

WEST CENTRAL FLORIDA

GAME CHANGER



The 30-Year-Old Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail Has Changed the Face of Active Transportation, Tourism and Recreation in Pinellas County

BY JANE BIANCHI



Used by more than 2 million people in 2020, Florida's developing 75-mile Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail (currently 54 miles) has been a boon for economic development, active transportation, tourism and community engagement in Pinellas County. •

Length: 54 (eventually 75) miles

County: Pinellas

Endpoints: St. Petersburg to Pasco County line

Trail Uses: Walking, biking, inline skating; wheelchair accessible



PINELLAS COUNTY MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

We had every intention of staying together, but shortly after I'd laced up my Asics on that cloudless, 70-degree February morning and started jogging on the northwestern portion of the paved Pinellas Trail, my husband, Bill, and our two daughters were far ahead.

Here's the thing: They cheated. They had *wheels*.

Bill likes to "strollerblade," aka wear inline skates while pushing our 2-year-old in a stroller. Meanwhile, our 5-year-old bikes at full speed in front of them while Bill repeatedly yells, "Stay to the right!" and then moments later, "Your other right!"

But not having to keep up with them meant that I could slow down and take in the green surroundings, like the peaceful palm trees swaying in the wind. After a couple of miles, I made it to the destination that had caught our eye on a map—the playground-filled Josiah Cephass Weaver Park, which is conveniently right off the trail—and reunited with my sweaty family.

We ended the excursion with an outdoor lunch in downtown Dunedin, a small, bagpipe-loving gem of a city on Florida's Gulf Coast that I had somehow never visited before, even though I live less than an hour away by car in Tampa. Dunedin was so charming, in fact, that we went back the following weekend.

An Economic Boom

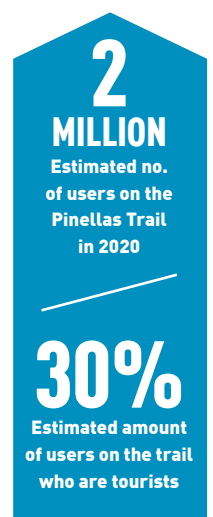
Dunedin, I learned, is arguably the city that has benefited most from the trail since its inception in 1990. In the 1980s, Dunedin's downtown was essentially abandoned, but today, it's a colorful, bustling hub of activity. Blocks away from the water is breezy Main Street filled with unique restaurants, live musicians, murals, boutiques, outdoor markets, ice cream shops and bars serving craft beer.

The Pinellas Trail (pinellascounty.org/trailgd) slides through the heart of the city, cutting across Main Street. Mayor Julie Ward Bujalski has even called it the community's "artery." And the relationship between the trail and the city is symbiotic. Data from eight automated, electromagnetic and infrared sensors that were installed along the trail in 2017 show that more people in Dunedin use the trail than people in any of the seven other locations served by the trail (which include larger cities like St. Petersburg and Clearwater).

It's no surprise that in 2018, Dunedin was named the first "Trail Town" in the state by the Office of Greenways and Trails (floridadep.gov/parks/ogt), part of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

"I was 43 when Bert was killed, and now I'm 81. So almost 40 years of my life has been working on the Pinellas Trail. I'm so proud of it. It's been a life changer for me."

Bert Valery Sr., co-founder of the Pinellas County Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee and early champion of the Pinellas Trail



Safety First

The fact that I could do what I did on that beautiful morning—have a fun, safe outing with my family—is something I don't take for granted, especially after chatting with Bert Valery Sr. In 1983, one of his sons, Bert Valery Jr., who was 17, was biking home when he was hit by a car and killed while trying to cross the Belleair Causeway.

Heartbroken by the tragedy, Valery Sr. was determined to reduce the risk for others. Later that year, he helped form the countywide Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) (rtc.li/pinellas-bike-ped), part of the metropolitan planning organization (MPO), and was a driving force behind the creation of the trail, which separates bikers and pedestrians from traffic. Their goal: to use the miles of railroad line in Pinellas County that CSX had recently abandoned.

