

***Protecting and Restoring
Pinellas County's
Natural and Cultural Heritage***



ISSUE: PROTECTING AND RESTORING PINELLAS COUNTY'S NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Pinellas County's rich natural heritage is part of the foundation of the quality of life enjoyed by residents and visitors, while the areas natural amenities and peninsular location have played a central role in defining the County's image. An awareness of these natural amenities and their protection, restoration, and management remains at the forefront of all planning efforts aimed at enhancing the County's quality of life. The County will evaluate the effectiveness of the Plan in protecting and restoring the natural heritage by focusing on the following topics:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to improve surface water quality. Continue to emphasize an inter-governmental watershed approach to managing the County's surface waters. Determine the potential impact of development and redevelopment on compliance with Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) requirements, on the commitment to improving conditions in Tampa Bay, and on compliance with NPDES permit requirements.
- Reevaluate the funding and maintenance of the County stormwater system, and determine the most effective and efficient approach for managing stormwater on a countywide basis,
- Since the 1970s, Pinellas County has had a very successful program and policies for acquiring, protecting, and managing open space and environmental lands. Furthermore, strong public support for protecting natural habitats and open space persists throughout the County. The EAR will evaluate how to most effectively continue the program's implementation in a highly urbanized county.

DISCUSSION OF THE ISSUE

Surface Water Quality and New Regulations

Pinellas County is virtually surrounded by water, and with about 55 inches of rainfall a year on average, a lot of water falls on Pinellas County! What does not evaporate, infiltrate, or become transpired by plants, makes its way to a stormwater pond, or to a natural or man-made creek or drainageway, and eventually a significant percentage of that water returns to the Gulf of Mexico or Tampa Bay. It is clear then, that the quality of surface water runoff in Pinellas County is critical to the quality and health of our surrounding coastal waters as well as dependent marine resources and industries.

This is not a new finding, and in fact, the health of the waters surrounding Pinellas County has improved significantly since the 1970s and 1980s with the implementation of more modern stormwater management techniques and water quality regulations, and the implementation of advanced wastewater treatment. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Pinellas County was one of the first local governments in Florida to initiate a systematic evaluation of each of its 52 drainage basins and to subsequently identify improvements and projects that addressed both flood control and water quality. In 1989, the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan committed the County to a long-term program of comprehensive watershed planning and management that would serve to update the original basin plans, as well as provide additional emphasis on the interdependence of water quantity, water quality and the health of dependent biological resources and habitat requirements. The Comprehensive Plan also committed the County to an ongoing program of surface water quality monitoring in order to assess the health of our surface water resources, to help prioritize watersheds for the development of management plans and strategies, and to determine the effect and benefit of the ultimate watershed plans.

Pinellas County has also been a major player in regional initiatives aimed at improving, conserving and managing our coastal waters by being a major signatory to the Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP), and committing to funding and implementing a contributory action plan containing projects directly affecting the conservation and management of Tampa Bay. The relationship with the TBEP is positive and ongoing, and the benefits to our coastal waters are being realized by, for example, the gradual restoration of seagrass beds and the concomitant health of dependent species and therefore, the health of the commercial and recreational fishing industry.

Watersheds do not follow political boundaries, which means the success of watershed planning in Pinellas County has come through coordination and partnership with other governments and agencies. The TBEP provides one forum for successful coordination, and Pinellas County also has a particularly strong relationship with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, both as a technical partner and a funding partner, in watershed plan development and implementation. In addition, the degree of urbanization in the County, coupled with the number of local governments, means that most, if not all, of our watershed plans involve a neighboring government or governments. Interlocal agreements then, continue to be a successful tool, and integral part, of the watershed planning and project implementation process.

In the early 1990s, the Clean Water Act promulgated the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) regulations and permit requirements. The new requirements were initially touted in many professional circles as surely being onerous and burdensome, but Pinellas County and several municipalities quickly saw the potential for opportunity. Pinellas County quickly convened an intergovernmental NPDES team comprised of co-permittees (i.e., Pinellas County and most of the municipal governments in the County) to assess and

address the new requirements, and to find ways to most efficiently address the permit responsibilities. That Team continues to function today, almost 15 years later. County staff from Environmental Management, Public Works and Planning work together (as the County's lead team) and facilitate the meetings and ongoing coordination with the municipalities and the regulatory agencies. One of the biggest successes of the Intergovernmental NPDES Team is simply the ongoing coordination, and the sharing of ideas and resources that have led to, for example, special recognition by the NPDES permit reviewers of the extent and quality of stormwater and water quality education underway in this County. Additional successes attributable to ongoing NPDES coordination are the nature and quality of the water quality monitoring network and analysis, information sharing and enforcement related to illicit stormwater discharges and the management of runoff, as well as ongoing professional development.

Pinellas County and the municipalities can boast many successes when it comes to managing, protecting and restoring its surface water resources, and with watershed initiatives, permit requirements, and land development regulations in place, the commitment to improving and sustaining the quality of our surface waters has been strong.

