

I. Introduction

In April 2003, Lake County began developing a 10 year Parks and Recreation Master Plan. While Lake County has a parks and recreation division, it has lacked a clear sense of direction and purpose in terms of providing an efficient and comprehensive system of parks, recreation, and natural areas. The Master Plan has been drafted with the objective of creating a framework for the delivery of recreation services, trails, and environmental lands to citizens and visitors alike, to narrow the focus of recreation delivery, and to work toward creating a countywide system of recreation that meshes well with the system of parks and recreation opportunities provided by the cities and towns within Lake County.

Lake County's Countywide Parks and Recreation System Master Plan was developed using a three-pronged approach that examined existing parks and recreation facilities, analyzed how recreation services are provided throughout the County, and used a grass roots public involvement program to gather public input. Three key areas, parks, environmental land, and trails, are addressed in the Master Plan. Additional elements of the Master Plan include data and analysis of each key area addressed, a mission statement and objectives that define the vision for recreation in Lake County, specific recommendations to implement the master plan, and an appendix containing additional documentation related to the Master Plan.

1.0 Planning Process

The planning process used for the development of the Master Plan had three major components, 1) interviews with cities, towns, and other recreation providers, 2) public workshops to gather input, and 3) an analysis of the County's existing parks and recreation service delivery system. As the process progressed it became clear that the Master Plan needed to address trails and environmental lands in addition to parks and recreation facilities. Other issues became apparent after meeting with other recreation providers and stakeholders, particularly the lack of capacity in recreation facilities and the impact of unincorporated residents on the municipal recreation providers. This Master Plan seeks to correct these issues by creating a more efficient County system and focusing specifically on parks, trails, and environmental lands.

In February of 2004, the project team formally presented the recommendations of the Master Plan at four public workshops held throughout the County. The Plan as a whole was well-received and the team was given excellent feedback on a variety of issues. Some suggestions were incorporated into the Master Plan, while others were considered, but not necessarily included in the Plan.



In April of 2004, the draft recommendations and executive summary of the Master Plan were presented to the Board of County Commissioners for their review and comment. The recommendations were accepted with the exception of the location of two parks in the Northeast Recreation Planning Area. Instead of one community park and one regional park, the Commissioners voted to have two community parks with the community park near Umatilla having a larger service area.

2.0 Mission Statement, Objectives, and Strategies

A mission statement and objectives were developed to help guide the County's parks, trails, and environmental lands programs. The County should consider the mission statement and objectives before making decisions related to the parks and recreation system. If the mission and objectives do not support a specific action, the action should not be carried out.

Mission Statement: *Lake County will facilitate the development and management of parks and facilities for a recreation system that includes environmental lands, trails, and other recreational opportunities that meet the diverse needs of a growing community.*



The following objectives and strategies provide the framework in establishing the steps necessary to provide quality recreation opportunities for citizens and visitors to Lake County:

Objective 1.0 - The residents in Lake County are our most important customer.

- 1.1 Lake County will develop, operate, and promote a parks and recreation system that provides all residents with quality leisure opportunities.
- 1.2 The Lake County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board shall include citizen representatives to further the mission envisioned by this Master Plan. A representative from the Public Lands Acquisition Advisory Committee (PLAAC) and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (B/PAC) or two additional seats shall also be included on the advisory board to represent environmental lands and trails interests.

Objective 2.0 - Recognize the importance of communicating our presence to residents and visitors alike.

- 2.1 Lake County Parks and Recreation shall coordinate with Lake County Economic Development and Tourism to help promote Lake County's parks, trails, cultural events, natural areas, and special events to visitors.
- 2.2 Lake County should support the development of top-notch athletic and community facilities to attract state, regional, and even national tournaments and events to Lake County. Such facilities should also be available to residents of Lake County for cultural and athletic programs when not hosting special events.
- 2.3 Lake County shall develop and distribute a promotional guide for parks and recreation facilities, environmental lands, and trails owned and operated by the County. Such brochures and promotional materials should be available at all public facilities, schools, libraries, and other public facilities throughout the County.
- 2.4 A logo and signage program should be initiated that becomes an identifier for the Lake County parks and recreation system, strengthening the image and recognition factor by residents of, and visitors to, Lake County.
- 2.5 Lake County should establish a recreation resource center or clearinghouse to provide the public with up to date information about all recreation providers, programs, and facilities.
- 2.6 Lake County should develop a presence on the County's website specifically for the Parks and Recreation Division that is updated regularly and contains useful information regarding programs, facilities, an interactive map, other recreation providers, volunteer opportunities, and upcoming events.