Let's Make a Deal

Of course, being a project that required a lot of money, cooperation from various levels of government and public support, it took seven years of negotiating to come to fruition. One major roadblock: At the time, it was incredibly ambitious. There were few trails like it anywhere in the country, so it was difficult for some stakeholders to envision it or feel confident that it was a worthy investment.

"You had to pretty much figure it out yourself," said Brian Smith, who was the county's planning director, and the director of the MPO from 1980 to 2011, and who was instrumental in making the trail become a reality. Now retired, he volunteers as chair of the BPAC.

At first, there was talk of creating a monorail, but eventually the concept of having a linear, recreational trail gained steam. By 1988, a nonprofit called Pinellas Trails Inc.—now known as Friends of the Pinellas Trail (friendsofthepinellastrail.org)—formed to help promote the idea to the surrounding neighborhoods. Scott Daniels, president of the organization, is someone who has been personally invested in the trail for decades. When the group was founded, he and his wife, Marcy, were living on a property right next to where the trail would be installed.

One argument made in favor of the trail was that Pinellas is a peninsula (so you can't easily cross county lines), as well as the most densely populated county in Florida (out of 67). The trail gave all those people a convenient and safe place to walk and ride bikes. Pinellas is also home to many popular parks, and the trail provided an easy way to connect them.



PHOTO: The Pinellas Trail includes 10 overpasses and three underpasses, which help separate trail users from cars so they can travel safely by walking and bicycling.

"It's the most important public works project Pinellas County has ever done because it makes communities come together and pulls people together."

Fred Marquis, former Pinellas County administrator and early trail supporter

In 1989, the county approved the plan, allocating \$1.5 million to build the trail's first 15-mile segment. On Dec. 1, 1990, the first 5-mile stretch opened from Taylor Park in Largo to Seminole City Park in Seminole with funding from a drainage project.

Money Talks

A couple of key decisions helped fund the rest of the trail.

One was getting the public on board with the "Penny for Pinellas" sales tax, the brainchild of Fred Marquis, who was county administrator from 1979 to 2000 and has known Smith since their days at Florida State University, where they both earned a master's in urban planning.

"I probably gave 300 talks in different subdivisions all over the county. We made this rails-to-trails project the poster child for the whole program," said Marquis.

The strategy worked. The tax first went into effect from 1990 to 2000. It's since been reapproved several times, most recently in 2017 by 83% of voters, so it will continue through at least 2030. This effort by Marquis was recognized when the county met behind closed doors and surprised him by naming the existing trail after him.

When it came to financial support, another factor was implementing a survey, which revealed that a lot of people used the trail for transportation as opposed to recreation, opening it up to a variety of federal grant programs.

Smith, who lives near the trail in Ozona, understands exactly why it's used for transportation. He used to ride his bike to work, and today, he often hits the trail to bike to a supermarket. (His top tip: Add a rack to the back of your bike for groceries, rather than carrying them in a backpack, since the Florida heat and humidity will wet the back of your shirt.)

Travel the trail and you'll see more of this, like cyclists leaning their bikes against the walls of the trail-adjacent Crystal Beach Post Office or employees of the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System biking to work. A bonus: These

THE SILVER RIDERS

Mike Siebel and Jim Wedlake might be retired, but they're as active and as social as ever—thanks to their participation in a group called the Silver Riders. Pre-pandemic, members (usually a couple dozen) would gather each Tuesday to bike part of the Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail (friendsofthepinellastrail.org) and then meet for breakfast. Lately, they've been splitting into smaller groups but hope to get back to the typical routine as soon as it's safe.

"When we started, we thought it was about biking. But really, we used the biking to go to breakfast. It's really about being together and camaraderie," said Wedlake, who likes that parts of the trail have an urban feel.

Siebel leads the group, deciding where to meet, ride and eat, and has become a better and more dedicated biker over the years. "The Pinellas Trail gave my wife and me the confidence that we wouldn't have developed on our own. We became more educated on the rules of the road. I used to bike once a month, but now we bike four times a week," he said. He's even taken part in bike-based tourism—sometimes with Wedlake—traveling to trails in other states like Virginia, South Carolina, Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota.

