



City of Tarpon Springs, Florida

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OFFICE OF
MAYOR BEVERLEY BILLIRIS

March 5, 2010

Commission Chair Karen Seel
Pinellas County Board of Commissioners
315 Court Street
Clearwater, FL 33756

Dear Chairman Seel:

My office has received several calls about the possibility that the County may close Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center. We all recognize that these are difficult times for cities and counties as we face the problems of the economic downturn.

Pinellas County is a tourist destination and for years we have touted that we are not only about the beaches but "eco-tourism" as well. During a time when the average person can no longer take long vacations, many are looking for inexpensive alternatives close to home. In my opinion, this should be the time to increase availability for our parks, not close them down. Brooker Creek had over 79,000 visitors to the preserve in 2009.

There must be other alternatives than to close Brooker Creek. If I could be so bold to suggest that you charge a \$2.00 fee for adults and children under the age of 12 could enter the preserve free of charge. To my understanding there are only 2.5 paid employees. The cost of keeping the preserve open is approximately \$243,000. By increasing the volunteer staff you could cut some of the operating costs.

As you are looking at your overall budget, have you discussed looking at the County Commissioner's own budget? It is to my understanding that each Commissioner has a secretary at a cost of \$40k plus benefits a year. Have you considered cutting some of that cost by having a secretary for the Commission Chair and one secretary to cover the needs of the rest of the board or any reduction to save costs? This would be a savings of \$200,000 plus. I know this would be a sacrifice for each of the board members, but during this difficult time when you are asking all departments to cut to the bone, it could send a powerful message that the board is willing to make the same sacrifices and those dollars could keep our parks and preserves open.

Closing down Brooker Creek even temporarily would be devastating. I am asking that you consider all alternatives before you take such a drastic decision. Thank you for this consideration.

Sincerely,

Mayor Beverley Billiris

cc: Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve