Florida Heartland Regional Trail
Long-Term Trail Management
June 2026

In 2024, FDOT District One completed a Master Plan for the Collier to Polk Regional Trail which is now called the Florida Heartland Regional Trail (FHRT). District One is currently overseeing feasibility studies for each of the six counties along the FHRT corridor which are expected to be completed by mid-2027.

An important long-term issue is to identify trail managers along the length of the proposed FHRT. While FDOT is partnering with communities to help plan and develop the project, the agency does not manage paved trails. It will be critical for local agencies to oversee day-to-day management of completed trail segments through activities such as mowing, blowing off the trail, and ensuring it is free of obstructions. If a manager cannot be identified for a given segment before completion of the feasibility studies, future funding and trail development phases may not advance in that location.

Local governments along the FHRT not currently managing trails likely have questions regarding trail management as a potential new responsibility. *This flyer provides a brief overview of key information regarding trail management to assist local agencies as they consider their role related to the FHRT.*

TRAIL MANAGEMENT

Many counties and municipalities throughout Florida manage paved trails with some having maintained public trails for over 30 years. Similar to the FHRT, some managers oversee trails in rural inland locations such as the Four Freedoms Trail (managed by Madison County) and Suwannee River Greenway (managed by Suwannee County). Along the FHRT, examples of existing trail segments managed by local agencies include the Fort Fraser Trail (managed by Polk County) and the Rich King Memorial Greenway (managed by Collier County). However, a majority of the proposed FHRT does not currently have a designated local manager. Therefore, it is important that future managers be identified during the current feasibility evaluation stage.

Paved trail management consists principally of routine trail maintenance and capital trail repair. Management can also include the maintenance of related facilities such as trailheads and wayside areas if those are additionally developed as part of a trail by local agencies. Routine maintenance is generally performed within the regular duty of staff and volunteers and is part of a recurring annual budget. Capital trail repair is undertaken and funded as needed.

The objective of trail maintenance is to preserve the utility and enjoyability of the trail for all users, extend the life of the trail, and prevent or address unsafe conditions. Examples of common trail maintenance standards include:

- Trail is clear of debris and accessible
- Trail surface is in good condition

- Vertical and horizontal clearances are maintained at a minimum height and width
- Signage is clear, legible, and in good repair

To maximize a trail's lifespan and utility, a baseline maintenance approach with standards like these should be implemented.

The cost of routine maintenance can vary widely based upon multiple factors such as the frequency of maintenance activities, level of volunteer support, and the amount of amenities. One Florida example is Volusia County which estimates annual average cost per mile per year for its trails at approximately $4,500. This includes the following level of service:

- Mowing – 20 times per year rural, 32 times per year urban
- Blowing off trail – twice per week
- Trash collection – twice per week
- All other services as needed (tree trimming, pavement repairs, etc.)

(Source: Volusia County Parks, Recreation and Culture)

A 2022 Rails-to-Trails Conservancy analysis, which highlights multiple example trails, includes the Panhandle Pathway (Indiana) which is a rural-asphalt trail with a low level of amenities and a high level of volunteer support. Maintenance cost is estimated at just under $1,000 per mile per year (Source: Rails to Trails Conservancy). Local context, trail setting, and other factors, many of which are in the control of the designated manager, will play a major role in determining actual costs.

Maintenance Agreements

Local agencies that take on trail management will likely enter into a Maintenance Agreement with FDOT which defines expectations for maintaining the project. Since trail management will require use of fiscal resources, local agencies typically express their commitment to manage a trail through an approved resolution from their commission or council. This sets the stage for the Maintenance Agreement between the agency and FDOT. The agreement defines the limits of the trail segment being managed. It also specifies the local agency's maintenance responsibilities which may include items such as mowing, sweeping, litter pick-up, debris removal, soil and weed control, pruning, insect control, and maintenance of signs.

The initial role of a designated manager along the FHRT will be to define an approach to maintain the first completed trail segment. Segments will be developed incrementally over time, so designated managers will have the opportunity to progressively phase in their trail management efforts. Though the FHRT is a long-distance trail, individual segments will be constructed in smaller lengths, typically from 5-10 miles. This will provide the opportunity for a designated manager to focus effort on a smaller scale and then expand its maintenance program in the future as other segments are completed.

Local agencies can calibrate maintenance needs based on the level of facilities they ultimately choose to develop. Beyond the paved trail, local agencies have the discretion to add amenities to the trail such as benches, kiosks, shade structures, parking areas, and even full trailheads. A key factor in planning the route of the FHRT is to identify and pursue connections to existing parks and recreation areas because they can provide access to established user amenities. Maximizing connections to existing facilities reduces the need for local agencies to provide new trailheads and access areas which, by extension, minimizes the need for new management responsibilities.

It is important to consider the costs of managing the trail relative to the benefits it will bring. Prior to developing the Master Plan, District One conducted a review of the potential economic impacts and benefits that come from regional trail systems. Key takeaways included the following:

- There is significant potential for positive economic impact from investment in regional trail systems
- A fully connected long-distance trail system, like the FHRT, will likely deliver greater returns economically than an equivalent length of unconnected trail segments
- Promoting and partnering with individual towns along a trail can dramatically elevate its success and bring heightened value to communities

Many Florida communities have experienced the benefits of regional trails, with Dunedin as a leading example. The city's downtown business occupancy rates were 30% before the Pinellas Trail was built, but have been at or near 100% since the trail opened over two decades ago. Bob Ironsmith, Dunedin's longstanding Economic & Housing Development Director, describes the trail as an "economic engine" for the community. See the Regional Trail State of Practice Scan for more examples and statistics regarding the economic benefits of trails. The amount invested toward trail management may be small in scale relative to the overall benefits the project will bring to the community.

TRAIL MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Additional considerations for prospective trail managers include the potential for support of volunteers and other funding that may help with maintenance needs.

Volunteers can provide meaningful assistance through support of maintenance activities, fundraising for equipment purchases, and other types of assistance. For some trails, volunteers provide a significant amount of support monitoring for maintenance needs, serving as *trail ambassadors* to the community, and promoting the trail to increase its benefit and impact. For the FHRT, volunteer support will be more likely to mobilize after the first trail segments are in place and designated managers have begun initial trail management. Volunteer organizations typically develop on their own and become self-sufficient. While some are trail-specific, others are more general, serving as support for local agency parks and recreation departments.

Examples of volunteer organizations that provide support for trails in Florida are:

- Friends of the Withlacoochee State Trail (Citrus, Hernando, Pasco)
- Friends of the Blackwater Heritage State Trail (Santa Rosa County)
- Friends of the Pinellas Trail (Pinellas County)
- Friends of the Legacy Trail (Sarasota County)

These examples differ from one another and illustrate the diverse ways that volunteers can provide critical support.

Select funding sources can assist managers with trail maintenance and development needs. For example, the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) provides federal grant funding to develop and maintain recreational trails, trailheads, and trailside facilities. From the perspective of trail management, the program can even be used to purchase maintenance equipment. RTP can also be a useful source to fund trailside and trailhead facilities, if those are desired. Another important source to support trail development is the federal Transportation Alternatives Program, which is administered by FDOT. Additional grant funding programs are highlighted by the Office of Greenways and Trails (Florida Department of Environmental Protection) on its Assistance & Resources web page.

For further information about managing Florida Heartland Regional Trail segments, please contact David Turley, PE at david.turley@dot.state.fl.us or (863) 519-2255.