

History of the Pinellas Trail

July 27, 2016 by [Paradise News Team](#)

Before there was a Pinellas Trail, walkers, runners, bikers and skaters had to take their chances on one of the many streets and avenues crisscrossing Pinellas County. It is a shame that it took the death of a young boy to start the process of creating what we now refer to as the Pinellas Trail. And we have that young man's father, Bert Valery, to thank for it, too.

December is the 25th Anniversary of the opening of the Pinellas Trail. But development of the trail goes much further back than 1990. It involved a lot of hard work and determination by many local people...some in government and many that were not.



Albert Valery, Jr.

On April 1, 1983, young Albert Valery Jr. (age 17), was killed on the Belleair Causeway while riding a bicycle coming home from his part-time job on the mainland. This tragic accident was clearly the catalyst in launching the need for and concept of 'The Pinellas Trail.'

Bert and Patti Valery, his parents, began petitioning the County for safe bicycling pathways. They created the Bicycle Advisory Committee (BAC) in the fall of 1983 and started lobbying the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for safer roads or pathways. They actually had a vision that went from one end of the county to the other...over 30 miles one way.

It took five years of relentless petitioning and campaigning; visiting and presenting to dozens of local municipalities; twisting the arms of politicians and county department heads before the concept of a 'linear park', a recreational trail, a green ribbon running through the county—took form. In the late 80's, it was suggested that it be paid for by a new local sales tax known as 'Penny For Pinellas', a one-cent sales tax to be used only for capital improvements to our infrastructure and facilities.

The first section of the trail opened beginning at Taylor Park in Largo (8th Avenue), signaling the beginning of what would later become over 70 miles of connected roadway, reserved exclusively for locals on foot, bikes and skates.

In interviewing people who were involved with the creation of the Pinellas Trail, it became obvious, that this trail was more than a piece of asphalt over an old railroad bed. It was a passion to create a 'linear' park that people could use for pleasure, exercise and even use it to get to work or school.

Creating a trail required a vision. Bert Valery says 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.

The first steps were unknowingly taken even prior to young Albert's death.

In 1980, AMTRACK railroad pulled out of Pinellas County and their tracks went unused. The Seaboard Railroad wanted to abandon many of their lines in the County. Mary Grissle, a state senator and an environmentalist, made a motion for the State of Florida to buy those tracks...for \$20-30 million. They did and in 1983 the FDOT became the proud owner of hundreds of miles of railroad tracks, with no plans to use them. Certain people in Tallahassee and Pinellas had a vision of a monorail system running through Pinellas County... much like Disney World has.

Then in 1983, with the accident and death of young Albert Valery, Bert started pushing the need for safe places to ride. He and others started the Bicycle Advisory Committee (BAC).

They first started a campaign of talking to public groups and many municipalities. Valery went out speaking to groups from one end of the county to the other; big and small; homeowners to City Councils. He was seeking the help of the media in spreading his message. Newspapers and TV stations started to pick up on it.

He then approached the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) who controlled money for transportation projects.

Eventually, Bert was allowed to address the Board of County Commissioners. That was when the County heard the words 'Pinellas Trail' for the first time. "By this time, the commissioners knew all about it and the concept was well received," says Valery. "Mary Sheen Todd was the commissioner who made the motion and she helped push it through." From that meeting, the Commission created the Pinellas Bicycle Advisory Committee and each commissioner then assigned three people from their districts to be on that committee. The first meeting had over two dozen interested citizens & business owners.

In 1988, Bert and Scott Daniels, and members of the BAC created Pinellas Trails, Inc., a non-profit activist group and fund raising organization. They worked to expand the idea of a 'linear' park and campaign for more public support.

"No one wanted to do this," Valery recalls. "The head of County Parks was ready to retire and many thought the project was too big. Even Fred Marquis (who the trail was later named) gave little support in the beginning." He was pursuing a totally different plan for the unused railroad tracks.

But there were others in County offices that shared Bert's vision. Brian Smith, head of the County's Planning Department, thought it was possible. Mary Sheen Todd, was effective in working with the various County departments.

First they needed a plan or blue print. The abandoned railroad beds seemed out of reach. They were not for sale and some of them were still in use by CSX.

Then there was the possibility of running the trail down the easements under the power lines owned by then Florida Power. Florida Power did not like this idea for a number of reasons, the foremost was liability. Then there was the idea of the County's drainage systems and bypass canals. But they were not all linked and had many other problems.

