



2025
ANNUAL REPORT

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2025 ANNUAL REPORT

The Healthy West Orange Trails Connection (HWOTC) was formed to promote, activate and enhance the trail system to create opportunities for physical activity, social engagement, prosperity, and happiness. Our goal is to connect and enhance a dynamic regional trail system that we can all enjoy close to home. The committee is proud of the collaborative progress being made with the largest grass roots coalition for trail activation and development in the Central Florida region.

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LETTER FROM THE HEALTHY WEST ORANGE TRAILS CONNECTION

In 2025, the Healthy West Orange Trails Connection advanced key priorities to support a more connected and accessible regional trail network. A major focus this year was defining and refining a shared vision for priority trails that would connect Partner Cities and Towns while forming loops throughout West Orange County that connect to the statewide SUN Trail network. This “HWOTC Priority Trail Loops” vision now serves as the foundation of the Trail Project Implementation Grant Program and will guide future investments in regional connectivity. Planning is already underway to contract a third party to conduct a system-wide study of this vision, with completion anticipated in 2026.

The Trail Grant Program made important progress in 2025, with multiple applications for the Small Project category being received, reviewed, and approved. The Grant Program was also revised to align available funding outside of the Small Project category in service of advancing the HWOTC Priority Trail Loops Vision toward reality.

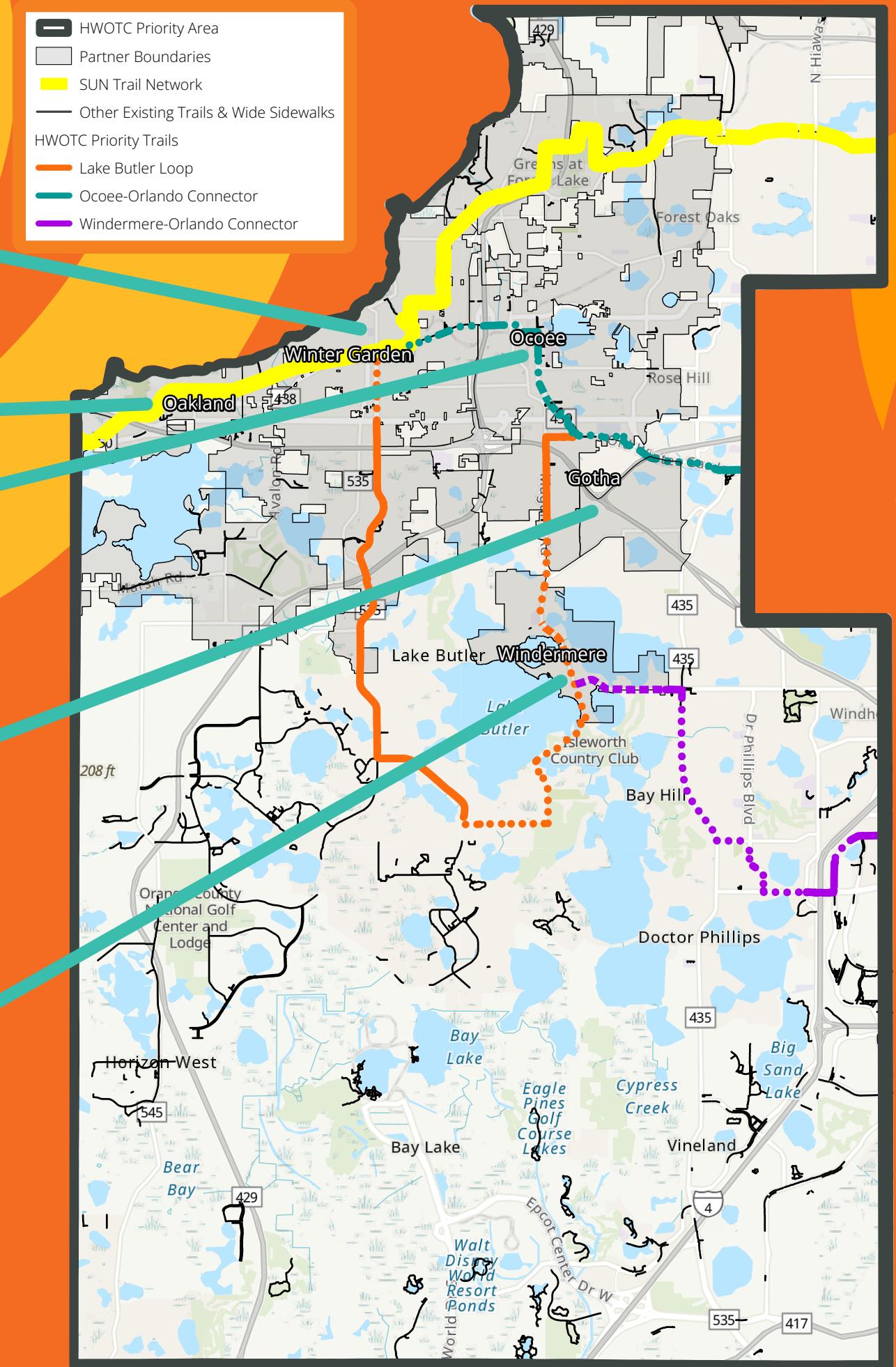
To further support HWOTC's goals, the Enhance Working Group expanded its role to include evaluations of planned and prospective trail corridors. In 2025, five trail evaluations were completed, one for each partner city and town, ranging from early-stage concepts to advanced design-phase projects. These efforts are helping ensure that future trails are thoughtfully planned, feasible, and aligned with long-term goals.

