



FLORIDA HEARTLAND REGIONAL TRAIL

Trail Towns

June 2026



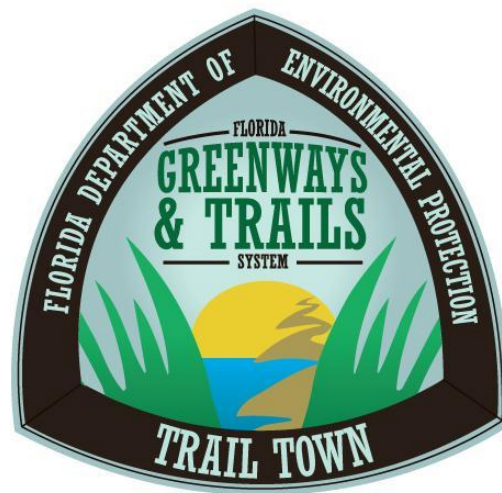
The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) District

One is coordinating the development of feasibility studies for the [Florida Heartland Regional Trail](#) which is being planned as a paved, multi-use trail from Collier to Polk County within the Shared-Use Nonmotorized (SUN) Trail Network. The vision for the regional trail is to connect and provide access to small-

towns, cultural and heritage sites, parks, preserves, wildlife corridors, and working lands. Promoting and partnering with individual towns along a trail can dramatically elevate its success and bring increased benefits to communities.

Florida Trail Town Program

In response to the growing emphasis on the transformative value of trails for communities, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Office of Greenways and Trails established the Florida Trail Town Program. A Florida Trail Town is a community located along, or in proximity to, one or more long-distance, nonmotorized recreational trails. As defined in the Florida Greenways and Trails System Plan, the goal of the Trail Town program is to “inspire cities and communities to fully capitalize on the economic opportunities afforded to them by trails and trail tourism.”



FDEP can assist communities seeking to be designated as a Trail Town. The process includes formal approval by the Florida Greenways and Trails Council.

Characteristics of a Successful Trail Town

- Incentives to attract trail users off the trail to explore the town
- Clear and safe connections between the town and trail
- Wayfinding and readily available information about the town
- Businesses that offer goods and services to meet the needs of trail users
- Festivals and events are held that draw people to the trail who may not normally be trail users
- Safe connections to work, schools, parks, and shopping
- Relationships with adjacent communities that promote the regional trail as a tourist destination

Source: Florida Greenways and Trails System Plan – 2024-2028

Dunedin along the Pinellas Trail was designated as the Sunshine State's first official Trail Town in 2018. Since then, a wide range of other communities statewide have been designated as Trail Towns.

Examples of Florida Trail Towns transformed by trails include:



Dunedin | Pinellas Trail

- Dunedin, along the Pinellas Trail, saw downtown business occupancy rates go from 30% before the Trail to at or near 100% since the trail opened over two decades ago.
- Dunedin's Economic Development Director, Bob Ironsmith, touts the trail as an 'economic engine.'



Winter Garden | West Orange Trail

- The West Orange Trail has been a key component behind the transformation of Downtown Winter Garden.
- The success of the trail helped earn the city recognition as a Great Place in Florida (Florida Chapter of the American Planning Association).



Inverness | Withlacoochee State Trail

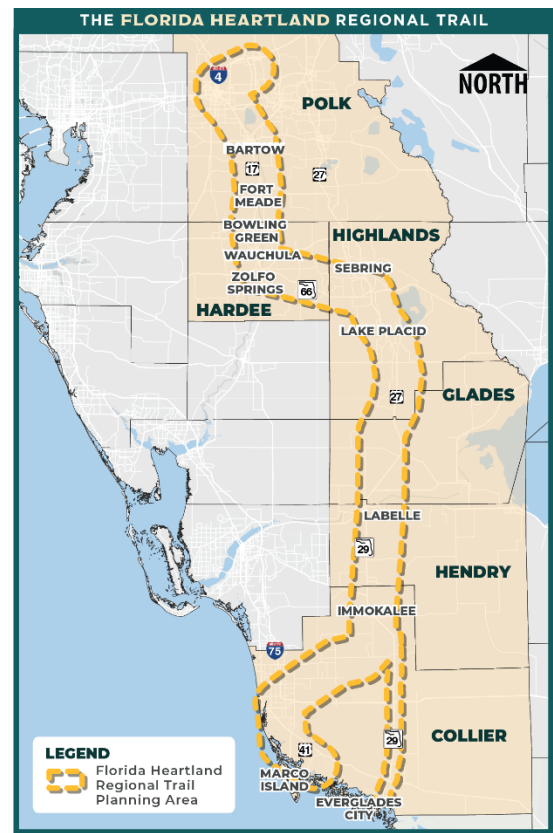
- Inverness has invested in the development of a highly visual gateway to downtown from the Withlacoochee State Trail.
- The Inverness Depot District consists of two parks, an open-air event pavilion, and other facilities centered around the trail.

Trail Towns and the Florida Heartland Regional Trail

Passed in 2023, Senate Bill 106 [Ch. 2023-20 Laws of Florida] places a heightened emphasis on designation of Trail Towns to “maximize use of nearby trails as economic assets, including specific promotion of trail-based tourism.” Planning for the Florida Heartland Regional Trail is focused on connecting to existing Trail Towns and communities appropriate for designation in the future.

Everglades City and Marco Island, in Collier County, are already designated as Trail Towns. The Florida Heartland Regional Trail is being planned to leverage these locations as key destinations on the southern end of the corridor.

In addition to these locations, there are several other small-towns and communities that reflect the region’s culture and history that could benefit from the presence of a long-distance regional trail. These communities were identified as candidate Trail Towns in the Collier to Polk Regional Trail Master Plan which preceded the current Feasibility Studies.



Florida Heartland Regional Trail Candidate Trail Towns

- Bartow (Polk County)
- Fort Meade (Polk County)
- Bowling Green (Hardee County)
- Wauchula (Hardee County)
- Zolfo Springs (Hardee County)
- Sebring (Highlands County)
- Lake Placid (Highlands County)
- LaBelle (Hendry County)
- Immokalee (Collier County)

These communities have potential to become pivotal partners and destinations along the Florida Heartland Regional Trail. As planning and development of the regional trail progresses, it will be important for each to explore the opportunity and appropriate timing to seek designation as a Trail Town. This will help these communities begin to realize the benefits that other Trail Towns have experienced and maximize the trail's economic impact.

Learn More...

Contact FDOT's Planning Project Manager, David Turley, PE (863-519-2255 or david.turley@dot.state.fl.us) to learn more about the Florida Heartland Regional Trail and potential role of Trail Towns.



Visit the [Florida Trail Town Program web page](#) (FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails) for more information about the program including current information such as the complete list of Florida Trail Towns.

Download the [Regional Multi-use Trail Corridor State of Practice Scan](#) (FDOT District One) for further information about economic and other benefits of trails.