

Grayton Beach State Park

June 2017 Proposed Unit Management Plan Amendment

Overview of Public Participation

The Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) was presented with an opportunity to consider funding, through the Natural Resource Damage Assessment, of a 7-acre beachfront parcel at the outfall of Little Redfish Lake in the western unit of Grayton Beach State Park. Planners with the DRP drafted a design concept for development of recreation amenities adjacent to the proposed acquisition.

DRP provided an opportunity for public input by conducting both a public meeting and an advisory group meeting to present the draft management plan to the public. These meetings were held at the Northwest Florida State College South Walton Center in Santa Rosa Beach on Tuesday, June 13 and Wednesday, June 14, 2017, respectively. Meeting notices were published in the Florida Administrative Register, June 11, 2017, Volume 43, Issue 107, included on the Department Internet Calendar, posted in clear view at the park, and promoted locally. Additional means of advertising included social media.

The meeting on June 13, provided a forum for engaging and informing the public on the proposed unit management plan amendment. The public meeting began at 5:00 pm and was conducted in an open house format. Posters of maps were placed on easels throughout the meeting room, depicting the park's natural resources, existing facilities, and conceptual land use plans. Park, district, and central office staff were present at each map station to provide information and converse with members of the public. Approximately midway through the session, the lead project planner gave a 15-minute presentation reviewing existing conditions and proposed development in the park. Following the presentation, attendees were encouraged to resume dialogue with DRP staff around the map stations. This format facilitated one-on-one conversations, in which citizens were able to discuss issues with staff and propose solutions. Over 70 members of the public attended. The DRP received 141 written comments from the general public.

The purpose of the advisory group meeting is to provide the advisory group members an opportunity to discuss the draft management plan. Advisory groups for Florida State Parks consist of stakeholders – which include representatives of local, state, and federal government agencies, environmental organizations, recreational user groups, adjacent landowners, and the park's citizen support organization. This meeting was conducted in a round-table format, allowing for members to comment on the proposal, one speaker at a time. As with the general public meeting the evening prior, DRP staff was present to answer questions and share information.

Public Participation:

Public Meeting Attendees **70**

Written Comments from General Public **141**

Grayton Beach State Park

Advisory Group Meeting Report

The advisory group meeting to review the proposed unit management plan (UMP) amendment for Grayton Beach State Park was held at the Northwest Florida State College South Walton Center in Santa Rosa Beach on Wednesday, June 14, 2017 at 9:00 am.

Dave Clausen represented the Choctawhatchee Audubon Society. Diane Rickman-Buckalew represented the Florida Paddling Trails association, Emerald Coast Chapter. Jason Love submitted written comments for the Florida Forest Service North Florida Region. Kristi Yanchis submitted written comments for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Leonard Thorn, and Charlie Helms were not in attendance. All other appointed advisory group members were present.

Attending Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) staff members were Warren Poplin, Raya Pruner, Matthew Allen, Elizabeth Kahn, Sine Murray, Eric Pate, Holly Cramer, and Daniel Alsentzer.

Mr. Alsentzer began the meeting by explaining the purpose of the advisory group and reviewing the meeting agenda. He summarized public comments received during the public meeting the evening prior as well as those submitted in writing. A brief overview of the plan amendment was provided and then Mr. Alsentzer asked each member of the advisory group to express his or her comments on the draft plan amendment. After the advisory group spoke, public attendees offered their comments to the room, during which period the public also asked questions. After all comments were shared, Mr. Alsentzer described the next steps for drafting the amendment and the meeting was adjourned.

Summary of Advisory Group Comments

Jennifer Manis (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Northwest Regional Office) expressed appreciation for the plan's efforts to stay within the footprint of previous development. She noted concerns over protection of imperiled animal species located in the western unit, specifically shorebirds and Choctawhatchee beach mice, if the plan is approved and the facilities built. Ms. Manis noted potential impacts that may result from an access point to Little Redfish Lake, which she stated is currently in pristine natural ecological condition. She inquired whether the DRP has evaluated impacts to the site's resources that may occur with increased visitation and exceeding the site's carrying capacity. Matthew Allen, park manager, responded that the day use area would be limited to 24 parking spaces and visitation numbers would not exceed the determined carrying capacity. Ms. Manis stated that the proposal does not ensure acquisition of the Little Redfish Lake outfall area and that impacts of increased visitation in the new development within the existing park boundary might be significant.