The two friends look forward to more meals, conversations and adventures.

findings reinforced how much the trail helps the environment by reducing carbon emissions from motor vehicles.

Look How You've Grown

Over the last three decades, the trail has expanded to 54 miles in length. It starts in vibrant downtown St. Petersburg in the southeast corner of the county, where it connects to the gleaming new St. Pete Pier (stpetepier.org), curves around Tropicana Field (home to the almost-champs of 2020, the Tampa Bay Rays) and provides easy access to campuses such as the University of South Florida (usf.edu), as well as cultural venues like the Mahaffey Theater (themahaffey.com) and the Dali Museum (thedali.org). It travels northwest, winding its way past the powdery, white-sand beaches and retirement communities in Clearwater, and then leads up to the quiet, Greek fishing village of Tarpon Springs in the northwest corner. The trail also contains 10 overpasses and three underpasses, which help keep users away from cars.

And it's not even finished yet. On a map, it currently looks like a doughnut with a few bites taken out of it. When the gaps are filled on the northeast side that run along the power lines—this newer portion is known as the Duke Energy Trail—the trail will become a complete loop of 75 miles.

What's more, probably within the next five years, the trail will connect to other Florida trails that can take riders across the entire state—from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean. It will be called the Florida Coast-

"We hear wonderful trail testimonials like, 'I never talked to my neighbors when I was in my car, but now I see my neighbors more and talk to them more,' or 'The trail certainly motivated us in our decision to move here.'"

Scott Daniels,
President, Friends of
the Pinellas Trail



PHOTO: The Pinellas Trail slides through the heart of Dunedin, cutting across Main Street.

to-Coast Trail (rtc.li/fl-coast-to-coast) and will span a whopping 250 miles over central Florida, ending in Titusville, near Cape Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Center.

Thinking about these achievements, as well as what the future holds, Valery Sr. said: "I feel like something good came of Bert's death. I was 43 when Bert was killed, and now I'm 81. So almost 40 years of my life has been working on the Pinellas Trail. I'm so proud of it. It's been a life changer for me."

A Warm Community Embrace

By any measure, the trail has been a resounding success. From 2017 to 2019, more than 1 million people used it each year, and in 2020, likely due to the pandemic, users soared to more than 2 million, according to statistics from Forward Pinellas (forwardpinellas.org), a land use and transportation planning agency. Tourism in the county has increased over the last 30 years, and surveys show that about 30% of the trail users are tourists.

"It's still very well embraced by the community. On Trailink.com[™], it's consistently one of the most commonly searched trails during the winter months," said Ken Bryan, who has been the Florida director of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) for 29 years and who helped the trail get state funding.

Daniels agrees, adding: "We hear wonderful trail testimonials like, 'I never talked to my neighbors when I was in my car, but now I see my neighbors more and talk to them more,' or 'The trail certainly motivated us in our decision to move here.'"

It doesn't hurt that the trail is well maintained by Chief Park Ranger Carol Gray and her team of four park rangers, as well as dozens of volunteer auxiliary rangers who often drive golf carts and remove debris like stray branches and broken glass from the trail, among other responsibilities.

There have also been unexpected, positive impacts. For instance, the trail inspired adjacent homeowners to tidy up their properties. Marquis noticed that many residents along the trail have made aesthetic improvements to their yards now that so many people pass by. Goodbye, junk piles and overgrown shrubs! And data show that a good portion of them ask for permission to install a gate in their backyard fences for easy access. "Within a month, I was inundated with requests," said Marquis.

For all of these reasons, RTC has inducted the



trail into its Rail-Trail Hall of Fame (railstotrails.org/halloffame), meaning it's among a list of 35 trails in the country honored for their quality and high standards. It's the only trail in Florida and one of only five trails in the Southeast United States to earn that distinction. It's become such a gold standard that planners from other states reach out and visit to learn how to build something similar in their areas.

All in all, Marquis calls it a "labor of love," saying: "It's the most important public works project Pinellas County has ever done because it makes communities come together and pulls people together." •



Jane Bianchi is a freelance writer and the editor of the UT Journal alumni magazine at The University of Tampa. Follow her on Twitter @janebianchi.