Objective 3.0 - There are different expectations and service requirements based on the nature of the urban, suburban, or rural character of the different areas within the county. Lake County will strive to locate facilities that address these differences.

3.1 Recreation Planning Areas (RPAs) will be established based on location, growth patterns, and the individual character of each particular area.

3.1.1 Northwest Lake County (SR 27 Corridor) – This area (from the turnpike north) includes Lady Lake, Fruitland Park and parts of Leesburg in the north. Lake County should coordinate with the towns of Lady Lake and Fruitland Park to provide a regional park with facilities such as athletic fields and cultural/civic space.

3.1.2 South Central Lake County (SR 50 Corridor) – This area includes the towns of Mascotte, Groveland, Clermont, Minneola, and Montverde located along SR 50 in south Lake County. Rapid growth and a large number of residents interested in an active lifestyle characterize this area of the County. Team sports as well as individual sports are extremely popular. Lake County should consider partnering with the National Training Center to develop regional high quality athletic and wellness facilities, as well as coordinate with Mascotte and Groveland in developing their recreation facilities and programs.

3.1.3 Southeast Lake County (Four Corners/Citrus Ridge) – This area is uniquely situated in four (4) counties midway between the expanding Orlando and Lakeland urban areas. Unique issues face the developing area because of the many local governments and agencies with jurisdiction in the ninety square mile area. Lake County should plan for community facilities to support the expanding population as well as being an active participant in the overall planning for the area.

3.1.4 Central Lake County (Golden Triangle) – This area includes Mount Dora, Eustis, Tavares, Howey-In-the-Hills, Astatula, and southeast portions of Leesburg. This area is primarily urbanized and most municipalities are already providing significant recreation programs and facilities. The smaller towns of Astatula and Howey-in-the-Hills do not have extensive parks and recreation programs. Lake County's role in the area should be primarily to coordinate and partner with the public and private providers to provide facilities and programs.

3.1.5 Northeast Lake County (SR 19 Corridor) – This area includes Umatilla, Astor, Paisley, Lake Mack, and Sorrento/Mt. Plymouth as well as portions of the Ocala National Forest and Wekiva River Protection Area. The area is characterized by rural development. There are several well-established youth associations as well as the City of Umatilla who have the potential to partner with the County in providing facilities and programs in the area. Because of the number of unincorporated residents in the area Lake County should take on a more proactive role as a recreation provider with focus being on facility development.

3.2 Lake County shall work toward creating a model for a City/County/Private Partnership plan.

Objective 4.0 - Lake County will facilitate the development of a well-balanced system of community and regional facilities that include active and resource based recreational opportunities to meet a variety of needs for individuals as well as groups.

4.1 The park classification system in Lake County will be limited to community parks, regional parks, and special facilities. Parks will be further classified as either resource-based or activity-based.

4.2 Existing mini parks, neighborhood parks and parcels of undeveloped land less than 10 acres in size currently maintained by Lake County should be evaluated for potential



phase out. Any new parks developed by Lake County shall be community parks or larger.

- 4.3 Lake County shall consider increasing the adopted Level of Service from 2.5 acres to 4 acres per 1000/population.
- 4.4 Lake County Parks and Recreation shall maintain an up to date inventory of all Lake County maintained park facilities.
- 4.5 Lake County will use, as a guideline, the activity standards suggested in the 'State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan' (SCORP) for Florida, as updated on a regular basis.
- 4.6 When developing new parks and facilities, Lake County shall include nearby residents and other interested parties in the planning process.
- 4.7 Lake County should consider the possibility of outsourcing park maintenance for activities where appropriate.
- 4.8 Lake County will create and approve a phased development and renovation plan for the existing parks in the System to determine appropriate development of new facilities and/or phase out of parkland that does not meet the objectives of the Master Plan.