Celeste Cobena (Beach to Bay Connection) recommended denial of the plan amendment. Ms. Cobena stated that she supports the acquisition of the outfall but stated that the conservation benefits of the acquisition would not offset the impacts of increased recreation adjacent to Little Redfish Lake. Ms. Cobena suggested that the DRP reassign the funds and planning efforts to improvements in the eastern

Grayton Beach State Park

Advisory Group Meeting Report

unit as detailed in the 2013 Unit Management Plan to fulfill the recreational component stipulated for acquisition of the outfall. She stated that acquisition of the outfall would not be worth the impacts of new development on Little Redfish Lake. She suggested that altered portions of the Western Lake shoreline, located in the eastern unit, would be more suitable for development. Ms. Cobena commented that the development proposed on Little Redfish Lake will not adequately serve persons with disabilities. She stated that new beach access in the park is understandable, but that the proposed location of new recreation facilities is problematic. Ms. Cobena commented that new development and access along Little Redfish Lake will lack staff management control, resulting in disturbance of surrounding landscape and exceeding capacity. She stated that visitors will be aware of the lack of adequate surveillance of the area and will use the increased access as an opportunity to dump unwanted animals and commit crimes, in turn negatively affecting the park's character and natural integrity. She stated that if the development takes place, impacts to several imperiled species will occur, specifically citing shoreline vegetation trampling and erosion. She explained that the small size of the lake is inappropriate for recreational paddling. Additionally, Ms. Cobena cautioned that individuals will have to bring their own boats, which risks the transportation of aquatic invasives into the park. She emphasized that as urban areas grow in the county, conservation lands are becoming increasingly valuable and therefore should limit development. She suggested that the park's northern half above County Road 30A could better accommodate increased recreational opportunities rather than the sensitive areas along the undisturbed coastal dune lakes. She concluded by reiterating her opposition to the amendment, emphasizing that if a version of the proposal does move forward, then the facilities should be constructed elsewhere.

Diane Rickman-Buckalew (Florida Paddling Trails Association, Emerald Coast Chapter) expressed concerns over the proposed boardwalk to Little Redfish Lake. She cited the boardwalk would not be practical for paddlers because the design would require paddlers to carry boats down a narrow walk and that parking closer to the body of water is typically preferred. She said that she would prefer using the existing trail rather than a boardwalk as the trail is more natural and easier to traverse.

Bob Murphy (Grayton Beach Neighborhood Association) agreed with the overarching goals of the plan but not necessarily the details. He encouraged acquisition of the outfall to protect the ecological and hydrological sensitivities of the site. He voiced concerns over alligators in Little Redfish Lake and the potential of hazardous wildlife conflicts with paddlers, especially for beginners. He stated that a 24-space parking area as proposed might not be detrimental, although there could be unintended consequences. He preferred the proposal for tent campsites in the location as initially identified in the 2013 plan. Regarding Little Redfish Lake, Mr. Murphy emphasized the significance of an eagle nest present in the area and that visitors may impact the nest. Additionally, he emphasized that the lake shoreline is especially sensitive and increased access to the lake could be damaging. As a homeowner, he stated that he supports recreational opportunities

Grayton Beach State Park

Advisory Group Meeting Report

as well as conservation, but affirmed that the proposed recreational opportunities should be moved to the eastern unit of the park where visitor impact has already occurred.

Commissioner Tony Anderson (Walton County Board of County Commissioners, District 5) addressed the advisory group first by clarifying that the Walton County Tourist Development Council is a willing partner and may be able to supplement funding for the project, to the extent that NRDA is unable provide funding. He stated that the current owners of the parcel at the Little Redfish Lake outfall intend to sell, and recommended that it be sold to the State of Florida, to ensure proper management. He contended that there does have to be a recreation component to this acquisition but that there is a way to balance the concerns of conservation with the other variables at hand.

