



Photo courtesy of Pinellas County Communications



THE PINELLAS TRAIL 25 YEARS LATER



Bert Valery



Albert Valery

December is the 25th Anniversary of the opening of the Pinellas Trail. Before it was built, area walkers, runners, bikers, and skaters had to take their chances on our city streets. Unfortunately, it took the

death of a young man to jump-start the building of the Pinellas Trail. His tragic death is what motivated his father Bert Valery, to make the trail a reality.

On April 1, 1983, 17-year-old Albert Valery was killed while riding a bicycle on the Belleair Causeway. He was returning home from his part-time job. The tragic accident was the catalyst to move the concept of The Pinellas Trail forward, by focusing on its need.

Parents Bert and Patti Valery started a movement to create safer areas for bicycling. Their vision was "bicycle pathways" from one end of the county to the other, 30 miles each way, protected from cars. It would take five years of relentless petitioning and campaigning, numerous presentations to dozens of local municipalities and the twisting of many politician's arms before their concept of a "linear park," a green ribbon running through the county as a recreational trail, took form.

Creating the trail required a vision, but the first steps were unknowingly taken prior to young Albert's death. In 1980, AMTRACK pulled out of Pinellas County leaving their tracks unused. The Seaboard Railroad wanted to abandon many of their county lines. State Senator and environmentalist, Mary Grizzle proposed the State of Florida buy the tracks for \$20-30 million. As a result, in 1983 the FDOT became the owner of hundreds of miles of tracks, with no plan for them.

After Albert's death, his father started his campaign for safer

riding places. To get his message out, Valery spoke to groups big and small--from homeowners to city councils. He also enlisted the help of the media. He did not care if a trail was created over railroad tracks, power line corridors or on the edges of major drainage ditches - as long as it was safe for cyclists. Valery found support from many area biking clubs and cycling shops.

Valery approached the Metropolitan Planning Organization, who controlled transportation project's money. With their support, he made a presentation to the County Commission. "By this time, the Commission knew about the concept and it was well received," says Valery. "Commissioner Mary Sheen Todd made the motion and helped push it through." From that meeting, the Commission created the Bicycle Advisory Committee. Each commissioner assigned three people from their districts to be on it. The first meeting was attended by over two dozen citizens and business owners.

In 1988, Pinellas Trails, Inc., a non-profit activist group and fundraising organization was created. The organization worked to expand the idea of a linear park.

"No one really wanted to build this," Valery recalls. "The head of County Parks was ready to retire and thought the project was too big. Even Fred Marquis (for whom the trail was later named) gave no support in the beginning. He wanted to use the tracks to construct a \$2 billion monorail system. That was nixed by the voters in the late 1980s.

Others saw Valery's vision. Brian Smith, head of Pinellas County's Planning Department, thought it was possible. County Commissioner Mary Sheen Todd also liked the idea.

It was time to create a real plan. The abandoned tracks seemed out of reach. They were not for sale and some of them were still in use by CSX. The possibility of building the trail on easements under power lines owned by then Florida Power was proposed, but Florida Power did not like it, primarily due to liability issues.

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Story by Bob Griffin, Publisher

25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PINELLAS TRAIL, continued

Then the State passed a law allowing abandoned railroad easements to be acquired by the nearest landowner, if not owned by a local government. This meant a person backing up to a train track could extend their property lines to the middle of the track at no cost.

About the same time, the Federal government wanted to increase public transportation and offered grants to improve methods of transportation. The Pinellas Trail concept qualified and grant money became available.

In 1989, County Manager Fred Marquis proposed using the newly created Penny for Pinellas money to buy the tracks for development of a Pinellas Trail. The Penny for Pinellas was already approved by the voters; all the County had to do was earmark the funds for the never before tried concept of a linear park.

"Fred got the various cities on board with the project," said Barbara Sheen Todd. "He saw it as a use-it-or-lose-it proposal."

The County Commission allocated \$1.5 million to build the first 15-mile segment beginning at Taylor Park and running a short distance north and south. County voters extended the Penny for Pinellas sales tax, which led to further funding of the complete 35 miles of trail.

On December 1, 1990, five miles of Trail were officially opened from Taylor Park (Largo) south to Seminole City Park. It was the beginning of what would become over 70 miles of roadway, reserved exclusively for people on foot, bikes, and skates. At the same time, two more sections were built at Seminole City Park and near U.S. 19 at Curlew Road.

It would be easy to say "and the rest is history" but that was only the beginning of now 30 years of planning and construction. There were overpasses to build and CSX was still operating in parts of St. Petersburg.

In 1994, sections of the Trail opened north to Tarpon Springs and moved into

the western part of St. Petersburg. By 2002, they built an overpass over Pasadena Avenue and sent the trail on towards downtown St. Petersburg. On the Trail's 15th Anniversary, in 2005, the County purchased the abandoned CSX section of tracks near downtown St. Petersburg and started two years of construction on that part of the trail.

In 2008, the County Commissioners agreed to form the Pinellas Trail Loop connecting Downtown St. Petersburg to an area east of Lake Tarpon. At the same time, downtown St. Pete opened three miles of trail along the waterfront.

Progress Energy eventually agreed to allow the use of some power easements and even contributed money to the project. In return, much of the northeast trail was named Progress Energy Trail (later changed to Duke Power Trail when the companies merged).

After 20 years, the 34th Street overpass opened and construction began on the path running through Clearwater's Downtown area. By 2011, the trail was 37 miles long.

