

# 7 *Public Access to the Water*

Being mostly surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay, recreational pursuits in Pinellas County are often connected to the water. Beach activities and boating are prime examples. Statewide, concern over the availability of the public's access to sandy beaches and coastal waters has taken on increasing importance with the continued development of coastal areas. As the most densely populated county in Florida, Pinellas County has experienced extensive private development along its shorelines for the past several decades. Such development presented challenges regarding sufficient public access to the shoreline.

In response, the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners took on the task of acquiring coastal land suitable for public access for both its citizens and visitors, and has been committed to this task for many years. Since 1989, six County beach and/or shoreline access parks were opened to the public: St. Pete Beach Access Park (1989), Treasure Island Beach Access Park (1992), Indian Shores/Tiki Gardens Beach Access Park (1995), Indian Rocks Beach Access Park (1995), Boca Ciega Millennium Park (2001) and Wall Springs Park (2004). This commitment to shoreline access, associated with the comprehensive commitment to providing recreation and open space for the citizens and visitors of Pinellas County, is expected to continue into the future.

## **BEACH ACCESS**

Pinellas County has 35 miles of sandy beaches. Most of these are located on a string of barrier islands stretching from Anclote Key south along the western portion of the County down to Mullet Key. These beautiful, white sand beaches and the County's subtropical climate are major attractions for tourists and seasonal residents, as well as a source of outdoor recreation and environmental appreciation for residents of the county and the Tampa Bay region. Some public beach access sites are narrow pedestrian walkways, accessible only on foot. Others are several acres in area, have parking areas, restrooms, showers and food concessions.



*Pass-a-Grille Beach*

The Board of County Commissioners has been successful in coordinating the acquisition of beach access sites, and in funding management efforts for the beaches, along with different municipalities. It is imperative that the public and private interests in Pinellas County's sandy beaches for both resource protection and public access be balanced since both are important in maintaining the quality of life in Pinellas County.

By Florida law, the shoreline seaward of mean high water is the property of the State and open to public use. Consequently, the ability for the public to access the beaches is of the highest concern to the Board of County Commissioners. The following discussion will give an overview of beach access in Pinellas County from a countywide perspective.

Public beach access sites in Pinellas County are categorized as follows:

- Pedestrian Access: Narrow access ways allowing a person to walk to the beach. On-site parking or other facilities are not usually associated with this type of site.
- Street Ends: Public rights-of-way ending at the beach that provide access. On-site parking may or may not be available.
- County, State, and Municipal Parks and Recreation Areas:
  - County: Fort DeSoto, Sand Key, Tiki Gardens, etc.
  - State: Caladesi Island, Honeymoon Island, Anclote Key
  - Municipal: Clearwater, St. Petersburg, Pass-a-Grille, etc.
- Causeways maintained by either the State or Pinellas County:
  - State: Courtney Campbell Causeway
  - County: Belleair Causeway, Dunedin Causeway

There are 170 State, County and Municipal public beach access sites in Pinellas County, ranging in size from narrow three-foot wide pedestrian paths to the 29,000 linear feet of beach access at Fort DeSoto County Park. The list includes a few artificial beaches along the shore of Tampa Bay and certain causeways. Eleven of the access sites are available only for municipal residents in Belleair Shore and Redington Beach. **Appendix B** identifies each beach access site by jurisdiction, as well as the amenities offered at each. County Beach Access Parks, covered earlier in this Element, are also listed in **Table 3**.

The adequacy of beach access and parking facilities in Pinellas County are measured using Florida Department of Environmental Protection guidelines for granting funds for beach renourishment. The guideline states that at least two access sites and 100 public parking spaces should be available for every one mile of beach. The result of a recent analysis of the County's barrier islands concluded that the standard was being adequately met, with one exception: central Clearwater Beach is slightly deficient in parking based on the standard. Although a parking deficiency was found, public bus service is provided by the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority from the mainland to this area and along the Clearwater Beach barrier island.