Together, these steps bring us closer to a seamless trail system that promotes active transportation, outdoor recreation, and healthier communities across West Orange County. We look forward to building on this momentum in the year ahead.

Sincerely,

The Healthy West Orange Trails Connection Partner Cities and Towns

THE HEALTHY WEST ORANGE TRAILS CONNECTION MAP



CONTINUING TO BUILD HEALTHY TRAILS

From September 2024 to August 2025, HWOTC focused on supporting the Trail Grant Program and advancing the development of the Priority Area trail network through three main efforts: refining a vision for three loop trails throughout the region, breaking them into priority groups to help direct grant funding to key connectivity projects; promoting small grants category of the Trail Project Implementation Grant Program, including reviewing and supporting partner applications; and conducting future trail corridor evaluations.

One of the most significant efforts of the past year was the refinement of a vision that identified three trail loops designed to maximize connectivity between Partner Cities and Towns while enhancing broader connectivity within the region and to statewide networks through loop connections to the SUN Trail network. Referred to as the "HWOTC Priority Trail Loops" vision, this concept was further broken down into priority segments that could be targeted for funding assistance through the HWOTC Trail Grant Program to provide direct connections between Partner Cities and Towns in the short term, and lay the groundwork for larger regional connectivity in the future. Following advice from multiple local and state agencies, HWOTC decided to pursue a planning-level study of the entire vision to obtain cost estimates, with the goal of positioning the project to be considered in regional and state trail planning efforts and funding programs. If successful, this strategy would guarantee the completion of the entire trail network, representing a significant return on the funds used to commission the study.

On the grant administrative side, HWOTC awarded its first small grant to the Oakland Nature Preserve for a guided tour and wayfinding signage throughout the preserve, and awarded a second to the Town of Oakland for the construction of a trail connection within the town. HWOTC continued to support the completion of a sidewalk and trail loop around Lake Down in Windermere and Gotha. Throughout the process, applicants were encouraged to seek assistance from HWOTC, with Gotha in particular benefiting from support in the absence of staff to assemble necessary resources.

Lastly, HWOTC supported trails in the region through the Enhance Working Group's evaluation of trail corridors. The working group reviewed proposed trail segments in each of HWOTC's five partner towns and cities, provided recommendations for improvement, and held valuable conversations with city and town staff about existing plans and how HWOTC could help move them forward.

The HWOTC is governed by an Executive Committee and Steering Committee, as agreed upon by the Partner Cities and Towns. The Executive Committee is comprised of one (1) West Orange Healthcare District representative (Past Trustee - WOHD dissolved June 2023), one (1) Foundation for a Healthier West Orange (FWHO) representative, and one (1) City/Town representative (elected annually). The Steering Committee is comprised of one (1) staff member and one (1) alternate from each Partner City and Town. HWOTC Working Groups are comprised of various Steering Committee and Supporting Agency members.



INITIATORS



WOHD dissolved June 2023

FOUNDATION
For A Healthier West Orange

2025 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

FOUNDATION

For A Healthier West Orange



Past Trustee



2025 Elected City Representative

Facilitated by
Bike/Walk Central Florida



STEERING COMMITTEE

East Central Florida Regional Planning Council | Florida Department of Transportation
West Orange Chamber of Commerce | Kittelson & Associates | Friends of Lake Apopka
Orange County District 1 Commissioner's Office | Orange County Parks and Recreation
Orange County District 2 Commissioner's Office | MetroPlan Orlando

EXECUTIVE & STEERING COMMITTEES

Whereas most decisions relating to direction are expected to be made through consensus of the entire HWOTC membership, final decisions are based on a one-vote per HWOTC Partner system of the Steering Committee.