Objective 5.0 - Lake County will foster the development of a comprehensive greenway, trails, and bikeway system that provides scenic, eco-tourism, and resource-oriented recreation.

- 5.1 Lake County shall continue working towards implementing its trails program by coordinating with federal, state, regional, and local public agencies and private organizations.
- 5.2 Lake County shall add greenways and blueways to its trails and bikeways program to help connect natural resources and parks to the trail system.
- 5.3 Lake County shall adopt as a guideline the Florida Bicycle Facilities Planning and Design Handbook by FDOT and the Florida Office of Greenways and Trails Reference and Resource Guide. These documents shall be used in the planning and development of trails.

Objective 6.0 - Lake County will ensure equal access and maximum availability to all facilities.

- 6.1 Lake County shall design, construct, and manage parks and trails with access ways that are compatible with the natural features and character of the individual park site.
- 6.2 Sidewalks, bikeways, and/or trails should be provided to link residential areas, community facilities, schools, and other park sites where feasible.
- 6.3 Parking areas and bicycle racks, where appropriate, will be provided at recreation sites. The inverted U or other rack that supports two contact points of the bicycle should be the preferred style of bicycle parking.
- 6.4 Lake County shall ensure the provision of disabled parking spaces and barrier-free access to activity-based parks and facilities, where practical and appropriate.

Objective 7.0 - Lake County will promote our natural environment and all forms of recreation opportunities.

- 7.1 Lake County will strive to preserve its natural resources through land acquisition programs and the use of best management practices.
- 7.2 The Lake County Public Lands Acquisition Advisory Council (PLAAC) will recommend and prioritize properties for potential acquisition by the Board of County Commissioners.
- 7.3 Lake County will develop land management plans for all environmental lands acquired. Such plans will address access, restoration, and the types of amenities that can be developed consistent with the character and carrying capacity of the property.

- 7.4 Lake County will continue to promote access to water bodies and natural resources through the development and maintenance of public access points, swimming areas, boat ramps, and canoe/kayak launches.



Objective 8.0 - Lake County will develop, improve, maintain, and manage our facilities and resources in a manner that evokes a positive and safe image.

- 8.1 Lake County shall adopt development, maintenance, and management standards for individual parks, trails, and environmental lands.
- 8.2 A logo and signage program should be initiated that becomes an identifier for Lake County parks, environmental lands, and trails in order to strengthen the image and recognition factor of County facilities by residents and visitors alike.
- 8.3 Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) methods, programs and techniques should be integrated in the design and operation of County public parks, trails, and environmental lands.
- 8.4 In order to reduce vandalism and crime in Lake County parks, Lake County should consider methods to improve security in its park system by such means as maintenance and/or program staff, volunteers ('adopt-a-park' program), partnerships, and/or live-in park attendant agreements.

Objective 9.0 - Lake County recognizes that it is imperative to identify and implement methods to finance the on-going operation and management of our facilities.

- 9.1 Lake County will streamline its parks and recreation facilities and programs to focus on providing larger scale facilities to supplement existing city recreation facilities, natural resource based parks, and a trails system linking them all together.
- 9.2 Design of new facilities should incorporate revenue-generating opportunities that could offset operational costs and/or enhance the recreational experience of participants (i.e. concessions, rentals, etc).
- 9.3 The County's grant programs should be refined to be consistent with the goals and objectives of the Master Plan and expanded to more adequately address the impact of unincorporated residents on municipal recreation facilities and programs.
- 9.4 A reliable and consistent capital funding source for recreation facilities and operations should be established to help implement the Master Plan.
- 9.5 The County shall adopt fees and charges, where appropriate, for the Parks and Recreation System that is fair and equitable to residents and visitors that use County facilities.
- 9.6 New park and trail development shall address the cost to maintain each facility prior to implementation. Design/maintenance techniques, materials, and procurement methods should be used that provide the most cost effective measures to develop, as well as maintain, the park and trail facilities.