Please refer to **Table 10** for a breakdown of the latest attendance figures and available parking spaces at County parks with beach access. The fact that 8,409,591 people attended County parks with beach access in fiscal year 2005/2006 attests to their popularity.

County-owned beach access parks, discussed in a previous section, are shown in **Figure 4**. Regional and selected municipal public beach access areas (those larger than one acre) are depicted in **Figure 10**. See also **Appendix B**, which includes information on location, jurisdiction, acreage, length of beachfront, boat ramps, parking and other facilities provided, as well as a map series depicting all beach access points.

**TABLE 10**  
**ATTENDANCE AND PARKING SPACES AT COUNTY PARKS**  
**WITH BEACH ACCESS**

COUNTY PARK	ATTENDANCE FY 2005-2006	PARKING SPACES AVAILABLE
Fort De Soto Park	3,179,504	3,242
Fred Howard Park	2,132,469	1,035
Indian Rocks Beach Access	340,662	79
Madeira Beach Access	245,396	100
Redington Shores Beach Access	374,833	180
Sand Key Park	1,145,312	778
St. Pete Beach Access	494,554	235
Treasure Island Beach Access	316,449	67
Tiki Gardens/Indian Shores Beach Access	180,412	172
<b>Totals</b>	<b>8,409,591</b>	<b>5,888</b>

Source: Pinellas County Department of Culture, Education and Leisure, 2006

### **SHORELINE ACCESS**

In addition to beach access, it is important to evaluate what is termed shoreline access - tracts of land or facilities that provide public access to the shoreline other than sandy beaches. In most instances, these access points are publicly owned and include causeways, street ends, natural preserves, and private and public piers and bridges. Shoreline access provides the public with a variety of uses, such as open space, boat launching facilities, recreation facilities and important opportunities for scenic vistas of the County's shoreline and open waters. Public shoreline access is important in preserving both physical and visual access to the County's coastal assets.

#### ***Parks***

Parks provides many of the opportunities available to the public for shoreline access. The largest parks are operated by the Board of County Commissioners. Philippe Park on Old Tampa Bay and War Veterans' Memorial Park on Long Bayou offer users shoreline access. Please refer to the 'Resource-Based Regional Parks' section of this Element for a description

**FIGURE 10**  
**REGIONAL & SELECTED MUNICIPAL PUBLIC BEACH**  
**ACCESS AREAS IN PINELLAS COUNTY**

of each of the parks under the auspices of the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, including the two newest sites that provide shoreline access: Boca Ciega Millennium Park on Boca Ciega Bay and Wall Springs Park on Boggy Bayou. Two additional sites that remain under development, the Belle Harbor Marina in Tarpon Springs and the Sutherland Bayou Boat Ramp (formerly the Palm Harbor Resort) in Palm Harbor, were purchased in 2006. Many municipal parks, often small in size, are unevenly distributed along the shoreline. These access sites provide either limited facilities (e.g., an open space vista) or a number of facilities including restrooms, picnic shelters, docks, fishing piers and boat ramps.

### **Causeways**

The causeways in Pinellas County provide numerous opportunities for access to the shoreline by actually creating shoreline where there was none before. Some of the causeways in the County include the Courtney Campbell Causeway, Howard Park Causeway, Memorial Causeway, Pinellas Bayway, the causeway leading to the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, Gandy Causeway and the causeway leading to the Howard Frankland Bridge.



*Windsurfing off a Pinellas Causeway*

### **Bridges and Catwalks**

In Pinellas County, some of the most heavily used shoreline access facilities are the numerous bridges. Many of these bridges are constructed with a narrow pedestrian walkway, which is sometimes referred to as a catwalk. Some of the bridges are functioning or abandoned railroad bridges or trestles, but most are used for automobile travel. The primary activities associated with these public access facilities are fishing and cast netting.

