

# Residents' message about Lake parks and trails system — take care of what we have



The Green Mountain Scenic Overlook on County Road 455 in south Lake County is part of the county's master plan for its parks system. (Jerry Fallstrom/staff)

By **Chris Gerbasi**  
Correspondent

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**E**USTIS — **Lake County** residents are ready to roll up their sleeves to help plan the future of parks, preserves, trails and recreational facilities.

The county's Parks & Trails Division earlier this month held the first of five public workshops at the **Eustis** Community Center to gather input on its 10-year comprehensive master plan.

The workshop put people to work. About 70 residents split into groups to examine county maps and come up with priorities for use of the county's 1,168 acres of parkland, 48 miles of linear trails and 162 miles of blueway trails.

Their bottom-line message: Take care of what we have. Recurring themes from the residents stressed improved maintenance at facilities, more connectivity in the trail system, better collaboration on projects between the county and cities and the creation of more ecotourism.

The master plan should reflect the community's priorities, said County Commissioner Leslie Campione, who participated at one of the work tables.

"It should be a fun process," she said. "We'll get to hear everybody's different perspectives."

Indeed, each resident seemed to have their own agenda. Kevin Jenness of Eustis said his interests lie in conservation and preservation while his son, Sean, is an avid hiker who'd like to see more trails.

"Hiking is almost like an American pilgrimage," Sean Jenness said. "We have public lands and open space that we, as Americans, definitely take for granted."

Barry Wright, a triathlete from Yalaha, said he regularly jogs, swims and bikes at county facilities. But he would prefer to ride on an expanded route with safer trails away from roadways.

"We have a bunch of trails now, but they're not connected," he said.

The county should acquire more land for nature parks and greenways, said Mike Barnett, leader of the Tavares Family Nature Club.

"I'm a big fan of greenways," he said. "One problem is there are not enough greenways for wildlife to travel."

The residents' diverse requests also included areas for paintball, pickleball and remote-control model planes, more equestrian trails, boat ramps, ballfields and lighted fields, better lake accessibility, larger conservation areas and more niche parks, such as dog parks.

Many county parks have small-scale improvements already planned. Larger plans are in the works for the new South Lake Regional Park, south of State Road 50 near Groveland, the Ferndale Preserve and the local and regional connectivity of trails, said Ginger Corless, director of community planning and design for Tindale Oliver, the Orlando company organizing the workshops.

Tindale Oliver will analyze residents' input after the workshops conclude in the spring, then make recommendations to the County Commission, which may draft an updated master plan by fall 2017.

The workshops are being held in each County Commission district so residents in all areas get a chance to participate.

"It's a critical component of any comprehensive plan that we get public input," said Bobby Bonilla, manager of the Parks & Trails Division.

The next workshop is scheduled for 6 p.m. Jan. 18 at the Lake County Agriculture Center, 30205 State Road 19, Tavares. Residents also may fill out a survey at [surveymonkey.com/r/LakeCountyCommSurvey](http://surveymonkey.com/r/LakeCountyCommSurvey).

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