Objective 10.0 - Lake County recognizes that survival, growth and effectiveness will depend on the ability to focus on a formalized mission and the ability to develop and maintain partnerships with the municipalities, the Lake County School Board and the Lake County Water Authority as well as not-for-profit agencies and the private sector.

- 10.1 Lake County shall primarily act as a coordinator for the development of recreational facilities and work with other agencies to facilitate recreation programs.
- 10.2 Lake County shall continue to investigate alternative funding sources and relationships to provide for public park facilities, programs, and management.
- 10.3 Lake County and the School Board should further work to co-locate sites for new and existing schools and parks where feasible. Lake County should work with the School Board to identify possible joint opportunities to provide athletic and recreation opportunities for students and citizens. A school/park design model should be developed to be used for planning such joint facilities. Lake County and the School

Board should also work to identify existing school sites for possible improvements to better accommodate public recreation usage.

- 10.4 Lake County should work with the School Board to develop a model 'Mutual Use Agreement' for the use of school and park facilities for public use.
- 10.5 Lake County shall coordinate with the County's municipalities and adjacent counties for the provision of public parks and recreational programming through the use of interlocal agreements.
- 10.6 Lake County shall develop agreements with non-profit recreation providers such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club to provide recreational programming and facilities.
- 10.7 Lake County shall pursue joint agency funding for the purchase, development, and management of public parks, environmental lands, and trails.

Maintaining and improving the quality of life that is attracting unprecedented growth to Lake County is one of the key issues facing Lake County government today. Provision of a cohesive recreation and parks system that fosters an active and healthy lifestyle, protection of natural resources, and connections to these assets is the intent of this Master Plan. The master plan establishes a framework for a parks and recreation system the community desires for today and the future as well as fulfilling the recreation needs of Lake County residents.

3.0 Public Involvement

A primary focus of the master planning process has been to connect with the recreation providers and users in Lake County. The County is incredibly diverse with very distinct communities within it. To understand the issues facing the various user groups and recreation providers, the County developed an extensive public involvement program.



3.1 Steering Committee

Lake County's Parks and Recreation Advisory Board served as the steering committee for the creation of the Master Plan. The project team held several workshops involving steering committee members to guide the development of the Master Plan. The initial workshop focused on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the County's current system of parks and recreation facilities. Members also gave their ideas regarding plan direction as well as how to provide for the implementation of the Master Plan. Key issues identified could be classified in three separate categories; facilities, management, or funding.

3.2 Municipalities

The project team also met with representatives of all fourteen (14) municipalities with the exception of Howey-In-The-Hills as part of the public involvement process. These meetings took place throughout the months of June and July of 2003. All the meetings were extremely productive and yielded a variety of information, data and insights into the provision of recreation services on a municipal level. The following is a list of common themes that were heard in these meetings.

❖ Funding

The County's grant program is extremely popular among the municipalities. Some would like to see the restrictions regarding differential fees for non-residents removed or re-structured since the impact of serving non-residents is often much greater than the grant monies received. There were many comments supporting the expansion of the grant program.

Cities without an extensive recreation program did not have a problem with the differential fees or simply did not participate in the program. Other cities were frustrated that their residents were charged differential fees by neighboring cities, when their facilities were also being used by residents from other towns.

The majority of cities supported the concept of establishing a dedicated funding source for parks and recreation (i.e. a referendum, bond issue). However, many had concerns regarding where and when the money would be spent. As always, more details would have to be worked out before cities could commit to such an effort.

❖ Programming

Nearly every City had a different approach to providing recreation facilities and services. Some cities preferred to run all aspects of their recreation programs, from registration to coaches training to field maintenance (i.e. Leesburg, Tavares). Other cities had a more hands off approach where private youth associations managed the leagues (i.e. scheduling, registration, collecting fees) but the City was more of a facilitator that maintained the facilities (i.e. Clermont). Other cities (i.e. Eustis) simply paid the registration fees of city residents participating in leagues, but provided no facilities or maintenance to the leagues.

Smaller cities, especially in the rural areas, had few resources and relied mostly upon private youth associations and other private groups to provide recreation programming to residents. Larger cities with more established recreation departments were concerned with duplicating services and creating unnecessary competition between city-sponsored programs.