Today, although the loop is not fully connected, a plan is in place to complete it by 2020. The loop will serve as a linear park and a multi-modal transportation pathway directly linking eight municipalities and numerous unincorporated areas

In 2003, the Pinellas Trail was designated as part of a National Recreational Trail within the National Trails System by the United States Department of the Interior and the National Parks Service. The Pinellas Trail has been inducted into the Rail Trail Hall of Fame and has twice received the Best Trails of Florida Award from the State Office of Greenways and Trails.

"It is a shame that it took a terrible tragedy, like the accident that claimed Bert Valery's son's life, to develop something as nice as this Pinellas Trail," says Barbara Sheen Todd.

Although the trail was started with money from Penny For Pinellas, County, State and Federal agencies have also

invested more than \$63 million in expanding and improving the trail over the last 25 years.

It is estimated that an average of 70,000 people use the Pinellas Trail each month. The trail is a priceless haven in a busy, highly urbanized environment. The construction of 10 overpasses and 3 underpasses allow trail-goers to safely travel above and below traffic through some of the County's busiest intersections.

The existing 47-mile trail offers residents and visitors a unique opportunity to enjoy the outdoors close to their home, school or office. The trail is patrolled by the Pinellas County Security Task Force, which are not police but represent law enforcement officers, the County Sheriff, and other agencies. Pinellas County Park Rangers also patrol the trail daily as well as auxiliary rangers who are supplied by Pinellas Trails, Inc.

Each Pinellas Trails, Inc., volunteer travels the trail 12 hours per month. Some walk, or bike while others drive a golf cart bought by the organization. Their program "Trees for the Trail" plants trees along the corridor. They started the Auxiliary Ranger Program to support police enforcement. They pay for maps, signage, benches, water fountains and other amenities along the trail. Fundraisers are held throughout the year to pay for these expenses.

"Our goal is to ensure the viability of the trail," Scott Daniels says. "We stress safety and security. This has become a special source of pride—for me, for Bert, the County, and everyone who lives here and uses the Pinellas Trail."

In the beginning, only three other places had any form of a community trail. Today, over 1,000 cities have them. Almost all have asked Pinellas County for input or visited to see our now famous Pinellas Trail.

A 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Pinellas Trail is December 5 at Largo's Taylor Park beginning at 10 am. Visit www.PinellasCounty.org/Trail or www.PinellasTrails.org for more information. ■

SOME OF THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE SCENES RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING OUR PINELLAS TRAIL A REALITY

Scott Daniels

An active bike rider, he met Valery as the Trail concept was developing. He was a founding member of the Bicycle Advisory Committee and Pinellas Trails, Inc. and is still their spokesman.



Brian Smith

As the County Planning Director he was involved creating the trail from Tarpon Springs to downtown St. Pete. Although retired after 30 years with the County, he is still on the Board of Directors of Florida Greenways & Trails Foundation, Inc.



Barbara Sheen Todd

A County Commissioner in the late 1980s and early '90s, she helped to push the Pinellas Trail through the Commission and worked closely with Marquis, and other Department Heads.



Fred Marquis

Pinellas County Administrator from 1979 until 2000, he proposed using Penny for Pinellas to fund the trail and took steps to make it happen. The trail was named in his honor.



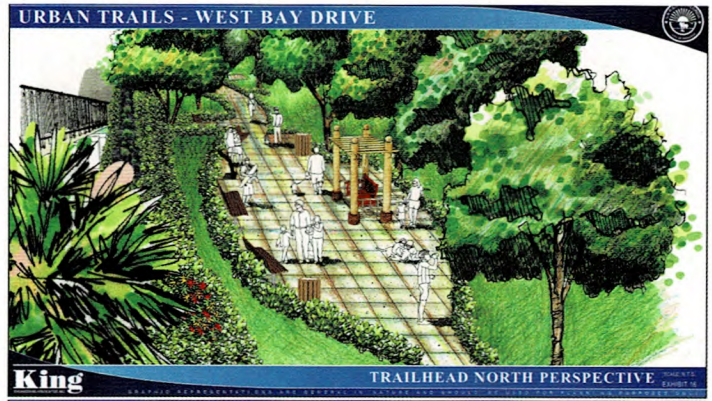
LARGO'S NEW PLAN FOR THE PINELLAS TRAIL

The West Bay Drive Trail Head Project will connect the Pinellas Trail with Downtown Largo neighborhoods and the commercial center. The project is intended to add seven access points to the Largo area. In addition, the project will provide landscaping and amenities to areas in and around the Pinellas Trail and West Bay Drive.

The Trail bisects the City of Largo. It provides a unique protected green space for walking, jogging, skating and biking. Largo is fortunate to have over three miles of the trail running through it, but there are minimal access and exit points to Largo's section of the trail. The City of Largo is proposing to construct pedestrian and bicycle trail access improvements within the West Bay Drive Community Redevelopment District. Improvements will also address informational signage and new trail amenities. Under consideration are various trail access points, sidewalks, pedestrian bridges, overpass enhancements, trail rest areas, safety improvements, storm water treatment features, landscaping and other amenities.

"Our goal is to encourage people to come off the trail and into our community," said Teresa Brydon, Economic Development Manager for Largo. "Another objective is to create open spaces where people can hang out and enjoy our part of the area around the trail."

Construction for these additions should begins in 2016. For information, you can contact Rafal Cieslak, Project Manager through email at DowntownTrailHead@Largo.com. You can also see more on www.Largo.com.



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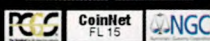
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