The County did not support the concept of using the abandoned train lines because they had another, hidden agenda. The county was attempting to upgrade their mass transit plan and wanted to construct an aboveground type monorail system, bullet train system for around \$2 billion. Yes, this would be very expensive and require the public's approval. It was put to the voters in the late 80's and shot down by a wide margin.

Then something else happened. The State got involved. They passed a law that all abandoned railroad easements could be acquired by the nearest landowner if not taken over by a local government. This meant that a person who backs up to a train track could actually extend their property lines to the middle of the track for free.

Next came the Federal Government with the desire for more public transportation. They were offering grants to cities and counties who wanted to improve their methods of transportation. Somehow the Pinellas Trail concept qualified under those guidelines.

In 1989, Fred Marquis, longtime County Manager, proposed using the newly created Penny For Pinellas money to buy the tracks and start development of a Pinellas Trail. The Penny for Pinellas was already approved by the voters. The County's role was to earmark it for this never before tried concept of a 'linear park.'

"Fred got the various cities to get on board with this project," says Barbara Sheen Todd. "He saw it as a 'use it or lose it' proposal."

The County Commission approved the beginning of the project and allocated \$1.5 million of county money to build the first 15-mile segment beginning at Taylor Park and running a short distance north and south. County voters went on to approve the Penny for Pinellas sales tax referendum, 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 near their Seminole City Park. At the same time, two more preview sites were built at Seminole City Park and near US19 at Curlew Road.

It would be easy to say 'and the rest is history' but this was only the beginning of 25, or now 30 years, of planning and construction. The trail did not immediately connect from Tarpon Springs to Downtown St. Petersburg. There were overpasses to build. CSX was still operating in parts of St Petersburg.

In 1994, sections of the Trail opened north to reach 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. In 2005, the Trail's 15th Anniversary, the County purchased the now abandoned CSX section of railroad near downtown St. Petersburg. In 2007, they started construction on the part of the trail that later made it to downtown and the waterfront.

And that is not all, folks. In 2008, the Board of County Commissioners agreed to plans to form the Pinellas Trail Loop to connect the Pinellas Trail from downtown St. Petersburg to area East of Lake Tarpon. Downtown St. Pete opens three miles of their trail along the waterfront.

The power company, now known as Progress Energy, gets on board and allows the use of some of their power easements. They even contributed money. In return, much of the trail in the northeast part of the County is named Progress Energy Trail (and later changed to Duke Power Trail).

In 2010, with the trail's 20th Anniversary, the 34th Street overpass opens; there is a ground breaking in for the Northeast Trail Extension. Clearwater begins construction for the East Avenue bicycle boulevard running through Clearwater's downtown area. With that completion in 2011, the trail is now 37 miles long.

In 2014, Pinellas County enters into an agreement with Duke Energy changing the name in the northeast area to Duke Energy Florida Trail.

And here it is 2015. Although the 'loop' is not fully connected yet, the plan is in place with hopes to connect the loop by 2020.

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. In 2008, the Pinellas Trail was inducted into the 'Rail To Trail' Hall of Fame. It has twice received the 'Best Trail of Florida' award from the State Office of Greenways & 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 original trail was started with money from the Penny For Pinellas 1¢ local option sales tax, County, State and Federal agencies have invested more than \$63 million in expanding and improving the trail over the past 25 years.

What is next?

The long-term plan of the MPO is to complete the 75-mile Pinellas Loop in the very near future. The loop will serve as a linear park and a multi-modal transportation pathway directly linking eight municipalities and numerous unincorporated communities. The County is seeking federal grant money to complete the loop. The total cost to complete the project is \$31 million.



It is estimated that an average of 70,000 people use the Pinellas Trail every month. The trail is a priceless haven in a busy, highly urbanized environment. The construction of 10 overpasses and three underpasses allow trail-goers to travel safely above and below traffic at some of Pinellas' 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 law enforcement agencies. Pinellas County Park Rangers also patrol the trail daily, as well as Auxiliary Rangers who are supplied by Pinellas Trails, Inc.

The Pinellas Trails, Inc., holds fundraisers throughout the year that helps to pay for maps, signage, benches, water fountains and other amenities found along the trail. They even bought the trail's auxiliary volunteers a few golf carts to travel the trail. They started 'Trees For The Trail' program to plant more trees along the corridor. They started the Auxiliary Ranger Program to support police enforcement. Volunteers travel the trail 12 hours per month each. Some walk, bike and others ride a golf cart.



“Our goal is to ensure the viability of the trail,” Scott Daniels declares. “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.” PN

Story By Bob Griffin (Publisher of local Restaurant Guides and Community Newsletters)