and expanded funding partnerships with municipalities and non-profits to manage and operate recreational facilities on County sites.

Traditionally, Pinellas County Parks and Recreation has concentrated its efforts on creating and maintaining passive recreation areas which concentrate recreation activities toward unstructured, environmentally focused, recreational pursuits. Changing demographics, including the increase in families with children within the unincorporated areas, has brought increased demands for recreation facilities and programs currently available through the county’s many municipalities. For many years, this demand has been assuaged through program fee subsidies provided directly to unincorporated residents participating in municipal programs, and grant programs for construction of facilities and program development to cities and non-profit organizations serving the needs of unincorporated citizens. Funding for these initiatives has been provided by municipal services taxing unit assessed on unincorporated residents.

Increasing unincorporated demand for these services, as well as the inability for many cities to keep up with the demand created by their own residents, will possibly outpace the approximate \$2,000,000 per year provided by the municipal services taxing unit. In order to meet this demand, the county will need to contribute to the active recreation facility inventory through direct or indirect participation. This may include the construction of active recreation facilities or sports complexes on county owned property and additional partnerships with area municipalities, other government organizations such as the local school district, and non-profits including the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs.

EOSRC-5 – Inject Color and Energy into Regional Parks and Preserves.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-5.1 – Promote capital programs.**

Accept and promote the priority capital programs identified in the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan.

⇒ **Strategy EOSRC-5.2 – Invest in arts and culture programs and organizations.**

Consider Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations regarding increased investment in arts and cultural programs and

organizations. Adopt action plan to increase per capita spending to be at par with top Florida communities.

The county's regional park system and natural preserves are nationally recognized for their high quality native ecosystems in urbanized areas. The residential communities in which parks and preserves exist are protective of these areas for their beauty and important habitat for native flora and fauna. Parks and preserves offer classic passive recreation opportunities, including hiking, nature study, solitude and related activities. As related in the Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan, many of the parks have become "one dimensional" over time, offering limited activities and/or areas of interest to hold visitors' attention.

Although many parks have expanded programming opportunities or educational activities, many of the areas are underutilized. Without compromising the very qualities that make the parks and preserves so popular, the county could do more to appeal to a broader range of citizens. Initiatives such as summer camps, special events, or other similar activities are currently underway in several parks and preserves. Their growing popularity and appreciation by visitors indicates the departments could do more to satisfy visitors' need to be entertained and/or informed. This goal seeks to broaden citizen support for these facilities by appealing to a larger customer base through the addition of minor programs, activities and facilities which would inject more color, life and energy into the parks and preserve systems.

"Energizing" the parks and preserves might include the addition of signature special events, permanent and traveling art and sculpture exhibits, environmental education exhibits and kiosks, festivals, concerts, cafes and concessions. Care must be taken to not detract from the primary mission of the parks and preserves. The county must develop management tools which recognize carrying capacity, suitability of uses, potential conflicts, and protection of natural resources.

EOSRC-6 – Inject Color and Energy into Regional Parks and Preserves

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-6.1 – Codify key policies of Master Plan into Comprehensive Plan.

Codify the key policies and visions of the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan in the County Comprehensive Plan (Recreation and Open Space Element)

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-6.2 – Promote capital programs.

Accept and promote the priority capital programs identified in the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan. A common theme during the evaluation of the Comprehensive Plan during 2004 and 2005, and a common theme during the development of the Recreation, Open Space, and Culture System Master Plan during this same time, was the need to ensure adequate protection of this County's incredible system of regional passive parks and preserves from the threats of encroachment by incompatible uses.

Pinellas County is unique in how it has built its parks and preserve system. Beginning in the 1970s, a continuous series of citizen-supported referenda provided a consistent pot of money for environmental land acquisition. Essentially, once the Red Flag Charrette was completed (see discussion under the Sustainability goal) the County set about systematically acquiring the lands identified as "Red Flag" properties – meaning they had important environmental value and were likely to be otherwise developed if they were not acquired.

As the county approached build-out and property values skyrocketed, the county held the course, and increasingly leveraged its acquisition dollars with State grants so that critical properties could still be acquired. Today, out of the approximated 140 properties originally identified for acquisition, only one was not acquired. This diligence generated consistent public support for the land acquisition

referenda, including the original and subsequent Penny for Pinellas efforts. Because of citizen support, and thanks to an unwavering course by elected officials and staff, this county has a world-class system of regional passive parks and preserve lands, beach accesses and trails. So while it's easy to call us an urban county, through good planning development this county is interspersed with large publicly accessible natural areas – our very character is definable by the open spaces and recreational opportunities around us.

But we are at a critical time. A large open space can look awfully attractive, both to the private developer and the public developer, when there are a myriad of competing wants and needs – but very few areas left to accommodate those wants and needs. Where can we put a sports field or a community center? Where can we put the fire station? Where can the high tech manufacturer expand his business? Where can we put affordable housing? Where can we increase density? Where can the road project go? The list is exhaustive. But there is one fundamental point that must be interjected into the scramble to find enough land for everybody – once you begin to nibble away your open space and your natural areas, it will not take long for them to be gone, plain and simple, and we will not get them back.