While there are many bridges in the County, some do not offer good shoreline access due to restricted parking or other limitations. The bridges in Pinellas County that provide public access for fishing are the Gandy Bridge, Tierra Verde and Fort DeSoto Causeway bridges, John's Pass Bridge, Belleair Causeway Bridge, Memorial Causeway Bridge, and the Dunedin Causeway Bridge. Public parking is available at these bridges.

### **Piers**

In Pinellas County piers vary considerably in size, purpose and construction, and public access is provided by both the public and private sectors. The most notable is The Pier in downtown St. Petersburg, which extends into Tampa Bay. This large facility provides users with opportunities for pleasant walks, shopping, dining and fishing. All of the other piers in the County are more limited in the variety of services they provide the public. Most provide scenic vistas and fishing opportunities, and many are located within County and municipal parks.

**Table 11** on the following page lists County-owned and operated shoreline access sites and other public shoreline access sites located within the unincorporated area.

**TABLE 11  
PINELLAS COUNTY PUBLIC SHORELINE ACCESS SITES**

<b>FACILITY<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>BOAT RAMP LANES</b>	<b>ACREAGE</b>	<b>PARKING</b>
Belleair Boat Ramp	10	5	146
Belle Harbor Marina <sup>2</sup>	-	2.52	-
Boca Ciega Millennium Park	0	186.57	309
Crystal Beach Park	0	2.06	20
Sutherland Bayou Boat Ramp <sup>2</sup>	-	5.49	-
Park Boulevard Boat Ramp	6	6.5	107
Philippe Park	1	122	670
Pop Stansell Park	1	7	12
Wall Springs Park	0	200.4	135
War Veterans Memorial Park	6	122	374
Gandy Causeway	0	N/A	Unimproved parking only
I-275 Scenic Overlook	0	N/A	Unimproved parking only
Pinellas County Bayway	0	N/A	Unimproved parking only
Cooper's Point	0	136	0
Gateway Preserve (Weedon Island North)	0	1,768	Unimproved parking only
Mobbly Bayou Wilderness Preserve	0	396	Unimproved parking only
Weedon Island Preserve	0	1,396	166

Source: Pinellas County Park Department and Pinellas County Planning Department, 2007.

<sup>1</sup>These sites include all facilities owned and operated by Pinellas County and any additional public access sites located in the unincorporated area.

<sup>2</sup> New acquisition currently under development



## SCENIC OVERLOOKS AND COASTAL CORRIDORS

Several County-owned facilities in Pinellas County and roadways in unincorporated Pinellas County offer outstanding scenic coastal vistas. These include: Fred Howard Causeway, Gulf Drive in Crystal Beach, Dunedin Causeway, Belleair Causeway, the scenic drive in War Veterans Memorial Park, Park Street between Park Boulevard and 46th St. N., Pinellas Bayway, Fort DeSoto Park, Gandy Bridge and Causeway, Howard Frankland Bridge and overlook, and the State Road 580 Bridge in Safety Harbor. Additional scenic vistas include the Bayside Bridge on Tampa Bay, portions of Gulf Boulevard along the barrier islands, portions of Alternate US-19 between Clearwater and the Pasco County line, the Pinellas Trail at the Cross Bayou Bridge and along St. Joseph Sound in north Dunedin, and the trail along Stevenson's Creek in Clearwater.



*Vista along Gulf Drive in Crystal Beach*

## BOAT RAMPS

As of July 2006, there were 109 combined unincorporated and municipal boat ramps available for public use in Pinellas County. These facilities and their amenities are inventoried in **Appendix C**. The number and distribution of boat ramps has remained relatively static for a number of years, with a significant majority of them located in the southern part of the County. Please see **Figure 11** for a depiction of countywide boat ramp locations. County-managed boat ramp parks, discussed in a previous section of this Element, are also listed in **Table 4** and mapped in **Figure 4**. For an in-depth analysis and more information on the future of boat ramp and waterway access in Pinellas County, please see the 'Boat Facility Siting and Resource Protection' section of the *Coastal Management Element*. See also the 'Strengthening Connections to the Water' section of this *Recreation, Open Space and Culture Element*.

## MARINAS

A countywide marina inventory conducted in 2006 revealed that there were 4,889 wet slips and 5,192 dry storage spaces in Pinellas County. This total does not include condominium or property owner association marinas that are unavailable to the public. Please see **Appendix D** for a detailed listing of marina facilities and their amenities. **Figure 12** identifies marina locations throughout the County. The supply of publicly-available marina space has declined the last few years, primarily due to the surge in demand for waterfront property and higher business costs. This is an important consideration in a highly developed County with a large number of registered pleasure boats. Fortunately, the recent cooling of the housing market has largely halted the decline and stabilized marina slip and storage space numbers. In an attempt to help offset the losses, Pinellas County purchased its first marina property in 2006. For more information, please see the 'Strengthening Connections to the Water' section in this Element and the 'Boat Facility and Resource Protection' section of the *Coastal Management Element*.

**FIGURE 11**  
**COUNTYWIDE BOAT RAMP LOCATIONS**



**FIGURE 12**  
**COUNTYWIDE MARINA LOCATIONS**

## PINELLAS COUNTY BLUEWAYS

Pinellas County's 587 miles of coastline provide ample and diverse opportunities for paddlers to recreate and enjoy the natural coastal amenities and waterway resources of the area, and to access various points of interest along the way. The waters of Pinellas County offer a wide range of paddling opportunities for all levels of experience. In late 2006, the Planning and Park Departments finalized a final draft *Guide to Pinellas County Blueways* and the corresponding *Online Guide to Pinellas County*



*Blueways*, both the culmination of a yearlong effort to provide Tampa Bay residents and visitors with a free, easy-to-access, comprehensive source of information regarding paddling opportunities in Pinellas County's coastal and inland waters. The *Guide* provides detailed information on 49 separate launch points, amenities, and ideas on what kayakers and canoeists can expect while traversing the diverse assortment of paddle trails covering almost every corner of Pinellas County. The *Online Guide* is the first of its kind in the area, and can be accessed at [www.pinellascounty.org/plan/blueways/default.htm](http://www.pinellascounty.org/plan/blueways/default.htm).

The development of the *Guide to Pinellas County Blueways* was a cooperative effort between Pinellas County government, several local municipalities, paddling enthusiasts and interested citizens. Pinellas County Parks and Recreation staff and Planning Department staff conducted a series of meetings, produced a series of maps for discussion and mark up, and developed paddle logs for use in the field to collect information on the unique attributes of each proposed trail segment. Local paddle groups donated their time and effort to paddle and document each proposed launch point and trail. In addition, County staff took extra effort to promote and encompass the local segment of the future Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail (developed by the Florida Office of Greenways and Trails) into the *Guide*. See **Figure 13** for a depiction of the Pinellas County Blueways network. Please see **Appendix E** for a detailed listing of blueway launch sites and their amenities.

The main goal of the *Guide to Pinellas County Blueways* is the promotion of access to, and appreciation of, the surrounding waters that are so paramount to the quality of life and attractiveness of Pinellas County. There are a significant number of paddlers in the area, as documented by the large number of registered canoes (according to State statistics, as of 2006 Pinellas County has the largest number of registered canoes in Florida). The *Guide to Pinellas County Blueways* is designed to provide these users with fresh ideas on where to recreate, and help out-of-town visitors decide on where to paddle as well. With public access to coastal areas becoming more scarce and difficult to provide, strengthening connections to the water is a primary goal for Pinellas County. The *Guide to Pinellas County Blueways* is also beneficial to the natural environment through its promotion of a low-impact recreational activity. Wildlife appreciation and environmental stewardship is a major theme throughout the *Guide*. The completion and printing of a brochure version of the *Guide* is expected sometime in 2008.

**FIGURE 13**  
**PINELLAS COUNTY BLUEWAYS NETWORK**