In 2024, the Executive and Steering Committees worked directly with the program's facilitating

organization, Bike/Walk Central Florida, to develop several program components and initiatives in pursuit of the HWOTC mission. These included refinement of the Priority Trail Loops Vision, planning for the procurement of a planning and feasibility study for those Priority Trail Loops, and review of Trail Project Implementation Grant Program applications.

HWOTC Project Evaluation Rubric			
Category	Description	MAX Points	Reviewer Score
Health Impact	This project enhances the physical health of the community.	14	
	This project enhances the mental, social, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing of the community.	14	
Safety	This project contributes to a safer trail system.	14	
Trail Activation & Enhancement	This project provides a trail connection or enhancement(s) to an existing trail.	8	
	This project activates one or more trails.	8	
	This project provides support for facilities and amenities.	5	
	This project provides wayfinding signage.	5	
	This project has historical or cultural significance.	3	
Environment	This project supports or enhances the natural environment.	8	
Design	This project's design meets the intent of HWOTC's design guidelines and priorities.	8	
Inclusivity	This project is inclusive of people of all ages and abilities.	7	
Collaboration	This project includes collaboration with one or more partners/organizations.	6	
	<i>total</i>	100	

HWOTC Priority Trail Loops Vision

As HWOTC investigated how to leverage the Priority Area Trail Gap Analysis through discussions with the Trail Network Development Working Group (TNDWG) and Steering Committee, it eventually settled on pursuing the construction of three key trail corridors that would effectively create a network of loops connecting the Partner Cities and Towns to each other and to the broader statewide SUN Trail System by focusing on filling gaps in existing infrastructure, effectively creating the maximum impact possible with the lowest cost.

The vision is intended to be fulfilled through a two prong approach:

- Direct funding to Priority Trail Loop segments
- Priority Trail Loops system-wide planning-level study

LEFT: HWOTC Trail Project Grant Program Evaluation Matrix



HWOTC Trail Project Implementation Grant Program

HWOTC has developed and launched the first stage of a grant program intended to provide funding assistance for implementation of trail projects aligned with the HWOTC Mission. Program components include grant categories and eligibility requirements, application and review processes, and project prioritization and evaluation processes.

The Grant Program proposes to apportion the \$5 million dollar implementation fund managed by the Foundation for a Healthier West Orange into two categories:

- **Small Projects**
- **HWOTC Priority Trails**

The Grant Program components were approved in March 2024, first accepting applications for the Small Projects category, which was allocated a total of \$500,000 in available funding. In December 2024, the Steering Committee decided to use the remaining funds to support the HWOTC Priority Trail Loops Vision.

Healthy West Orange Trails Connection Priority Trail Loops Vision

In 2023, an in-depth analysis was conducted to identify and evaluate opportunities to close trail gaps between HWOTC Partner Cities and Towns, and to create connections to the Statewide SUN Trail Network. This study aimed to identify options for creating a high-impact trail network by connecting as many of the existing and previously-planned trails together with as few new trail connections as possible.

Building on that foundation, HWOTC spent 2024 and early 2025 developing a vision for three key trail corridors that would link partner communities to one another and to the broader Statewide SUN Trail system. In recognizing that the amount of funds available through the HWOTC Trail Grant Program would not be sufficient to fund construction of the entire Priority Trails vision, the Steering Committee reached consensus on updated priorities for the use of the Grant Program's implementation fund:

- A portion of funds would be used to commission a vision-wide planning and feasibility study yielding confidence in the trail alignments and planning-level cost estimates for future use;
- Remaining funds would be used to assist Partner Cities and Towns in construction of those priority trail segments expected

Group	Description
A	Closing Gaps; Connecting Communities: Single <u>or</u> multi-segment projects between existing <u>or</u> funded trails <u>that connect HWOTC Partner Cities and Towns</u>
B	Extending the Network: Single- or Multi-segment projects that extend the existing network
C	Completing the Network: Additional projects that would complete the Priority Trail Loops network
D	Improving the Network: Existing sidewalks to convert to 12'W trails