These concerns have been echoed in the Comprehensive Plan and the Recreation, Open Space, Culture System Master Plan. Our parks and preserves are also impacted by what goes on around them. Most residents are familiar with the Brooker Creek Preserve and the Weedon Island Preserve, and have probably been to one or more of our regional parks, but do they stop to think about how their own actions contribute to the viability of these natural areas? The management of the uses around the preserves can be as important as management of what's inside, and informed citizens can perhaps be the best advocates for an ecosystem approach based on the premise that contributory lands do not stop at the park or preserve fence.

We have a vast resource in the natural lands and passive open space inventory of our parks and preserves. This inventory makes us one of the most important regional flyways for migratory birds, provides strategic habitat, and contributes to sustaining the biodiversity of the region. However, the key to sustaining the resource is management of the resource. Environmental management in our urban environment is challenging, requiring innovation in management techniques, critical habitat protection, and an integrated watershed approach that focuses on net environmental benefit. This management commitment does not come without a substantial cost.

Success in protecting our parks and preserves can be measured in a variety of ways. Most fundamental is no net loss of land or conversion to an active purpose or use that cannot coexist compatibly with the overall passive purpose of the park or preserve. However, the measure must also include benchmarks that address the function and health of the natural system. Benchmarks will include the completion of individual management plans, identification of critical habitat in each park or preserve, with subsequent funded commitments to restoration, enhancement and managed public access, in a manner individual to each location. Importantly, while clearly most large remaining tracts of natural land have been acquired, this does not mean all aspects of park and preserve acquisition are complete. "Closing the gaps" is an integral part of managing for ecosystem health. The incremental addition of lands to existing areas of open space will enhance both our existing recreational and environmental greenways – that is, they will close the gaps in our system. This idea of acquiring land to "close the gaps," now that most of our big acquisitions are over, has been supported by the Comprehensive Plan since 1998. Funding to take advantage of acquisition opportunities will remain important. The best measure though of our success in protecting our parks and preserves will be found in renewed public trust. The public has trusted Pinellas County since the late 1970s to be a leader in open space and environmental land acquisition and management – arguably, public trust in this regard has been integral to the success of the past two Penny's. This message should not be lost.

EOSRC-7 – Promote the Arts, Culture and Historic Preservation

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-7.1 – Codify key policies of Master Plan into Comprehensive Plan.

Codify the key policies and visions of the Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan in the County Comprehensive Plan (Recreation and Open Space Element)

⇒ Strategy EOSRC-7.2 – Invest in arts and cultural programs.

Consider Pinellas County Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan recommendations regarding increased investment in arts and cultural programs and organizations. Adopt action plan to increase per capita spending to be at par with top Florida communities.

This goal both embraces and deepens Pinellas County's long-standing commitment to arts, culture and heritage. Portions of the work of at least three county-wide groups are included in the goal. They are:

- Pinellas County Arts Council's Community Cultural Plan,
- Pinellas County Parks & Recreation Department's Recreation, Open Space, and Cultural System Master Plan
- Board of County Commissioners' Historic Preservation Task Force

In FY05, the Arts Council developed a **Community Cultural Plan** which identified needs and opportunities, defined goals, and recommended funding and actions to strengthen the county's arts, culture, and heritage, and to enhance the its economic development and quality of life for residents and visitors. Nearly 1,000 individuals participated through interviews, focus groups, a constituent survey, and random-sample polling. Fifty-eight civic, business, cultural, and education leaders served on an Advisory Committee and five task forces. The assessment phase of the Plan revealed the interesting statistics that seventy-nine percent (79%) of respondent households indicated that it is either a Very Good (39%) or Good (40%) investment for Pinellas County to improve the quality of and accessibility to arts, cultural and heritage programs. The process resulted in the following five major goals:

- Develop arts, heritage, and cultural resources to enhance Pinellas County's economy and aesthetic environment.
- Market Pinellas County as a cultural destination to increase participation by residents and visitors
- Value and assist artists and creative workers as fundamental to a vibrant community.
- Ensure lifelong education opportunities to expand knowledge and experience in and through the arts.
- Achieve increased public and private funding to strengthen Pinellas County's cultural sector.

The completed Community Cultural Plan calls for several, specific initiatives, which include:

- A cooperative, comprehensive marketing effort that includes non-profit, county and municipal institutions
- A needs assessment for artist live/work space
- A study of the economic impact of the arts in Pinellas
- The development of a Public Art & Design Master Plan.

During the same time period, the Pinellas County Parks and Recreation Department conducted a wide-ranging study that involved input from hundreds of individual citizens as well as a large number of focus groups and user-groups. The data reported in the subsequent **Recreation, Open Space and Cultural System Master Plan** recorded that the county has, in fact, long been involved in the delivery

of heritage, culture and education to residents and visitors through such existing venues as Heritage Village, Florida Botanical Gardens and the educational centers at Weedon Island and Brooker Creek Preserves.

The **Historic Preservation Task Force** is currently challenged to review, analyze and facilitate the implementation of preservation policies for historically significant structures, neighborhoods and districts throughout the county. Comprised of preservationists from all areas of the County, the Task Force is poised to advise the county commission on the implementation of effective preservation while taking into account the cultural diversity on which this county was founded.