Jason Cutshaw (Walton County Tourist Development Council) emphasized the commissioner's point that the acquisition of the outfall is critically important to preventing unwanted private development. He offered TDC support for any type of park recreation opportunity that could meet the requirements of the acquisition.

Cynthia Alexander (Friends of Graton Beach and Deer Lake State Parks) began by stating that access into the park must be carefully controlled. She stated that this is the among the last sites south of County Road 30A for species to be preserved to their fullest extent. Referencing the 2013 plan, she noted that the amendment is not coherent with the plan in terms of conservation efforts and goals. She supports the potential acquisition of the outfall as well as the 2013 plan but does not support the amendment proposed. Ms. Alexander commented that little of the 2013 plan had been implemented to date due to funding and stated that she supports the county allocating funds specifically to the projects outlined in the current UMP. She noted that she supported Ms. Cobena's comment that crime has risen in the area and she continued by saying that if illegal parking began to take place because of increase in popularity to more beach access, the sheriff likely would not do anything to remedy it. She emphasized that the beach access would be heavily visited. In respect to the species present around Little Redfish Lake, she advised that the FNAI survey was not up to date due to her own sighting's along with other individuals of eagles, alligators, etc. Ms. Alexander remarked that due to the size of the lake she believed alligators might attack because in the presence of visitors along the lake, the alligators would have nowhere to go in the small lake. Sequentially, they become aggressive which would be especially problematic for children, she stated. The impact of hurricanes and other storms on the lake would be increasingly problematic she said, as the storms can destroy dunes and septic materials can end up in the lake, disturbing the balance of the system. She commented that non-native sand, which impairs shorebird nesting, was placed around the lake as a buffer after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. She concluded that the amendment would be acceptable if the recreation component follows the projects as proposed in the 2013 plan.

Grayton Beach State Park

Advisory Group Meeting Report

Bill Crane (adjacent landowner) stated that his research with the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance reveals Little Redfish Lake as the healthiest dune lake in the area. He stated the lake should maintain this quality standard. Mr. Crane said that in the past 10 years he has seen significant increase in disturbance along the outfall, exemplified by the 212 new home sites constructed in lake vicinity. He affirmed the comments made by other members of the advisory group. He noted that conserving the outfall, which is continually migrating, is the priority. Supplementing his position, he added that the lake is also significant for the vegetated wetland shoreline. With the increase of use that he has witnessed, Mr. Crane commented that he finds litter increasingly close to Little Redfish Lake, as well as unofficial trails rimming the lake. He referred to the comment of another individual by stating that tax dollars are not being lost and this is not the concern at hand. On behalf of the community, Mr. Crane relayed that there is a widespread community concern that development will be expanded beyond the currently proposed footprint. He added that visitors are unlikely to obey the parking capacity in the proposed lot and the parking will primarily be used for beach access. He cautioned that invasive species could be introduced to the lake by kayaks and paddleboards. He added to Ms. Alexander's comments about the effect of hurricanes on the lake, stating that debris is a concern but pollution is purged through the outfall.

Dave Clausen (Choctawhatchee Audubon Society) stated that Audubon supports the acquisition of the outfall and urged that the site will be managed to encourage shorebirds nesting and resting. He advised that the development proposed in the amendment is planned for the wrong area. Mr. Clausen did not support the concept of the 24-space parking area. He voiced concern over the feasibility of the boardwalk, the presence of alligators in the lake, and the potential impacts of development on the species inhabiting the lake shoreline. He said that he prefers to see the western unit of the park in as pristine of a condition as possible; and therefore, development should take place in an area of the park that is already disturbed.

Matthew Allen (park manager) offered support of the plan and thanked the public and members of the advisory group for their participation in the planning process.