But Pinellas County is at a critical point in time. With little or no vacant land available, redevelopment of the County lies ahead. But to date, redevelopment discussions rarely, if at all, acknowledge the strides in surface water management and water quality made over the past decades largely through local government diligence and commitment (and regulation). These discussions do not address the fact that recreational and commercial boating and fishing are top industries in this County - industries that are completely dependent on the quality of the water, and they do not refer to the regulatory horizon that includes Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements and the regulatory and financial consequences of not meeting surface water pollutant load reduction targets.

Too much has been gained over the past decades, and planning for redevelopment must include a broad and factual environmental discussion. Importantly, redevelopment offers a real opportunity for individual contributions to water quality improvement, and, with the right development review structure, the developer and government should be able to work compatibly to achieve a quality project with a positive contribution to the surface water environment. Revisions to, at a minimum, the Surface Water Management Element and the Future Land Use Element will provide the support for the creative regulation, incentives and programs to ensure the protection and improvement of our County's most important and defining feature.

In addition, the Surface Water Management Element will need to be amended to better support the value of regional stormwater management solutions, but we will need to better determine the appropriate role of the local government versus the developer, not only in providing the stormwater infrastructure but also in ensuring that redevelopment activities help meet our water quality improvement

goals, support our regional surface water improvement commitments and address new regulatory requirements.

The Future of Stormwater and Surface Water Management Funding

The future method of funding for stormwater and surface water management is currently under review. The Penny for Pinellas has been the primary funding source for capital projects and watershed planning initiatives since its inception. That money is leveraged whenever possible with grants, or for multi-jurisdictional projects, with interlocal agreements for shared funding. The pace of annexations and resultant differences of opinion regarding drainage responsibilities has been one impetus behind exploring the current approach to funding. The Pinellas County Charter does allow the County to exercise countywide authority for major drainage - which it has not exercised to date - and to therefore fund a countywide program. One idea under discussion is collection of a stormwater utility fee. If a countywide program were to be implemented, the discussion of funding and fees would be complex, particularly as several municipalities already collect a stormwater fee. Discussions on this matter continue and at this time, no decisions have been made. The Surface Water Management Element and the Capital Improvements Element will be amended to reflect the status and/or outcome.

Protecting Natural Habitats and Open Spaces

Pinellas County and its citizens are models when it comes to continuity in the acquisition, protection and management of open space and environmental lands. Since the 1970s, and the completion of the Red Flag Charrette (the identification of approximately 140 endangered and critical environmental lands by a task team of scientists, governments, citizens and agencies, targeted for public acquisition and protection), Pinellas County can boast 7 consecutive successful citizen-supported referenda supporting the acquisition of passive parks and environmental land. Approximately 1,150 acres of environmental lands and parklands have been purchased since 1998 alone, using Penny for Pinellas revenue, matched with a series of successful grants from the Florida Communities Trust, the Office of Greenways and Trails and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. With most, if not all, of the large undeveloped tracts of environmental land already in public ownership, what is next?

One area of focus will be to “fill in the gaps.” Consistent with the County’s multi-year emphasis on connecting greenspaces and greenways, and with probably all of the large environmental tracts purchased already, the shift will be to finding ways to piece together smaller tracts for incorporation into the larger greenway system, enhancing both the recreational and biological opportunities and connections. Again, redevelopment offers a challenge and an opportunity in this regard.

The County's development review process, in partnership with the development community, can be one way to continue to "fill in the gaps," enhancing the recreational and environmental greenway system through easements, land donation and land swaps. In fact, making this idea into a win-win partnership can be one component for consideration in an incentive-based development review process.

Pinellas County is recognized as a leader in environmental stewardship. Its environmental programs, coupled with the continuity of commitment and support reflected in the Comprehensive Plan, and the creativity and innovation in public outreach and education, have brought significant recognition to Pinellas County. In fact, County Planning staff was recently made aware that the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan, the environmental planning process, and how the plans and policies are implemented is actually required reading at the Texas A&M University.

It is imperative then, that the County maintain its commitment to environmental excellence; The County can be a model of how environmental sustainability can co-exist with the urban landscape and economy. It is important to remember that what sets this County aside from so many others are its unique natural surroundings. Our coastal setting, with water on almost all sides, is key to why we remain a desirable residential and vacation haven. In addition, our incredible system of passive parks and preservelands intersperse the urban fabric and provide respite for the public (and wildlife) from the pace and activity of urban life. Without exception, the level of planning, programming and commitment that has allowed this must stay in place, and not be compromised by the critical juncture of build-out.

Consequently, it will be imperative that all discussions regarding redevelopment and the future of the County recognize the economic contribution of the County's natural environment – it is why many of us have chosen to live here in the first place. Redevelopment activities must contribute positively to all facets of the County's fabric. This means that the County, and its development review processes must adjust so they can facilitate the desirable renewal projects needed to sustain the economy, but also ensure that each project contributes to meeting the County's environmental goals in the process.

Amendments to the Natural, Historic and Cultural Resources Element, the Recreation and Open Space Element and the Future Land Use Element, at a minimum, will be required to incorporate the results of the review by the Environmental Work Group, and to ensure that, overall, the commitment and direction for the County's environmental future remains strong in our climate of redevelopment and that the County continues to be recognized as an environmental leader in this Country.