

BEACH STEWARDSHIP COMMITTEE MINUTES

November 13, 2024 - 9:00 A.M.

PRESENT: Dan Rothenberger, Chair
John Stevens, Vice Chair
John Kurzman, Member
Natalie Looney, Member

ABSENT: Brad Panek, Member

STAFF PRESENT: Ayako Ruckdeschel, Beach Manager
Ginny Keeter-Bodkin, Deputy City Clerk
Mandy Edmunds, Acting Parks and Recreation Director

Chair Rothenberger called the meeting to order at 9:00 AM. He thanked Michael Welch for his many years of service to the City and this Committee and welcomed new Member Natalie Looney.

1. Presentations

Ayako Ruckdeschel, Beach Manager, welcomed new member Natalie Looney to the Committee. Ms. Looney is the appointee of Commissioner Rzewnicki. Ms. Looney introduced herself and shared some of her background and her interest in beach matters.

2. Approval of the Agenda –

Chair Rothenberger asked that the two presentations take place first.

Member Kurzman asked to add a discussion items on how the City can assist businesses with dispensing accurate information for the public with regard to beach opening/s and to revisit the agenda building process.

Vice Chair Stevens moved, and Member Kurzman seconded the approval of the November 13, 2024 agenda with the added discussion items; the motion passed 4-0.

3. Audience Comments –

Kathleen Etxegoien of 5th Avenue asked for a progress report and timeline for the reopening of the South end beaches.

4. Action Items

a. Approval of Meeting Minutes August 21, 2024

Member Kurzman asked to add to the minutes that any suggested agenda items must be submitted early and succinctly to the Committee liaison to give staff adequate time to prepare prior to any meetings.

Member Kurzman moved, and Vice Chair Stevens seconded the approval of the August 21, 2024 minutes as amended; the motion passed unanimously.

b. Review and Approval of the 2025 Meeting Dates

Vice Chair Stevens inquired if the other members were amenable to moving the February meeting to February 26, 2025 and there was a positive consensus.

Vice Chair Stevens moved, and Member Looney seconded to accept the 2025 meeting dates presented with the February date moved to the 26th; the motion carried 4-0.

5. Items for Discussion

a. Seasonal Outcomes, Post-Dual Hurricanes and Effects on Beach

1. Damage to St. Pete Beach from Hurricanes Helene and Milton

Ms. Ruckdeschel introduced John Bishop, the Coastal Management Coordinator for Pinellas County to report on damages.

- The County mainly monitors Upham and Pass-A-Grille beaches and both sustained washouts; the County is awaiting for beach surveys and profiles report from their contractor, Aptim, for the entire County.
- Upham Beach lost dunes at the north end and severe washout.
- Their contractor has estimated that Pass-A-Grille beach south end lost 66,000 cubic yards of sand, but the north end is to the fill line. The 'lost' sand had moved up higher into parking lots and street and the dunes have been replaced by moving that back. The contractor is expected to finish in a few weeks.
- The location of where the sand from Upham Beach went is unknown.
- The County is working on a permit for the full restoration of Upham Beach.
- Federal beach renourishment project is still being delayed by the need for easements.
- The final report from Aptim may take a few months; Mr. Bishop will share that with the City/Committee when it becomes available.
- While the Federal renourishment is being held up, the County has submitted an emergency application to the Army Corps to get a one-time renourishment done.
- The sea oat giveaway for 2025 is still under discussion.
- There is currently no scope for sea oats at Pass-A-Grille; it should be timed seasonally.
- Ms. Ruckdeschel explained that the orange construction fence at Pass-A-Grille was placed by the City to prevent dunes from falling back into the pathway and prevent people walking over them; walkovers will be added at 3rd and 6th for access.
- Vice Chair Stevens suggested the City put out more information clarifying what is and is not opened via website and/or social media.

2. Recommendations for short & long-term recovery and rebuilding/maintaining sand dunes

Previously discussed under #5.a.1.

Resident Linda Borgia gave public comment on dunes sand that relocated to the back of Envoy Point; there was 5 feet of sand there and in the secret garden, which needed to be removed. The lower dunes and those with established plantings did the best during the hurricanes; she suggested more plantings and lower dunes going forward.

The aging drain at The Starlight was discussed; Code Enforcement has been informed and Ms. Ruckdeschel will follow up.

3. Other cities' storm damage response and best practices

Ms. Ruckdeschel had expected this as part of Mr. Bishop's report.

4. Status of the renourishment project on PAG

Previously discussed under #5.a.1.

5. Availability of any local, state and or federal funding or beach restoration FEMA funding

Ms. Ruckdeschel had expected Mr. Bishop to cover this. Member Looney suggested FEMA funds might help with sea oats; this is a public and private concern. Ms. Ruckdeschel suggested that the County would have accessed those as part of their clean up and restoration project. Member Kurzman spoke about FS 161, eminent domain, and property rights – other states have programs to give money for property rights.