Many of the cities expressed a desire to develop a cooperative arrangement among all recreation providers within Lake County to help facilitate recreation programs and events. Some cities also expressed a desire to have full control over their facilities where private groups ran programs citing issues with maintenance and training of parents and coaches. Coaches' certification and consistency between programs was also supported by the majority of city officials.

❖ Operations and Maintenance

Many cities expressed concern that the cities would be burdened with the maintenance and operation of new facilities and programs even if the County paid for their construction. The consensus viewpoint was that they were supportive of the County's efforts to develop a countywide master plan, but concerned that the burden of implementing such a plan may fall on the cities. As long as the County paid its fair share of the costs of the cities providing recreation programs and facilities to unincorporated residents, most cities could provide services to non-city residents. How this could be done is a critical issue for the Master Plan to address.

With respect to maintenance, there were some concerns that recreation providers (cities, County, non-profits) had differing standards regarding maintenance. For example, several County parks are adjacent or wholly within some cities due to annexations. There were concerns that if a city took over operations and maintenance of such facilities they would have to spend a lot of resources bringing them up to city standards and could also require an increase in operation and maintenance costs over the life of the facility.



❖ Facilities

Consensus indicated that the County is perceived as lacking in recreation facilities, particularly activity-based facilities. Many cities also noted that their facilities were currently over capacity and in need of expansion. The problem for many cities is a lack of room and/or land to expand their programs. Several large district and/or regional parks with athletic facilities, particularly tournament quality facilities, community centers and multipurpose open space were suggested as the kind of parks the County should build in addition to the resource-based parks the County already operates and maintains. Such facilities could provide much needed relief to the growing population within cities and unincorporated areas.

While many of the Cities have athletic fields, swimming pools and community facilities, many of these facilities are over capacity and too small to accommodate demand or allow for flexible use. This is especially true of swimming pools, and athletic fields. Most facilities can only accommodate one or two groups at a time, but many programs have three, four, or more groups trying to use the space at the same time. As a result, groups and individuals are turned away or are having to use less than ideal facilities for practices and competition.

3.3 Lake County Public Schools

The project team met with key staff members of Lake County Public Schools in late June of 2003 to discuss the Master Plan and how the School District would fit in with the Plan. Meetings were productive and provided a starting point to develop a working partnership and sharing of resources.

Lake County Public Schools allows for joint use agreements between local governments and individual schools. However, access to schools for recreation programs is highly dependent upon the principal of each school. Some communities and youth associations had great working relationships with the schools in their community while other areas had a much more difficult time gaining access to facilities.

School District staff also expressed their desire to co-locate facilities. Such facilities could include schools and parks, but also maintenance facilities as well as satellite vehicle storage sites. Adequate land would need to be acquired for a school/park site. Special design considerations would also be required in order to address security issues as well as access and traffic patterns between and to the facilities. Existing school facilities should also be considered for possible park expansion opportunities.

In general, the schools in rural areas tended to be more easily accessible for recreation providers, either private groups or local governments. The reason for this may have to do with the schools being a more integral part of the community as a whole in rural areas. Communities that had athletic facilities the schools used for their athletics programs were also more likely to allow outside groups to use their facilities. Youth associations that used school facilities were also charged differing fees. While some principals allowed outside groups to use their facilities for free or at little cost, other schools charged a significant amount of money (i.e. Eustis Little League says they spend \$18,000 per year to maintain and improve school facilities). School District staff agreed that a more consistent policy needs to be established between all the local governments and Lake County Schools.

3.4 Lake County Water Authority

Lake County Water Authority has the potential to be a significant partner in providing resource-based lands for outdoor recreational opportunities. Partnerships could include applying for grants with Lake County or other local government, environmental programs, trails and other resource-based aquatic recreation within Lake County. The Authority, however, is not interested in expanding activity-based recreation programs or facilities unless another entity is responsible for the construction and program management.

The Authority's focus is on improving water quality in the County's lakes, rivers, and canals as well as managing the properties it already owns. With the exception of Hickory Point, the rest of the Authority's lands provide resource-based recreation opportunities or serve as conservation areas. The authority has approximately 6,600 acres of land it manages. Six



preserves are open to the public; Hickory Point (pictured at left), Flat Island, Crooked River, Hidden Waters, Sawgrass Island, and Lake Norris. Activities that take place include boating, canoeing, hiking, bird watching and other resource-based activities.

