

Falling Waters State Park Advisory Group Meeting Report

The advisory group meeting to review the proposed unit management plan (UMP) for Falling Waters State Park was held at the Washington County Agricultural Center in the East Wing Conference Room on Thursday, April 20, 2017 at 9:00 AM.

Todd Abbott represented the Washington County Board of County Commissioners. Aaron Kincaid represented John Sabo for the Florida Forest Service. Ron Houser represented the Bay County Audubon Society. Jennifer Manis represented Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Tom Lancaster represented Gerald Richter who is an adjacent landowner. Heather Lopez represented the Washington County Tourist Development Council. Debbie Mitchell represented the Chipley Garden Club. Matt Whitfield represented Sean Creel for the Northwest Florida Water Management District. Alex Stigliano represented the Florida Trail Association. Susan Roberts represented Vann Brock for the Washington County School Board. Bryan Lee represented the Florida Panhandle Technical College. Kim Pallero represented Dorothy Odom for the Washington County Historical Society. John Gilbert (Orange Hill Soil and Water Conservation District) and Mike Weisenbaker (Division of Historic Resources) were not in attendance. All other appointed advisory group members were present. Gweneth Collins attended with Debbie Mitchell for the Chipley Garden Club.

Attending Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) staff members included Jacob Strickland, Benjamin Faure, Arthur Stiles, Daniel Alsentzer and Ashley Killough.

Ms. Killough began the meeting by explaining the purpose of the advisory group and reviewing the meeting agenda. She provided a brief overview of the DRP's planning process. Ms. Killough then asked each member of the advisory group to express his or her comments on the draft plan. After all comments were shared, Ms. Killough described the next steps for drafting the plan and the meeting was adjourned.

Summary of Advisory Group Comments

Tom Lancaster (represented Adjacent Landowner) addressed a few concerns but was overall in agreement with the plan and felt the changes were for the better. He inquired into whether the DRP would consider expanding parking, especially near the swimming area to better accommodate visitors. Mr. Lancaster also expressed concern about handicap parking during special events and how to better handle that. He expressed the shuttle system is a fantastic way to get people into the park during special events. Mr. Lancaster also had concerns regarding the expansion of the campground such as the impacts from wastewater, sewer, land use and ecologically. Lastly, Mr. Lancaster addressed public safety concerns and encourages other law enforcement agencies to drive through the park regularly to increase presence and security.

Ron Houser (Bay County Audubon Society) expressed concerns regarding the ecological impact of expanding the park and park events. Mr. Houser acknowledged not all forested areas are functionally forests and commends Falling Waters State Park as a great example of a healthy forest in an area with mostly planted pine. Mr.

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Houser advises the DRP to continually consider the impacts of expanding use areas as well as pursue acquiring adjacent parcels. He feels the festival should adjust to meet the limitations of the park rather than the park adjust to meet the needs of the festivals. Full written comments are attached.

Todd Abbott (Washington County Board of County Commissioners) agreed with the management plan resource management and land use proposals. He acknowledged the need for a balance between recreation, development, and natural communities. He also suggested constructing a sidewalk to connect the park to a municipal or city-managed paved trail.

Jennifer Manis (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) expressed concern with cave or subterranean access and stated that no cavern tours should be offered without a cavern plan. She also commended the park on a successful history of prescribed fire which has reduced exotic infestations.

Alex Stigliano (Florida Trail Association) inquired about the location of the proposed trail and described a recent visit to park. After additional discussion, Mr. Stigliano inquired about the DRP's project prioritization methods.

Aaron Kincaid (Florida Forest Service) agreed with the resource management goals and objectives. He found no inconsistencies with or concerns over forest management as proposed. Mr. Kincaid also inquired about staffing (Ashley Killough and Benjamin Faure responded) as well as outsourcing and volunteer work.

Susan Roberts (Washington County School Board) expressed that the park is a beautiful asset and commended park staff for their interpretive knowledge and customer service.

Bryan Lee (Florida Panhandle Technical College) commended the increase of public access and has held several events at the park such as End-of-Year Picnic. He has seen the park evolve over the years but expressed concern with additional stormwater runoff due to increased development.

Matt Whitfield (Northwest Florida Water Management District) encouraged increased access to public lands and agreed with the management plan proposals.

Debbie Mitchell (ChIPLEY Garden Club) spoke about the butterfly garden that the Garden Club developed using native flowers to attract native species. Ms. Mitchell discussed that most visitors find the falls to be worth hiking. Ms. Mitchell also described the Falling Waters Restoration Fund (how best to donate funds/equipment directly to the park).

Heather Lopez (Washington County Tourist Development Council) discussed using the park for special events but noted parking limitations citing Heritage Day

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Festival, which brought over 4,500 visitors in a two-day period resulting in vehicle stacking to the road. Ms. Lopez considered parking expansion trade-off with natural communities with offsite parking. Ms. Lopez also discussed the benefits of guided hikes and commented that a CSO would be an asset to the park in the future.

Kim Pallero (Washington County Historical Society) recognized the value of the park's cultural resources and encouraged additional interpretive planning.

Staff Recommendations

- The DRP will consider revisions regarding additional parking.
- The DRP will review proposed development in relation to natural community disturbance.

Additional revisions were made throughout the document to address editorial corrections, consistency of spelling and notations, and other minor corrections.

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 Division'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.