

Proposal for a Restoration of Okeehoelee Park South

Executive Summary

This proposal advocates for the natural restoration of an approximately 100-acre area within Okeehoelee Park South. There are currently preparations underway to convert the area into an RV park using ~\$4.1 million from the park's budget. The proposal herein suggests reallocating these funds toward the restoration of native pine flatwoods community, which will in turn a) mitigate the spread of invasive species, b) support native biodiversity, c) provide an enhanced experience for visitors, and d) serve as habitat for listed and declining wildlife species. This initiative is aligned with Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation Department's ecological vision and enhances the long-term environmental and recreational value of the park.

Background and Rationale

Ecological Significance: Okeehoelee Park South encompasses 960 acres of native south Florida ecological communities, including mesic slash pine flatwoods, hardwood hammocks, and wet prairies. The park is home to diverse fauna, including the gopher tortoise, eastern diamondback rattlesnake, great horned and eastern screech owls, wood storks and numerous other wading birds, as well as a variety of small mammals and rare invertebrates, like the atala hairstreak butterfly. Additionally, there are Florida endemic sedges, grasses, aquatic plants, and trees. The area proposed for development is the most biodiverse section of the park and provides an essential ecosystem for these species.

Management Failures: The area has faced chronic neglect since it was cleared for lake construction in the early 2000s. Having since been designated as a construction zone, it has become overrun with disturbance-tolerant invasive species like Australian pine and melaleuca, which now permeate beyond this area. Without intervention, these species threaten to degrade the surrounding ecological communities in Okeehoelee Park South.

Budgetary Opportunity: Palm Beach County's 2025 budget allocated \$4.1 million for two development projects within Okeehoelee Park South. Redirection of these funds would support a comprehensive restoration initiative.

Objectives

- Remove invasive species and restore the area to the native slash pine flatwoods and wet prairie ecosystem.
- Protect and enhance biodiversity by creating a sustainable habitat for native species.
- Potential for community involvement through volunteer programs, environmental education initiatives, and school visits.
- Demonstrate responsible land stewardship that aligns with the park's mission

and public expectations.

Proposed Actions

- *Invasive Species Removal*: Prioritize the removal of australian pine and melaleuca stands from the 100-acre area and adjacent parts of the park to which these plants have spread.
- *Native Vegetation Replanting*: Reintroduce native species such as slash pine, saw palmetto, cocoplum, and aquatic vegetation to the 100-acre area.
- *Long-Term Management Plan*: Develop a strategy for ongoing maintenance, including prescribed fire, to prevent future infestations and ensure ecosystem resilience across Okeeheelee Park South.

Budget Allocation

Allocate available funding designated for development projects to cover:

- Invasive species eradication
- Soil management and land recontouring
- Native plant acquisition and planting
- Hiking and equestrian trail creation
- Ongoing ecological monitoring and habitat management
- Outreach and educational opportunities for local students and residents

Expected Outcomes

- *Restored Ecosystem Function*: The reclaimed land will serve as a model for successful habitat restoration, benefiting local wildlife and improving ecosystem services.
- *Enhanced Biodiversity*: Native species, including the threatened gopher tortoise and wood storks, as well as eastern diamondback rattlesnakes which are declining across their range, will thrive in the restored habitat.
- *Stronger Community Connection*: A healthy, maintained habitat will foster public appreciation for the park's natural resources.
- *Long-Term Cost Savings*: Managing invasive species proactively reduces future restoration expenses.

Conclusion

The area of Okeeheelee Park South in question holds untapped ecological potential and benefits for park visitors. By redirecting funds toward habitat restoration, Palm Beach County can transform this area into a thriving ecosystem that enriches both the environment and the community. This initiative is a vital step toward fulfilling the Park and Recreation's mission of environmental stewardship and public service.