

Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Recreation and Parks

Request from Walton County for additional Public Beach Access to Topsail Hill
Preserve State Park

Walton County in conjunction with the Cypress Dunes Subdivision Homeowners Association and the Topsail Village Homeowners Association requested that the Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) consider an additional public beach access at Topsail Hill Preserve State Park. The concept included creation of a new pedestrian entrance and trailhead near the state park's southeast corner and construction of a boardwalk from that point to the park's beach. The potential access would serve the residential areas along SR 30A and east of the Preserve as well as the general public. Staff of the Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) met with representatives of Walton County, Cypress Dunes and Topsail Village at the potential access point to discuss potential improvements and alternatives.

Potential Public Access Concept Description

The potential access would be located in the southeastern portion of the park off of Sandstone St. Access to the trailhead would be provided via a county easement across the streets and alleyways of the Beachview Heights subdivision. Specifically access to the trailhead would likely occur along Tanglewood Drive and Sandstone Street. Bicyclists and pedestrians would travel on the Timpochee Trail, a paved multi-use trail that runs parallel to Scenic 30A and would cross the highway at an established signalized crosswalk. From the crosswalk visitors would turn south onto Tanglewood Drive then continue south and eventually east along Sandstone Street. A trailhead would be created on park property and include an interpretive kiosk, bicycle rack and honor box. Access to the park would be restricted to pedestrians only. Park visitors would enter the park through a pedestrian gate located at the trailhead then travel over a constructed boardwalk onto the park's beach.

Resource Description and Assessment

DRP Biologists have evaluated the potential impacts of the proposed trailhead and access route to park resources. This evaluation indicated that the entire area of beach dune and relatively open canopy scrub that lies south of Sandstone Street and the Cypress Dunes Subdivision is habitat for the state and federally endangered Choctawhatchee beach mouse (*Peromyscus polionotus*). The beach dune and open sandy areas to the north and west of the proposed access provides primary habitat for an extant population of beach mouse. The area that would be traversed by the proposed boardwalk is vitally important refugia for survival of the beach mouse population following hurricanes and tropical storm events.

The construction of an additional access point within the park would further fragment the available nesting and foraging habitat for snowy plovers (*Charadrius nivosus*) and other imperiled shorebirds (e.g., least terns). It would also increase the potential for conflict between park visitors and shorebird nesting and foraging

activity. Additionally, an unintentional consequence of many beach access boardwalks is the creation of elevated perches for avian predators of imperiled shorebirds. Existing DRP policies concerning pets will need to be strictly enforced. Free-ranging dogs and cats pose a significant threat to both imperiled beach mice and shorebirds. Currently DRP allows dogs in the park as long as they are on a leash, however a more strict “no pets allowed” policy may be considered for this area.

Other imperiled species are found within the vicinity of the proposed access. These include gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), large-leaved jointweed (*Polygonella macrophylla*) and Gulf Coast Lupine (*Lupinus westianus*). These species often require actions or protection in addition to the natural systems management that the Florida Park Service employs. Imperiled species management is a coordinated effort of US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), U.S. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (USDACS) and DRP. Further consultation with the FWC and the USFWS on the potential impact to imperiled animal species will be required as the project moves forward.

In addition, to concerns regarding imperiled species, the disturbance from the construction of a boardwalk or the continual use of on grade paths would provide a potential corridor for exotic plants to invade the preserve. Boardwalk construction within the beach dune community will also disturb the natural dune contours exposing them to unnatural wind currents and increased wind erosion.

Scrub is a fire dependent natural community that can burn during drought periods. It should be noted that while naturally occurring fire in the coastal scrub is unlikely, wildfires occurred at the park three times between 2002 and 2009. A wildfire burned the entire scrub area south of Sandstone Street and the Cypress Dunes Subdivision in the early 1990s, before it was acquired as a state park. The repeat of a wildfire with anthropogenic ignition, like the one in 1994, could result in the destruction of permanent facility improvements such as the proposed boardwalk. The park currently uses mechanical treatment methods to provide fuel reduction along established fire lines between the park and adjacent properties.

The park has yielded little evidence of prehistoric habitation; however, several archaeological sites have been identified within the state park. The area was utilized by the timber and the naval stores industry into the late 20th century. Any ground disturbance or construction within the state park would trigger the need for further investigation, including cultural resource surveys, in order to gauge potential impacts to the park’s cultural resources.

Design Factors and Permitting

Any potential expansion of public access to the state park must provide for the health, safety and welfare of state park users; and, all facilities must be constructed to the standards and characteristic style of the Florida State Park System. Facilities must comply with the guidelines in the *1991 ADA Standards for*

Accessible Design, which includes universally accessible materials and standards. Furthermore, materials and construction must be suitable to withstand environmental conditions that are natural to the park, including exposure to extreme heat, sun, saltwater, high winds and seasonal storms. Facilities within the state park must also withstand the natural community management protocols implemented by DRP, including prescribed fire. Park staff, volunteers, law enforcement and other personnel require unrestricted access to all facilities, trails and roadways for maintenance and operations activities.

Any potential improvement project must comply with the permitting requirements of relevant local, state and federal agencies. Walton County building codes, zoning and wetlands setback ordinances will apply. DEP coastal construction permitting will be required for dune boardwalks. Environmental regulatory permits will be required for wetland impacts and stormwater management. Consultation and permits from the FFWCC and USFWS will also be required for impacts to federal and state imperiled species. The feasibility and cost of obtaining necessary permits is not addressed in this report. Preliminary design, engineering and permitting studies would be needed to develop a project scope and generate more precise costs, including permitting fees and potential mitigation costs.

In order to limit resource impacts, the facility type preferred for the potential access is an 8' wide elevated boardwalk similar to the one that provides beach access at Deer Lake State Park (see attached photos). The proposed boardwalk is approximately 1650 linear feet. The cost estimate is based on a standard wood boardwalk with top-down construction. However, due to the topography and other potential design variables a 20% contingency has been added. The cost estimates presented are preliminary and intended to be used as a planning tool for illustrating the potential cost of the concept. The actual number and type of facilities, boardwalk materials and alignment, project scope and related costs can only be determined following stakeholder and public input and completion of an in-depth site analysis, environmental impact assessment, cultural resources survey and necessary engineering studies.



Legend

-  Potential Trailhead
-  Access via county easement
-  Proposed beach access
-  Park Boundary

TOPSAIL HILL PRESERVE STATE PARK

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Feet

Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Recreation and Parks
Office of Park Planning





Topsail Hill Preserve State Park
Summary of Cost Estimate - Potential Beach Access Boardwalk

Facility/ Construction Type	Unit Cost	Unit Cost	Units	Cost
Safe Crossing (typical treatment)	\$15,000.00	lump sum	1	\$15,000.00
Trailhead Facilities				
Stormwater	\$6,000.00	lump sum	1	\$6,000.00
Honor box	\$500.00	each	1	\$500.00
Bicycle rack	\$600.00	each	1	\$600.00
Kiosk	\$1,200.00	lump sum	1	\$1,200.00
Beach Access Boardwalk				
Cultural Resource Survey	\$5,238.00	lump sum	1	\$5,238.00
10' wide elevated boardwalk	\$280.00	l.f.	1,650	\$462,000.00
Preliminary Cost				\$490,538.00
20% Contingency				\$98,107.60
25% Survey, Design, & Permitting				\$122,634.50
Estimated Total Cost				\$711,280.10