

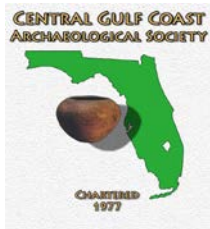
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# Central Gulf Coast Archaeological Society

A Chapter of the Florida Anthropological Society

www.cgcas.org



Special Edition Newsletter



March 2009

Editor: David Burns

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Weedon Island Center



Brooker Creek Center



As you probably know, local governments are struggling with reduced revenues and are faced with having to make difficult decisions to eliminate jobs and perhaps even programs in order to balance their budgets. Unfortunately, this has the potential dramatically affect the

Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center, where CGCAS holds its meetings and where the residents of Pinellas County can learn about the famous Weedon Island prehistoric site and culture. A recent press release indicates a 20% across-the-board cut is being considered, however, we have heard that this will be closer to 30%. The Environmental Land Division, the County agency under which Weedon Island Preserve operates, has already experienced cuts to its operating budget over the past two years resulting in reductions to staff and programs at Weedon Island and Brooker Creek Preserve. The Center presently operates with an exceptionally small staff of three and is able to continue offering its many educational programs only through the exceptional efforts of volunteers. Additional cuts will severely impact the ability of these facilities and programs to operate efficiently and meet their mission.

We have also heard rumors (although these have not been substantiated) that the County is considering closing the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center. At a recent Commission meeting, Commissioner Latvala recommended eliminating the entire Environmental Lands Division!

Please note that the Weedon Island Cultural and Natural History Center was entirely paid for by the voter approved Pennies for Pinellas tax initiative. Many of the improvements to the Center have also been funded by this initiative. It is important to let your County Commissioners, other elected officials, and friends know about the services and programs you have enjoyed there.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

CGCAS needs to mobilize its members to help preserve the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center, as well as Brooker Creek Preserve and the Environmental Lands Division in general. Here is what you can do to help.

- 1) Write or email you local County commissioner and urge them to maintain the Environmental Lands Division, to provide adequate funding to enable the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and

Natural History Center and Brooker Creek Preserve to retain adequate staff so that they can continue to offer educational programs to the residents of Pinellas County. Below is a list of talking points which you can use to help you compose your letter/email. Feel free to add additional points regarding the value of the Weedon Island Center to you and to the residents of the county. You can find out the address and email address of your commissioner by going to <http://www.pinellascounty.org/commission/default.htm> and clicking on the commissioner in your district. This will bring up contact information. If you are not sure what district you are in, go first to <http://www.pinellascounty.org/commission/districts.htm> and click on the maps to identify your district, then click on the appropriate commissioner name to obtain the contact info.

- 2) Write or email County Administrator Robert Lasala and express your concern about the effects of dramatic budget cuts, staff layoffs, and program elimination on the Environmental Lands Division, Weedon Island preserve, Brooker Creek Preserve, and environmental and cultural resource stewardship in general. Please copy your commissioner on these letters or emails.
  - 3) Even if you do not live in unincorporated Pinellas County, a letter or email to County Administrator Lasala indicating how much the Environmental Lands Division and Weedon Island preserve means to those residents who live in St. Petersburg, Tarpon springs, and other municipalities will help.
  - 4) Urge your friends to write their County commissioners and the County Administrator as well. Use you networking abilities to spread this information out to the community so that others will know about this budget crisis.
- 5) Attend the two public meetings that are being held in Pinellas County on March 23 and 26 in a show of support for continued funding for the Environmental Lands Division and Weedon Island Preserve.

It is critically important that the commissioners hear from their constituents! If the commissioners feel that there is no public support for these programs, they will conclude that there is no reason to continue funding them. There is a very real chance that the doors of the beautiful state-of-the art educational facility at Weedon Island Preserve will be closed. We cannot allow that to happen. Even if you live in Hillsborough County, you can still write to County Administrator Lasala to tell him that you visit the Weedon Island Center and express how much the Center means to the Tampa Bay area. You can also attend the meetings to show your support.

PLEASE DO YOUR PART. WRITE LETTERS AND ATTEND THE MEETINGS. TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE!