ABOVE: HWOTC Priority Trail Loops Prioritization Table

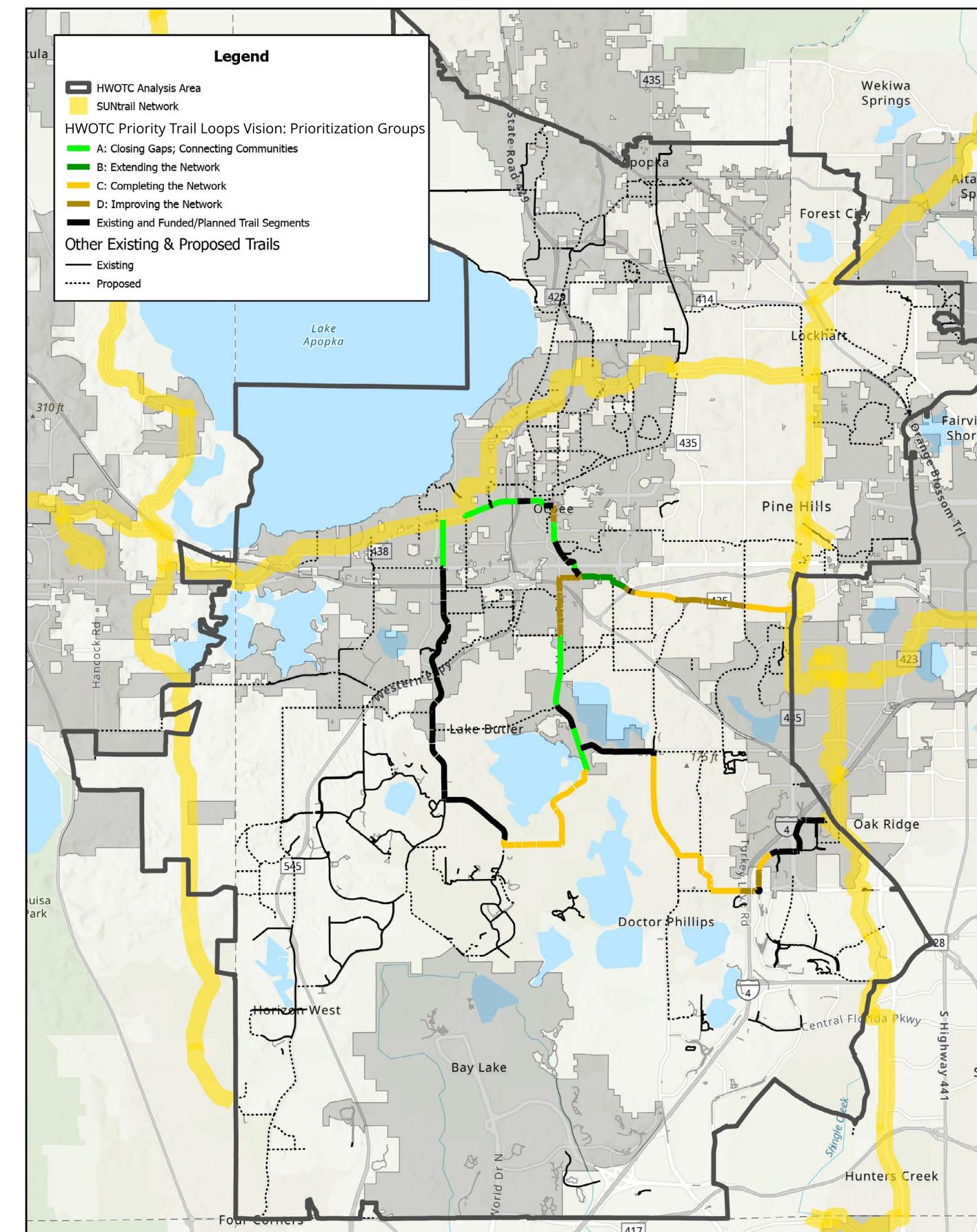
RIGHT: HWOTC Priority Trail Loops Vision Map with Prioritization

Healthy West Orange Trails Connection Priority Trail Loops Vision

to deliver the most immediate impact on connectivity between the HWOTC communities.

To guide decision-making, priority trail segments were identified using a matrix that categorized all trails in the network into four tiers. Finalized by the Steering Committee in June 2025, this matrix enabled both the Trail Network Development Working Group and the Steering Committee to begin focusing on the highest-priority segments. With this framework in place, the committees began engaging with relevant partners to assess funding needs and determine appropriate grant awards to help bring these priority connections to completion.

Meanwhile, allocating funds for a system-wide, planning-level network study to obtain cost estimates was a strategic step toward positioning the trail network as a unified system with potential to be considered in regional and state trail planning efforts and funding programs. With input from the Trail Network Development Working Group and guidance from Supporting Agencies (such as the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, Orange County Parks & Recreation, and FDOT), HWOTC had been advised that this approach offers the best path forward for securing additional project funding assistance.



Heading into 2025, HWOTC recognized that the Design & Connections Working Group would shift solely toward supporting the development of the trail network, both by developing the HWOTC Priority Trail Loops Vision and by serving as a review committee for small grant applications. As a result, the group's name was changed to the Trail Network Development Working Group (TNDWG) to better reflect its purpose moving forward.