Even without the current plans and studies, Pinellas County has a thirty year history of providing support to arts and culture through the Pinellas County Arts Council. Currently the council provides services to a cultural industry that includes:

- 110 nonprofit organizations,
- 10 major outdoor art/music/cultural festivals
- 4 major county facilities
- 6 municipal facilities
- 800+ artists in all discipline areas and 365 public school art teachers

The council's most recent grants application cycle reflects a vibrant and diverse cultural industry with 33 of the nonprofit organizations that applied to the Arts Council reporting combined operating budgets for FY05 of \$45.3 million and audiences of 2.1 million.

One of the most significant, immediate actions taken as a result of these studies has been the creation of the new Bureau of Culture, Education and Leisure and its assimilation of the Arts Council as the Cultural Affairs Department. This action will more closely align arts, culture, and heritage with future planning in the arenas of economic development, community planning, tourism and infrastructure, and will support the County's "planning to stay" initiative.

5. Environment, Open Space, Recreation and Culture Strategic Focus Area Organizational Capacity Requirements

The county has made significant investment in culture, education, environment and leisure services, programs and facilities. The 30 year history of acquiring environmental lands and passive park spaces, coupled with a consistent commitment to high operational, maintenance and management standards, has resulted in an inventory of parks and managed environmental lands like no other urban county. It is not unreasonable to suggest that much of this success is due to thirty years of continuity, stability, expertise and ingenuity of administration and staff. But the times are changing - old staff is retiring, new staff is hired, the unanticipated challenges of a built-out county threaten our traditional open spaces. New culture and leisure opportunities are also presenting themselves and reflect the changing needs of a maturing and dynamic urban center. To best position the county for meeting such comprehensive recreational, cultural, and environmental challenges, the organization must consider the following:

Internal Factors

Re-Visit and Re-Invigorate Original Motives and Values

Much of the original purpose of, and impetus for, our system of parks, preserves, beaches, trails and boat ramps is perhaps not as evident in our current decision-making. In the quest to meet all needs and to be all things, sometimes our decisions regarding environmental and recreational lands might stray from the foundation of certain long-standing commitments and plans, as we try to balance competing interests for limited land. As long time employees leave and retire, and the institutional knowledge is lost, it will be imperative to not lost track of the foundational plans and concepts, which have based on many years of methodical and incremental planning, to ensure that the vast public investment is not irretrievably lost or compromised.

Embrace New Values - Effective Coordination among Departments and Staff

Implementing this business plan will cross several departmental lines. As each department competes for the money and support to accomplish its goals and priorities, it is essential that coordination and collaboration be a priority. This requires a willingness to adapt compromise and change when necessary. The re-tooling and re-thinking of day-to-day processes is likely. Pinellas County, by resolution, is intending to become the first "sustainable" county in Florida. Perhaps more than anything, this commitment will solidify the need for every department to practice innovation, to embrace new ideas, and to work with each other to get the job done. - A fundamental tenet of a collaborative organization is the hiring, recognition, and retention of those employees with the right stuff to meet the challenge and do the job.

Succession Management and Knowledge Management

The County has been fortunate in having a history of long-term employees with extensive institutional knowledge. But as certain long term employees leave, so does the wealth of background and history. Knowledge management and consolidation of critical policies, maps, data, documentation and processes will enable the organization to move forward without losing the foundation and purpose of its original environmental and recreational commitments.

Staffing for Existing and New Initiatives

To sustain the County's level of public service and to meet the public's environmental, recreational and cultural expectations for tomorrow requires staffing. As new or enhanced initiatives come online, there will be commensurate impacts on workload and staffing. To become a leader in sustainability will mean edging towards more and more efficient government, but there will still be instances where new staff will be required to meet new and increased demands. Under-estimating or under-valuing realistic staffing needs will result in a reduced level of public service, and surely issues of morale. Of note, in the case of the environment, recreation and culture, certain staffing needs were preliminarily identified in the Glatting-Jackson Master Plan, providing a starting place to think about staffing for existing and new initiatives.

External Factors

Public Values and Expectations

We can meet the public's expectations if we pay attention to what the public is saying and if we address the internal factors that enable us to do our day-to-day job. But, clearly, the public's opinions and expectations are dynamic and diverse. The communication component of this business plan will ensure that we are not complacent, but are assessing public sentiment, needs and concerns, and responding timely and as needed, with correct and defensible findings and response. However, we must be careful to not adjust our direction just because of the squeaky wheel - we need to gauge the expectations of the majority before we alter the course.

Coordination with Other Governments

This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of implementing this business plan. We will undoubtedly continue to be pressured from the municipalities regarding the impact of unincorporated residents on municipal recreation programs and facilities. An efficient, realistic and affordable long-term solution for this problem is not yet at hand. In fact, with regard to active recreation, and recognizing the impacts of annexation, this business plan has not entirely answered just who we are ultimately planning for. But the discussion is not over – as the County prepares to significantly update its Comprehensive Plan, the discussion will continue and additional ideas and commitments will be contemplated for the long-term.

