



Legislation Text

File #: 19-0179, **Version:** 1

Agenda Item Name:

Four Creeks Preserve Trail System Development

Presenter:

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Description:

Four Creeks Preserve Trail System Development

Recommended Action:

Authorize staff to move forward with development of trail system with two walk-in access points at Four Creeks Preserve as described herein.

Prior Board Motions:

November 8, 2016 - The BoCC moved to place the Weiss property on the active acquisition list.

June 12, 2018 - In response to BoCC Regular Meeting Agenda Item #3 on the 5pm agenda, the BoCC moved to approve and authorize the necessary steps for acquisition of the Weiss property. The unanimous motion included direction for staff to follow normal procedures and due diligence for the acquisition, and additionally directed staff to:

1. develop a joint management strategy with the City of Gainesville,
2. work towards the property being placed on the Registry of Public Lands following acquisition,
3. open a basic trail system to the public within one year (including a basic trailhead and kiosk).

August 13, 2019 - During public comment in the 5pm BoCC Public Hearing, the BoCC moved that staff bring the issue of public access to Four Creeks Preserve and associated parking strategy along NW 37th Street to a BoCC public meeting so that the public and Board is informed of decisions being made.

Fiscal Consideration:

Management costs of approximately \$5,400 have been spent for initial public access to the preserve and was incorporated into the General Fund operating budget of the Parks and Conservation Lands Department; this was done at the direction of the Board. On-going costs will be minimal and a management plan will be developed that will include this land.

Background:

INTRODUCTION

Four Creeks Preserve is a 715 acre preserve located in northwest Gainesville. The preserve is the first Alachua County Forever conservation land acquisition under the citizen-supported Wild Spaces Public Places referendum passed by voters in 2016. The property was purchased on September 26,

2018. Alachua County purchased 470 acres, for \$2.88 million, and the City of Gainesville purchased 245 acres for \$1.5 million. The preserve contains a mixture of pine-dominated uplands, with over 200 acres of wetlands. The preserve protects portions of four different creeks, including Turkey Creek and Blues Creek, and the watersheds of Hogtown Creek and Possum Creek.

In response to direction given by the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners on June 12, 2018, the Parks and Conservation Lands Department has been working toward providing public access to the Four Creeks Preserve (formerly the Weiss property) by September 28, 2019. This preserve is in a highly developed area of Gainesville, with neighborhoods adjacent to the property on the north and south sides, and with US Highway 441 on the east boundary, and NW 43rd Street on the west boundary. Staff has conducted the following activities toward achieving this public access timeline:

- conducted on-site surveying and planning to identify a safe public access option and other issues of site security and resource sensitivity.
- coordinated with the City of Gainesville (COG) Parks and Recreation Department, and City of Gainesville Public Works Department regarding access, trail planning, signage, and parking.
- communicated with citizens and neighbors via HOA contact, direct mailout to 1,200 recipients, press release, media contact, a public meeting, and direct personal contact.

Staff review has determined that given timeline constraints, the most feasible initial public access strategy would be to allow a walk-in entrance on the NE corner of the property, and a walk-in entrance on the southern boundary via NW 37th Street, which dead-ends at a COG utility right-of-way running along the preserve south boundary. Staff also acknowledges the right of all citizens to access a public preserve once it is open to the public. In recognition of the likelihood of visitors driving to the southern entrance both from within the adjacent neighborhoods and elsewhere, staff sought options to allow legal parking in this location. Initial communication with the COG Public Works Department indicated that roadside parking on NW 37th Street would be allowable. A public walking trail has been identified using existing trails on the property. Public access will be functionally dependent upon rainfall levels due the nature and locations of the wetlands on site. This strategy was presented to 67 attendees at the public meeting held on July 18, 2019. Staff also pursued other potential parking solutions, without finding an option that could be executed within the established timeline.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

The preserve neighbors are supportive of the County's acquisition of the preserve and its protection from development. Many neighbors are excited about having access to the preserve for passive recreational use. However, some portion of the neighbors are concerned about the proposed strategy to allow citizens/visitors from outside the adjacent neighborhoods to utilize NW 37th Street to access the preserve, and to park in this area. Concerns have been primarily expressed about:

- impact to the shoulder and ditch of NW 37th St. from vehicles parking along the roadside
- proximity of vehicles and visitors in this location to the four fenced personal residential properties adjacent to the dead-end of NW 37th St.
- general increase in non-resident entrance into a quiet neighborhood, with associated concerns about crime, traffic, and privacy.

SUMMARY

In response to public concerns, combined with input from multiple departments within the City of Gainesville, the current opening strategy incorporates the following:

1. Open the preserve on September 28th, 2019, with 2 walk-in entrances, and with no parking provided. To open the preserve by this date, it will not be possible to establish authorized parking either on or off the preserve. Public information would emphasize pedestrian and bicycle access. Staff will coordinate with the City of Gainesville to restrict parking on soft road shoulders.
2. Prior to opening, hold a public meeting on site at the proposed south entrance, to allow members of the public to ask questions and voice additional concerns about the walk-in entrance access plan.
3. Focus staff time and County resources on development of a management plan for the preserve, following the standard process of review and vetting by staff, Management, members of the public and partners. Through this process, identify the most appropriate location for a main public entrance to the preserve (at this time anticipated to be located off NW 43rd Street).
4. Finalize Interlocal Agreement with the City of Gainesville to facilitate management of Four Creeks Preserve both within and across ownership boundaries.