3.5 Public Workshops

Public workshops were held throughout County in order to involve as many people as possible. An initial series of workshops focused on the groups who participated in parks and recreation programs or had an interest in recreation, conservation lands or trails. Youth athletic associations (baseball, aquatics, football, etc), private providers (YMCA, Boys and Girls Club), and a variety of interest groups were invited to attend. The purpose of these workshops was to gather information regarding existing facilities, programs and user groups. A second series of workshops was held to determine the desires of the community with respect to new facilities and the County's role as recreation provider. Many of the same groups participated in these workshops to help plan new facilities and how the County would manage them.

A third series of workshops were held to review the recommendations contained in the Master Plan. The recommendations of the plan were well received by the public. Final revisions were made to the recommendations based on review by the steering committee and County staff.

Discussions were informal and sometimes lively. Approximately 100 people attended the meetings throughout the County. The project team learned a great deal regarding the state of recreation in Lake County at the user level. The following is a list of common themes heard at the meetings.

❖ Operations & Maintenance

- Develop partnerships between cities, counties, youth associations and non-profit providers
- Establish a consistent mutual use agreement between school board and local governments
- Provide 3-4 regional parks throughout the County to provide active and resource-based recreation.
- The County should reduce the number of small parks, focus on larger parks with more amenities
- YMCA, Boys & Girls Club or similar groups could operate and maintain County facilities where appropriate
- Establish a volunteer program that supports existing volunteer groups, youth associations and the like to provide recreation opportunities
- Partner with the National Training Center to create a regional active recreation and sports complex in south Lake County.

❖ Programming

- Cities, non-profits and volunteer groups are the primary provider of recreation programming and they probably should be
- The County provides resource based parks and recreation facilities and should continue
- Develop countywide directory of youth sports organizations, recreation providers and other organizations who support cultural, environmental and recreational interests
- Promote health benefits of trails
- Need for additional hotels and other support businesses for regional/statewide events held in Lake County



- Youth sports programming is very inconsistent in terms of fees charged, maintenance of facilities and support from local governments and schools; a more consistent approach is needed
- ❖ Facilities & Land Acquisition
 - Develop connected system of greenways and trails possibly including blueways
 - Develop 3-4 regional recreation complexes to provide maximum flexibility in recreation programs and activities
 - Upgrade existing county and city facilities as many are old and/or over capacity
 - Provide activity-based recreation facilities in outlying areas
 - Ensure facilities are fully accessible
 - Develop a centrally located multipurpose cultural arts facility or include design elements in parks that allow for cultural arts activities and special events
 - Promote alternatives to acquisition of land to preserve Environmentally Sensitive Lands (i.e. conservation easements, fees in lieu of, transfer of development rights, etc.)
 - Need improved access to our lakes and environmental lands
- ❖ Funding
 - Continue county grant program
 - Fund parks and recreation through the general fund (ad valorem)
 - Use local option sales tax funds for facilities
 - Establish a dedicated funding source (referendum) for recreation
 - Some individuals did not want to increase taxes, but put more money into recreation



3.6 City Managers Meetings

HHI and the project team participated in three City Managers meetings to discuss the Master Plan. An initial meeting took place in June 2003. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the project team, explain the process and timeline and to gain the support and cooperation of the Cities during the data collection phase of the project. City representatives were extremely responsive and were a great help in assisting the project team with data collection.

In August 2003, the project team had another meeting with the City Managers to update them on the data collection phase and the next steps. The project team presented some initial findings and suggestions made during the one on one meetings with the municipalities. A third meeting was held in March of 2004 to discuss the direction of the plan and obtain feedback. Discussions primarily centered on funding and the role of the Cities and the County in providing recreation to Lake County residents.

3.7 Board of County Commissioners

In April 2004, the project team presented the plan recommendations to the Board of County of Commissioners (BCC) for their approval. Minor changes were suggested by the BCC and the recommendations were adopted in June, 2004.