Priority Trail Loops Vision Development

The TNDWG was where the Priority Trail Loops Vision first took shape and continued to be developed throughout the year. The expertise and diverse representation within the working group helped HWOTC develop a realistic plan for bringing the vision to life through strategic use of grant funds and by leveraging state-level contacts for guidance and support.

DONATE AND BECOME A MEMBER!

You can make a difference. Each one of us, by joining together as a group for a common cause, have a much greater impact on the world around us. As a non-profit organization, we depend heavily on the memberships and donations of those who share our vision.

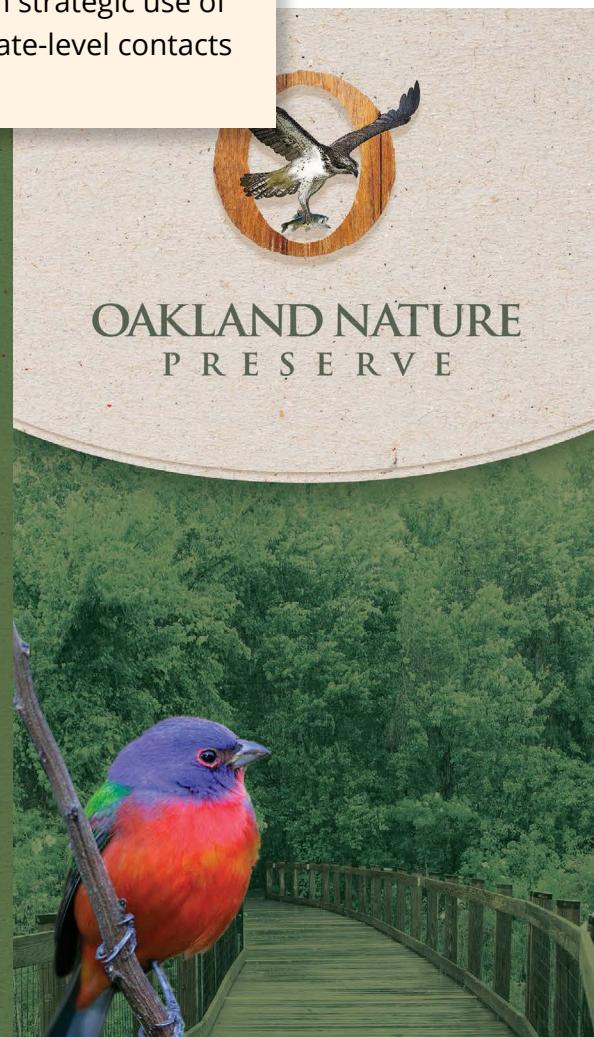
To donate or become a member online, please visit us at OaklandNaturePreserve.org. Donation boxes have also been placed around the Preserve.

VOLUNTEER!

Since the late 1990s, volunteers have donated thousands of hours to habitat restoration, fund raising, and education. The Preserve's continued success is only possible with the generosity and dedication of volunteers. The 128-Preserve and the Environmental Education Center offer a number of opportunities for people to help accomplish ONP's mission.

If you are interested in volunteering, please visit us online at OaklandNaturePreserve.org, email our Volunteer Coordinator at volunteer@oaklandnaturepreserve.org or call us at (407) 905-0054.

Oakland Nature Preserve
747 Machete Trail
Oakland, FL 34760
(407) 905-0054
OaklandNaturePreserve.org



Representatives from:

- City of Ocoee
- City of Winter Garden
- Florida Department of Transportation
- MetroPlan Orlando
- East Central Florida Regional Planning Council
- Orange County Parks & Recreation
- Kittelson & Associates, Inc.

BELOW: Oakland Nature Preserve brochure

ABOUT THE OAKLAND NATURE PRESERVE

The Oakland Nature Preserve encompasses 128 acres of land – 48 acres uplands and 80 acres of forested wetlands – and includes a boardwalk to Lake Apopka with a classroom-sized pavilion on the lakefront, and a pavilion on the West Orange Trail.

Interpreting signs through the Preserve help visitors identify plant species, while the log cabin-style Education Center, modeled after a pioneer homestead, includes a classroom, museum, office, and restrooms.

In addition to providing a window on the ongoing restoration of Lake Apopka, the Preserve features diverse biological, geological, and topographical features, rapidly vanishing in Central Florida. The Preserve also offers recreational and educational opportunities in a living classroom, perfect for learning about the ecology of Florida.

Oakland Nature Preserve offers memberships, field trips, guided tours, summer camp programs, and lectures for visitors of all ages. Volunteers are welcome to assist with everything from visitor tours to restoration projects and donations are greatly appreciated.



LEFT: Oakland Nature Preserve wayfinding signage

BELOW: Ocoee Railroad



Trail Implementation Grant Program: Application Reviews

The TNDWG reviewed two applications and facilitated pre-application discussions and coordination for two additional forthcoming applications:

Applications Reviewed

1. An application from Oakland Nature Preserve to develop a guided tour program featuring educational signage and materials.
2. An application from the Town of Oakland to complete a self-contained trail loop through southern Oakland, connecting Oakland Nature Preserve to the HWO Arts and Heritage Center, and supported by trail amenities.
3. An application from the Gotha Rural Settlement to complete a trail and sidewalk loop around Lake Down, running through Windermere and unincorporated Orange County, and connecting several parks and sites of cultural and historic significance.
4. An application from the City of Ocoee for the restoration and preservation of historically significant railroad assets along a planned rail-to-trail conversion, accompanied by educational signage.

Forthcoming Applications

Trail Corridor Evaluations

In 2025, building on previous years of infrastructure review, the Enhance Working Group expanded its efforts to include field evaluations of future trail corridors at the request of HWOTC's Partner Cities and Towns. Over the course of the year, the group completed five evaluations, one for each Partner City and Town, spanning a total of 14.75 miles of prospective trail infrastructure. Following each evaluation, Bike/Walk Central Florida prepared a summary document outlining key observations and recommendations, and the Enhance Working Group reviewed and commented on the evaluation.



ABOVE: Trail crossing in Winter Garden



ABOVE: Ocoee Rail Switch



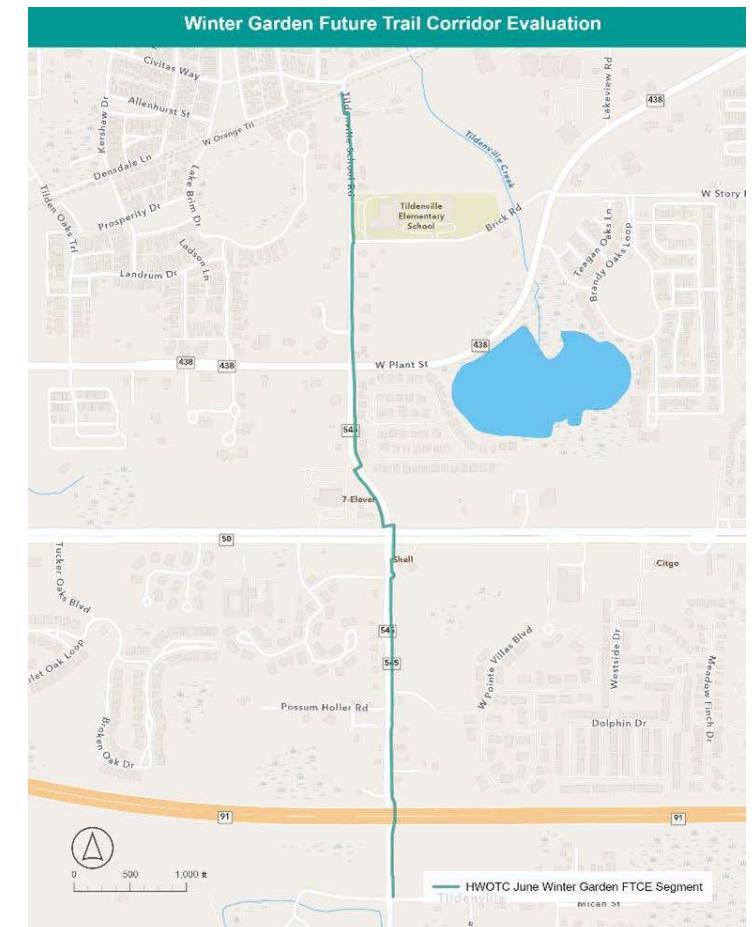
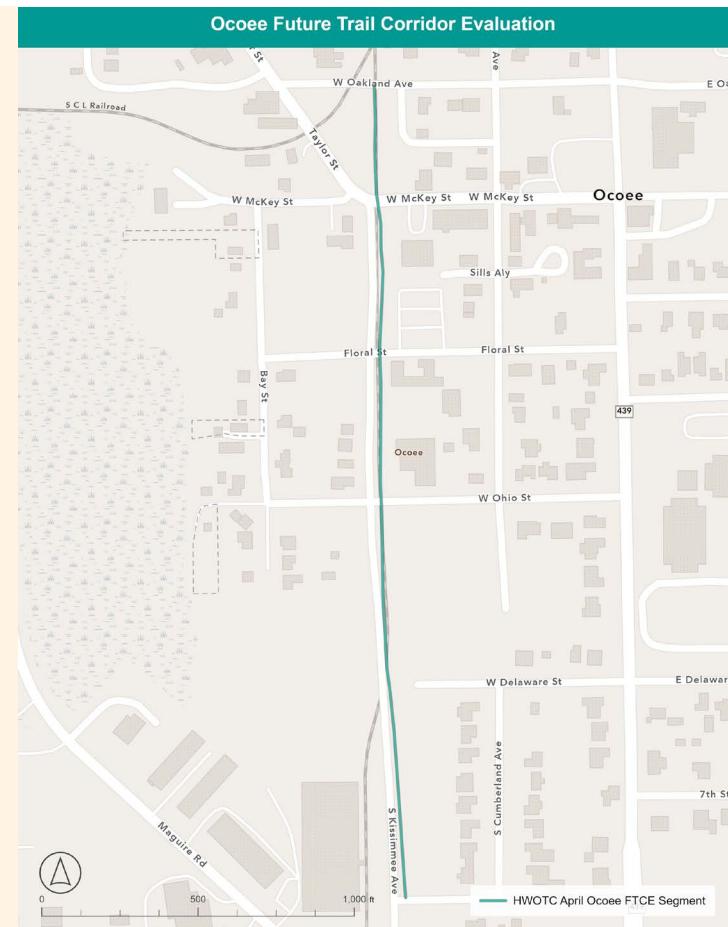
Ocoee Kissimmee Ave. Rail-to-Trail Conversion

In April, the working group evaluated a planned trail corridor in Ocoee that follows a former CSX rail line. The corridor is located in downtown Ocoee, adjacent to parcels designated for redevelopment as part of the City's Downtown Revitalization Plan, and offers an indirect connection to the West Orange Trail and the broader trail network through existing and planned connections within the City. This field effort created great opportunities for the Working Group members and Ocoee staff to collaboratively envision opportunities to enhance the proposed trail; noting the presence of original rail assets (e.g. rail switch, ties, and rail segments), the group discussed ideas that would incorporate these assets into the proposed trail, giving the City an opportunity to showcase the historical significance of the original rail corridor.

Winter Garden Avalon Rd. Trail Corridor

Following the recent transfer of ownership of a portion of Avalon Road from Orange County to the City of Winter Garden, the City identified an opportunity to create a trail connection between the West Orange Trail and the Tucker Ranch Recreation and Nature Complex. Although the concept was in early stages, the City requested that the working group evaluate the corridor to assess its viability and explore ideas that could support the eventual development of this exciting new trail connection.

HWOTC Trail Safety Audit mobile GIS app.

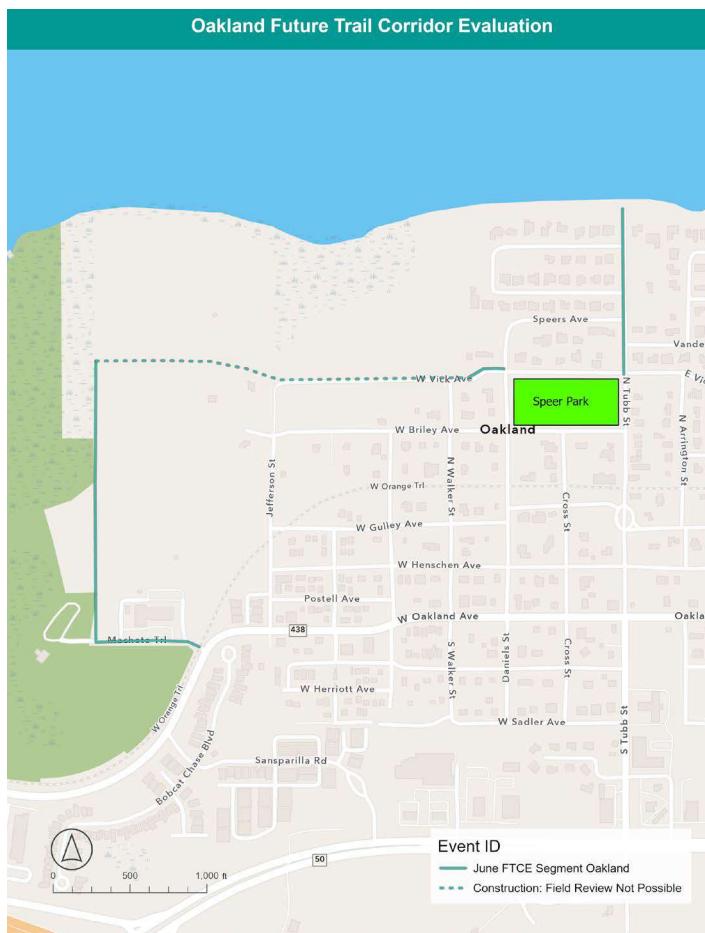


Oakland Briley Farms Trail

The working group visited the Town of Oakland to evaluate a proposed trail loop that, while not fully planned, had begun to take shape. Leveraging opportunities presented by new development, the Town of Oakland negotiated with the developer of the Briley Farms project to include the construction of a trail within the development. This trail is planned to connect Speer Park and, by extension, the West Orange Trail. Additionally, the Town negotiated the construction of a trail along a drainage easement near Oakland Nature Preserve. Together, these efforts outline a future trail loop through the development, linking Oakland Nature Preserve, Speer Park, and surrounding neighborhoods to the West Orange Trail.



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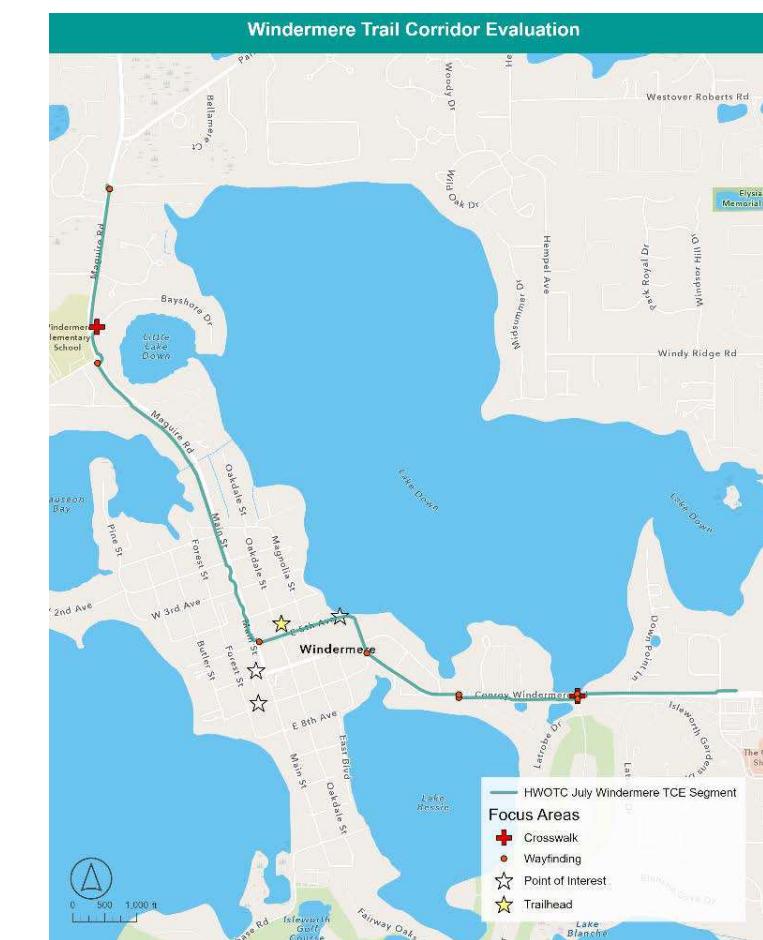


ABOVE: Enhance Working Group discussion at a trail crossing in Windermere

LEFT: Speer Park

Gotha and Windermere Lake Down Loop

In support of Gotha's forthcoming Lake Down Loop trail project grant application, the working group evaluated the proposed alignment and routing focusing on proposed roadway crossings and segments that are not currently existing or planned as part of other projects. The on-site assessment also involved discussions of how best to enhance access to nearby parks, points-of-interest, and destinations with historical significance.



SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE FUTURE

In 2025, the HWOTC Executive Committee, Steering Committee, and Working Groups advanced key initiatives to help fund improvements to the trail network and plan for the fulfillment of a large-scale network within the region.

In 2026, HWOTC will continue to allocate funds for improvement and construction of trail infrastructure and begin acting on its plan for a full regional trail network.



2026 INITIATIVES

- Continued advocacy in local and regional active transportation planning and implementation efforts
- Continued allocation of funds from the HWOTC Trail Project Implementation Grant Program
- Exploration and development of leveraged partnerships for additional trail network development opportunities
- Review of applications and disbursement of Trail Grant Program funds to approved applicants
- Procurement of system-wide study of the HWOTC Priority Trail Loops Vision
- Support for partners' trail efforts through at-request grant research support and field reviews



*For more information, visit:
<https://fhwo.org/hwo-trails-connection/>*



This 2025 Annual Report reflects the collaborative efforts of the Healthy West Orange Trails Connection - a coalition of Partner Cities and Towns and Supporting Agencies working together to promote, activate, and enhance the trail system to create opportunities for physical activity, social engagement, prosperity, and happiness.