## **Talking Points**

*Starting points for FY10 budget discussions:*

- ELD has a two-fold mission: (1) provide sound stewardship of Pinellas County's wild lands and waterways and (2) provide opportunities to the public for the appreciation of their intrinsic value; in terms of priority, the former is more important than the latter.
- Approximately 16,000 acres of wild lands and waterways are under ELD management and divided into 4 preserves and 15 management areas.
- Active resource management is required to maintain the ecological integrity of properties under our stewardship.
- Portions of these 16,000 acres were purchased with funds from the Florida Communities Trust (FCT) with binding stipulations about resources and facilities.
- Portions of these 16,000 acres retain state requirements for management.
- Two multi-million-dollar environmental education centers provide programs and events to the public along with permanent exhibits and associated trail signage, however, these centers represent approximately 1% of the total real estate value of all ELD properties (more than \$2 billion).
- ELD administration/operations headquarters is based in Tarpon Springs at the Brooker Creek Preserve along with local headquarters for the FL Division of Forestry (DOF).
- A maintenance shop as well as assorted barns and sheds are included as other ELD facilities.

- Pinellas County Biological Field Station is one of a handful of such stations in the southeastern United States and an integral part of a national network of field stations for the scientific community.
- ELD's workforce includes a corps of dedicated staff (32 for FY09) and youth/adult volunteers (500-t-); that's about 2 staff members per 1000 acres of wild lands and waterways under ELD management.
- Three nonprofit organizations (Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve, Inc; Friends of Weedon Island, Inc.; Alliance for Weedon Island Archaeological Research and Education) help ELD to fulfill its long-standing mission.
- Four residences (Brooker Creek Preserve, Weedon Island Preserve, Ozona Management Area, Alligator Lake Management Area) owned by ELD have law enforcement officers in residence to assist via contractual agreements with the safety and security of our natural resources and our staff, volunteers, and visitors.
- Safety and security needs are primarily and effectively addressed by the Pinellas County Sheriffs Office via the LIMA team (viz., 1 sergeant and 4 deputies for FY09).

*Further assumptions for FY10 budget discussions:*

- ELD has broad, long-standing support from the public, from conservation organizations and professional societies, and from collaborating education entities (e.g., colleges and universities) for its general mission.
- None of the above starting-point items will be bulldozed, moth-balled, permanently-closed, or otherwise removed from the ELD program for FY10 and beyond.

Over the past 2 years, the ELD lost 30% of its staff positions due to statewide budget reductions, declining revenues, and the passage of Amendment 1, resulting in major reorganization and a new strategic plan for the Division; one goal of that strategic plan was to create a platform of staff and duties to meet current budget reductions and to allow the County to rebuild its program at a later date when the fiscal climate turns positive. Reorganization through the past two years emphasized flexibility and efficiency including the cross-training of staff and the leveraging of volunteers; reorganization also allowed for adaptive stewardship of 16,000 acres with a minimum of staff.

Remaining funds for ELD's operating expenses and capital have no remaining "wiggle room" so further cuts will necessarily come from personnel services.

ELD is increasing its reliance on its volunteer corps even as it loses volunteers to the economic crisis; for example, a number of adult volunteers have returned to the workforce or can no longer afford the expenses of volunteerism (e.g., cost of petrol).

The Environmental Lands Unit of the Pinellas County Sheriffs Office (aka LIMA) serves a vital function to protect the health and safety of our staff, volunteers, and visitors as well as our biological and cultural resources.

Applicable documents (e.g., county comprehensive plan, charter amendment, preserve ordinance, ELD strategic plan, and various management plans) remain viable, but now some with likely lengthened timeframes for completion of various associated projects.

## **Public Meeting Schedule**

**All meetings will run from 5:30 to 8:00 p.m.**

**Monday, March 23- Osceola High School  
9751 98<sup>th</sup> Street North, Seminole**

**Thursday, March 26- Gibbs High School  
850 34<sup>th</sup> Street South, St. Petersburg**

**Central Gulf Coast  
Archaeological Society**  
P.O. Box 1563,  
Pinellas Park, FL 33780-1563

