

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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A. Introduction

The Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is planning extensions for the Pinellas Trail, a pedestrian and bicycle facility that currently runs from Tarpon Springs in northwestern Pinellas County to St. Petersburg in southeastern Pinellas County. There have been objections to the proposed extensions because of perceived problems with crime, property values and neighborhood privacy adjacent to or near the trail. In order to assess these perceptions, the MPO's general planning consultant has conducted a study that includes:

- A review of recent trail-related community impact studies from across the country (summarized in Chapter 1);
- A property value trends assessment for those properties near the trail compared to property value trends elsewhere (Chapter 2);
- An analysis of Pinellas County and St. Petersburg crime statistics (Chapter 3);
- A mail-back questionnaire survey of property owners adjacent to the trail that provides a large sample indication of what homeowners think of the trail (Chapter 4);
- A telephone survey of homeowner association officers to determine whether their members perceive the trail positively or negatively (Chapter 5), and
- A telephone survey of realtors who sell properties near the trail to determine whether they perceive the trail to be a positive or negative factor to prospective homebuyers (Chapter 6).

In summary, the national and local research indicates that the perceptions of higher crime, lower property values and neighborhood privacy problems are unfounded. The homeowners survey indicates a high percentage of those living near the Pinellas Trail perceive it as an asset and not a liability. This positive perception is not unique to the Pinellas Trail. The national research indicates positive perceptions by homeowners living along other trails around the country. The positive perception is translating into the values of homes along the Trail, which are increasing at a faster rate than home values elsewhere in the County. And, crime rates along the trail are no different than they are elsewhere in the County.

B. National Literature Review

Before looking specifically at conditions along the Pinellas Trail, the study team conducted a national literature review. The review indicates that multiuse trails are an asset to the communities that they serve. The studies reviewed conclude that trails actually deter crime, have no or slightly positive influence on property values and bring new money into the local economy.

The studies indicate residents experienced few trail-related problems. Most said that living near the trails was better than they had anticipated and better than living near the unused railroad lines. They also reported that their proximity to the trails had not adversely affected their property values.

The popularity of trails may deter crime simply due to the level of activity that occurs on trails throughout the day. One study found that multiuse trails increased tourism and brought between \$300,000 and \$600,000 of “new money” into the local economy annually, depending upon the trail.

C. Pinellas Trail Assessment

The analysis of conditions specifically along the Pinellas Trail focused on the four areas listed below and shown in Exhibit ES-1:

- St. Petersburg – between 9th Avenue North and Central Avenue;
- Seminole – between 102 Avenue North and Park Boulevard;
- Dunedin – between Michigan and Sunset Point Road, and
- Palm Harbor – Nebraska Avenue to Tarpon Avenue.

The market areas generally extended a quarter of a mile on either side of the trail.

Residents' Perceptions

Nearly two-thirds of the 441 households who completed the homeowners survey say they use the trail at least once a week, while only five percent have never used it. Nearly two-thirds indicate they are walking more now that the trail is open than before. Those surveyed feel that recreation and fitness are the primary reasons people use the trail.

Perceptions of the trail depend significantly on the use of the trail, with the most negative perceptions by those who never use it. Those who use the trail at least once a month think the trail notably improves:

- Their home's value;
- The value of other homes in the neighborhood;
- Accessibility to other places in the community, and
- Neighborhood acquaintances.

Those who used the trail less than once a month give the trail slightly lower positive ratings in each of these areas. As a group, the only respondents who negatively rate the trail on these points are those who never use the trail. Because there are so few who never use the trail, the overall perception of the trail is positive.

Property Values

An evaluation of property values from the Pinellas County Property Appraiser's records concludes that property values of homes adjacent to the Pinellas Trail followed countywide trends soon after the trail opened, but in recent years trailside home values have been increasing at a faster rate. In St. Petersburg, for example, trailside and countywide home prices changed at roughly the same rate between 1990 and 1995, but since that time the trailside home prices have escalated faster. This trend occurred in all four of the market areas. Overall, the median sale prices for single-family homes adjacent to the trail are rising faster than the median sales price of homes throughout the county. Property data indicate that trailside residential property values are increasing by two to three percent annually over countywide residential properties.

Crime

Crime data from the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office and the St. Petersburg Police Department for 1993, 1995 and 1999 indicate that crime rates along the trail are no different than elsewhere in the county or city. In 1993 and 1995, crime rates along the trail were lower than county-wide rates, and in 1999 the rates were still lower, but closer to the countywide average.

There are a few areas along the trail with higher than average crime rates due to factors other than the trail. Most notably, shoplifting crimes are much higher near large shopping malls along the trail. The relationship between shoplifting and major shopping malls is evident in other areas of the county as well.

Homeowners Association Perceptions

More than a third of the officers of the homeowners associations in the four market areas said the Pinellas Trail concerns have never been raised by their boards. When asked about possible concerns, the officers noted landscaping and maintenance as most problematic, with crime and loitering also noted. HOA officers are most disconcerted by perceived inequities and disparities in trail quality and amenities between communities.

Realtor's Perceptions

Nearly all (90%) of the realtors interviewed via a telephone survey said that home sales along the trail had either "increased somewhat" or "increased significantly." None said that home sales had "decreased." Most thought that the opening of the Pinellas Trail increased buyer interest in the area, particularly by those who plan to use the trail for recreation and fitness. This perception is confirmed by the resident's survey, which found that those who use the trail most frequently rate it very positively. The trail is likely attracting home buyers with an interest in using the trail.

D. Summary of Findings

There have been objections to proposed extensions of the Pinellas Trail because of perceived problems with crime, property values and neighborhood privacy adjacent to or near the trail. The Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization conducted this *Pinellas Trail Community Impact Study* to address those concerns.

The study concludes that the perceptions of higher crime rates, lower property values and neighborhood privacy problems are unfounded. Those who live along the trail are much more likely to perceive its benefits than negative impacts, and this perception is translating into higher

property values. Realtors note that the demand for homes along the trail is increasing, particularly by those with an interest in using the trail. This perception is supported by the survey of residents, which found that those who use the trail perceive it most positively. In sum, the Pinellas Trail is perceived by most to be a community asset and does not contribute to criminal activity or declining property values by its presence in a neighborhood.

