

***Parks are for People while Preserves are for Nature.***

The Hernando County Administrator is promoting a "concept" to create an aquatic park playground and public meeting venue, disingenuously disguised as a Nature Center, within the boundaries of the Weeki Wachee Preserve. The concept, as presented to the public, is fatally flawed, suffering from a misunderstanding of the fundamental and mutually incompatible differences between a Park and a Preserve. Because of this fatal flaw, the Gulf Coast Conservancy opposes this intrusion of disruptive public activity into the preserve. Please contact the Hernando BOCC and ask them to seek other location options for public park amenities that are not in fundamental conflict with the science-based Preserve Management Plan. The plan can be viewed on the SWFWMD website. Simply stated, Parks are for People while Preserves are for Nature.

At two public meeting to introduce the "concept", public response was overwhelmingly negative, approaching 90% disapproval as reported by local newspapers. Nonetheless, Hernando County staff has forged ahead and the BOCC has scheduled a vote for July 8<sup>th</sup>.

Any reading of the history leading to the acquisition of the land that makes up the core of the Preserve shows that the clear intent of the laws that provided Preserve funding envisioned only limited low-impact public access. The Management Plan lists specific activities that allow appreciation of natural ecosystems with an absolute minimum disruption to the environment. The "concept" presented by the County Administrator ignores the guidance provided by the Plan and ignores the laws that allowed state funds to be used to acquire the Preserve, and does great harm to the fundamental principles of preserving natural systems and protecting water quality that underlie SWFWMDs's existence.

During the development of the Management Plan, and as a concession to the recognized need for additional public swimming areas in Hernando County, the Plan designated a small (approximately 8 acres) site at the northwest corner of the lake complex, accessed from the Shoal Line Blvd. entrance, as suitable for public swimming. This site, with quick access from a public road, would approximately double the area available for public swimming in the County.

Rather than accept this reasonable accommodation offered by SWFWMD, County staff chose to develop a grandiose "concept" that severely degrade the natural systems that are presently functioning with the Preserve.

Apart from its overall erroneous and damaging central theme, there are specific proposals within the "concept" that must be addressed:

- The state-granted funding was apparently attained by styling the "concept" as an education center. The amount of land assigned to the Nature Center, including only 14 parking spaces, indicates that the Nature Center is designed as a smoke screen to hide the intent of the

"concept," which is to allow disruptive public activity in an area designated for wildlife protection. A public beach, playground, athletic field, cabanas and vendors do not facilitate the appreciation of nature. These facilities envisioned in the "concept" are incompatible with the authorized uses specified in the Plan.

- Further, there is no indication in the "concept" of the source of the matching funds required by the state grant. The Gulf Coast Conservancy has seen Hernando's environmentally sensitive lands acquisition program funds raided by the County in the past for such non-intended uses as mosquito control. To use these designated funds to build a public park would emasculate the fund and pervert the intent under which they were acquired.
- The proposed location of the "Nature Center" and public park will deny wildlife currently residing within the Preserve access to a significant portion of the Preserve. Affected wildlife includes several listed species of birds and plants. Impact on the bear population will be especially severe as this species already suffers a critical habitat shortage. Core range for the imperiled Chassahowitzka population of the Florida Black Bear would be reduced by several hundred acres, even though increasing the range available to this population is a fundamental part of FWC's bear management plan. Black Bears are an umbrella species, and habitat that serves their needs also allows smaller mammals, birds, reptile, amphibians, insects, trees, shrubs, grasses and aquatic plants to thrive.

Bluntly put, Hernando County staff proposes to build a public venue on land it does not own, in violation of the regulations concerning the use of that land, using money it does not have without violating the proposal under which state tax dollars were acquired, that has almost no public support, with no consideration of ongoing costs, unaddressed safety and liability issues and whose primary justification is that people want more access to Gulf beaches, which the "concept" does not provide.

This is a monumentally wrong-headed idea and the Gulf Coast Conservancy urges the Hernando County Board of County Commissions to reject it out of hand.