6. Concerns on water pollution / debris and swimming

Ms. Ruckdeschel reported that the County Environmental Management Director stated that they and FWC monitor for red tide and there is a Healthy Beaches program through the Florida Department of Health; she read a statement from their website how and when they monitor and test for contamination. Those two websites can be checked for water sample reporting every 1 to 2 weeks. Member Kurzman suggested a link on the City's website for the Health Dept. reports; Ms. Ruckdeschel will follow up with the PIO.

Cindy Perry of 1126 Boca Ciega Isle Drive gave public comment on large debris still in the water and coming over seawalls. Ms. Ruckdeschel suggested reaching out to the Sheriff's Marine Unit may be able to identify these items.

7. Beach cleanup activities and official recognition of individuals/groups/organizations

Ms. Ruckdeschel reported that the City had scheduled six community cleanups which were very successful. There were 711 volunteers that picked up 8,032 pounds of trash. She thanked Keep Pinellas Beautiful (including their equipment). Vice Chair Stevens thanked Ms. Ruckdeschel for her work in this regard. More cleanups are encouraged.

8. Status of public beach access points

Ms. Ruckdeschel reported that Upham Beach is wide open, and the County Park has been cleared, Pass-A-Grille is not open to the public, with warning signs of extreme danger still there, but people are disregarding. Walkovers will be placed at 3rd and 6th but there is no timeline currently. Member Kurzman spoke at FS 161.55 regarding public access; Vice Chair Stevens called a point of order to keep the discussion on beach access, not conditional use permits. He suggested staff ensure that each access point is clear and safe for residents.

Mandy Edmunds, Acting Parks and Recreation Director reported that staff is in that process, point by point from Upham heading south, marking those that are safe and open, and those still in need of repair and require caution. Signage is removed and placed accordingly. The orange fencing at Pass-A-Grille will stay in place until dune replanting is completed. The City Engineer is working with staff on plans to replace the wall.

9. Status public beach parking

Ms. Ruckdeschel reported that all beach parking is open.

10. Any public safety issues remaining for the beach / beach access

Ms. Ruckdeschel reported that larger debris has been moved, but there are still buried hazards; signs advising to proceed with caution, safety guidelines for feet, and staying off the sand dunes. Garbage cans have been replaced at Upham and Pass-A-Grille.

11. (Added) Communications for Hotels

Previously discussed under #5.6, with the suggestion to clearly post links to reports on the website and social media and an update summary of which access points are open to use safety. Ms. Ruckdeschel will get with the PIO to post.

12. (Added) Items for Future Agendas

Member Kurzman suggested that members should set reminders for ample time to submit potential agenda items to the Board liaison to allow staff time to consider for inclusion or contact experts, if necessary. Chair Rothenberger suggested waiting for the City Commission workshop on Boards and Committees scheduled for December 10, 2024 for direction on how information is exchanged. The Chair also asked for minutes to be distributed earlier than when the agenda is published.

b. Input from John Bishop, Coastal Management Coordinator, Pinellas County Government

Discussed under #5.a.1.

c. Review from Sea Turtle Trackers and nesting season data

Ms. Theresa Arenholz of Sea Turtle Trackers reported on the number of nests, hatchings, disorientations, and deaths during the May 5th through July 17th season. She spoke about disorientations due to hotel lighting and discussion followed; Sea Turtle Trackers take lighting surveys and report results to the County, who contacts the hotels of any violations. Ms. Arenholz reported on nests lost from tropical storms and hurricanes and explained what individuals and businesses can do to help protect the turtles, including keeping the beach clean, dark, and flat. Her presentation is part of the meeting record.

Vice Chair Stevens suggested scheduling a workshop with the City Commission to discuss the beach lighting ordinance. The previous attorneys were looking at that prior to the change; staff will need to communicate with new counsel on their availability to discuss.

d. Review from Audubon Society and wildlife report

Cindy Perry, a volunteer for the Audubon Society, appeared on their behalf, not as a member of the Planning Board. She reported on the local Black Skimmers' nesting areas, colony counts, common disturbances (dogs on beach, crows, garbage, fireworks), State Statute 68A-27 (rules relating to endangered or threatened species), and ways that the public can assist with protection of the Skimmers. Her presentation is part of the meeting record. Ms. Perry encouraged more stewardship and volunteers.

e. Beach Quarterly Report for period Jul 1-Sep 30, 2024

The report was published in the meeting packet. Ms. Ruckdeschel reviewed the highlights.

6. Adjournment – Next meeting will be February 26, 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 10:48 AM.

These minutes were approved at the February 26, 2025, Beach Stewardship Committee meeting.