



**PINELLAS CHAPTER
FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY**

PO Box 4265
Clearwater, FL 33758

March 30, 2021

Pinellas County School Board
301 4th St. SW
Largo, FL 33770
Via email: board@pcsb.org

RE: West Klosterman Preserve

Dear Honorable Pinellas County School Board Members,

It has come to our attention that the Pinellas County School Board is considering disposing of the property known as West Klosterman Preserve, ("Property"), listed as Folio No. 23-27-15-89262-000-2700. The Pinellas Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society is writing to urge the School Board to take steps to preserve the Property as an important environmental educational resource. The biodiversity on this site, located in a relatively urban area, presents a significant opportunity for hands-on environmental education for Pinellas County students and the public at-large.

Recently, our Chapter Representative David Perkey had an opportunity to visit the Property, along with ecological consultant Dr. Donald Richardson. Most of the Property is composed of sandhill or scrub vegetation communities, which are considered state imperiled communities and rare within Pinellas County. Perkey and Richardson observed over 60 species of flora and fauna on the property, including the Giant Wild Pine, a Florida listed species, Longleaf Pine, Sand Pine, Florida Rosemary, American Beautyberry, Gopher Apple, and Prickly Pear Cactus, among many others. They witnessed at least sixteen Gopher Tortoise burrows scattered throughout the central open scrub areas of the site, with many showing signs of activity. There are also various nuisance and exotic species on the Property such as Brazilian Pepper and Madagascar Periwinkle. While not ideal for an ecosystem, these exotic species provide teachable moments to help students learn about invasive species and identify exotic plants versus native plants in Pinellas County.

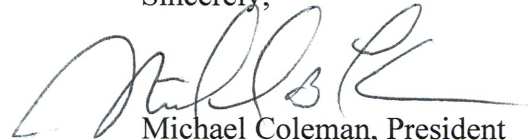
In addition, this Property provides important habitat connectivity in the area, located adjacent to and sharing an ecosystem with the County's 76-acre Mariner's Point Management Area (MPMA). The addition of this parcel to the MPMA would significantly enhance groundwater recharge, improve water quality, and enhance recreational opportunities, floodplains and roadway protection.

The Property was originally acquired in 1990 for the educational benefit of the students of Pinellas County and thirty years later it still provides an important opportunity for environmental education which should not be squandered. In the last few years, opportunities for careers in the environmental field are growing along with a heightened demand and interest in early environmental education. In response to this trend, you as elected officials can creatively use this valuable site to help respond to the growing need for environmental education.

Our Chapter strongly encourages the School Board to reject the decision to dispose of the Property. Instead, we propose that it be used as an outdoor classroom where students can learn about, interact and engage with its treasured natural resources. If the School Board decides to dispose of this public land, they should convey the Property to Pinellas County for no more than what the taxpayers paid and require that the land is preserved for conservation purposes in perpetuity. At the very least, provide the public as much time as is needed to secure funding to aid in the purchase of the Property for preservation, conservation, and education.

Our Chapter has been working for many years to conserve rare and unique plant species and we actively support plant conservation, community outreach, scientific research, and conservation education. We are part of a statewide network of conservation professionals, scientists, teachers, and volunteers. We look forward to working with you, other local governments, and nonprofits as a resource to preserve this important ecological site for generations to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Coleman", written over a horizontal line.

Michael Coleman, President
Pinellas Chapter
Florida Native Plant Society