Summary of Written Comments

Jason Love (Florida Forest Service North Florida Region) stated that the amendment proposal may represent inconsistency with the approved unit management plan. He noted the integrity of the water quality in Little Redfish Lake and urged the DRP to continue its objectives to improve the hydrological functions of the coastal dune lake community. He encouraged continued work in the resource management to restore the natural hydrology north of 30A. Mr. Love recommended continued implementation of best management practices to protect shorebird and sea turtle nesting on both the proposed acquisition and area around the existing beach access point in the western unit. He noted the presence of the federally listed Choctawhatchee beach mouse in the beach dune communities. He commented that the park is protected under the federal Coastal Barrier Resources Act and that an assessment should be conducted to verify permitting under this act. Mr. Love noted

Grayton Beach State Park

Advisory Group Meeting Report

the recreation development proposals in the current approved plan and encouraged trails and primitive camping in the north portion of the park.

Kristi Yanchis (United States Fish and Wildlife Service) Ms. Yanchis recommended minimizing the impact of the amendment's proposed development and requests review of all development plans for this site prior to implementation.

Summary of Public Comments

Coy Bowman expressed strong distaste with more development along the 30A corridor. She stated that she does not want to see any further development in the park. She commented that Walton County does not have a right to be involved with the plans for the park. She inquired whether title documents for the park and proposed acquisition are available for the public to review.

John Veasvey (Florida Paddling Trails Association) supported the denial of the plan. Mr. Veasvey reiterated the sentiment of Ms. Buckalew in the need for easy transport of boats to the body of water. He noted that much of the paddling community is older and requires easy transport of their boats. He added that walking 500 feet to a campsite is laborious and generally not recommended. Mr. Veasvey disapproved of visitor fees for access to resources that exist on public lands.

Bonnie McQuiston noted that she has been a diligent and long-standing advocate for the park's protection alongside Ms. Cobena and Ms. Alexander. She did not believe that the amendment being proposed supported the protection of the park and inquired as to who decided to change the 2013 plan. She offered support for the acquisition of the outfall. She inquired whether the county's involvement is required and whether this is an effort by the Walton County Tourist Development Council to gain additional public beach access. She disputed that there should be more access points in the park as there is already an ample supply. She emphasized that there needs to be a balance of conservation and recreation which is not currently present throughout the amendment. Regarding specifically the access to the lake, she did not think that the launch point would be quiet or secluded at all or that paddlers would be safe against alligators, especially the disabled and children. Ms. McQuiston stated that the development overall runs counter to the procedures in place to not remove scrub and destroy shoreline. She expressed concern that the proposed campsites cannot be moved next to residential areas. She commented that the Deepwater Horizon settlement funds are intended to remedy losses and not to damage remaining natural areas.

Barbara Morano stated that she has been involved with Coastal Dune Lake Advisory Committee. She commented that Walton County has engaged in a study of lake health in the past and should conduct a similar study specifically on Little Redfish Lake. She supported acquisition of the outfall but inquired whether management of the proposed development and the visitor impacts will be too difficult and how exceeding capacity would be avoided. She encouraged increased bicycle use as it is low impact yet provides recreational opportunity. Ms. Morano

Grayton Beach State Park

Advisory Group Meeting Report

stated that she dislikes the proposed concept of paddlers using Little Redfish Lake. She summarized by voicing her support of the current plan.

Carolyn Rowe supported the acquisition but would not like to see public access along the lake. She raised particular concerns of the bald eagle population around the lake and the potential impacts development would have on this population.

Notes on Composition of the Advisory Group

Florida Statutes Chapter 259.032 Paragraph 10(b) establishes a requirement that all state land management plans for properties greater than 160 acres will be reviewed by an advisory group:

"Individual management plans required by s. 253.034(5), for parcels over 160 acres, shall be developed with input from an advisory group. Members of this advisory group shall include, at a minimum, representatives of the lead land managing agency, co-managing entities, local private property owners, the appropriate soil and water conservation district, a local conservation organization, and a local elected official."

Advisory groups that are composed in compliance with these requirements complete the review of State park management plans. Additional members may be appointed to the groups, such as a representative of the park's Citizen Support Organization (if one exists), representatives of the recreational activities that exist in or are planned for the park, or representatives of any agency with an ownership interest in the property. Special issues or conditions that require a broader representation for adequate review of the management plan may require the appointment of additional members. The DRP's intent in making these appointments is to create a group that represents a balanced cross-section of the park's stakeholders. Decisions on appointments are made on a case-by-case basis by Division of Recreation and Parks staff.