



To: Mayor and City Commission
From: Olivia Minshe, City Manager
Date: May 8, 2026
Subject: Primitive Camping at Peace River Park

Peace River Park is a City-owned and maintained natural area consisting of approximately 154 acres along the Peace River. The park has historically functioned as a passive recreation area focused on nature-based activities and currently includes walking trails, picnic pavilions, an observation tower, and approximately 18 primitive camping sites.

Primitive camping has been a component of Peace River Park since the park was originally established. The camping area has traditionally been available at no charge. Camping sites do not include utilities or amenities. There is no electric, water, sewer, or restroom service available anywhere within the park. In addition, campers are unable to drive directly to their campsites and must park near the front entrance and walk supplies into the camping area.

To help manage the camping activity, campers are currently required to register with the Wauchula Police Department and are limited to a maximum stay of 14 days.

Over time, staff has observed that the primary users of the camping area are individuals experiencing homelessness. While the camping area was intended to provide primitive recreational camping opportunities within a natural park setting, the park has increasingly functioned as an informal temporary homeless encampment.

This has created several ongoing operational, maintenance, and public safety concerns for the City, including:

- Abandoned personal property and accumulated materials being left behind after campers vacate sites;
- Required compliance with Florida's statutory process for abandoned or lost property on public property, including inventory, storage, advertising, and holding periods prior to disposal;
- Human waste and sanitation concerns due to the absence of restroom facilities;

- Increased maintenance demands on City staff and the Wauchula Police Department;
- Complaints from park users who report feeling uncomfortable or unsafe while using the trail system;
- Situations involving mental health crises and substance abuse issues occurring within the park environment.

Staff also reached out to a local organization that assists individuals experiencing homelessness and provides tents for temporary shelter. During those discussions, staff explored whether charging a camping fee might help transition the park back toward recreational camping use. However, it was noted that a reasonable primitive camping fee would likely be too low to meaningfully deter long-term occupancy, while a significantly higher fee would be unreasonable for the type of primitive camping accommodations provided.

Importantly, the assisting organization indicated that they would support discontinuing camping at the park altogether. The organization expressed concern that the availability of free camping within the park attracts homeless individuals from surrounding areas into Wauchula, which in turn increases demand on the organization's already limited resources and assistance programs.

Recently, the City received grant funding to improve Peace River Park. Those improvements included trail enhancements, additional trails, an observation tower, fire rings, and trash receptacles at the camping sites. Should the City discontinue camping, many of those improvements could continue to support passive recreational use of the park. Over time, the former camping areas could potentially transition into additional picnic or day-use areas through the addition of picnic tables.

Given the lack of restroom and sanitation facilities, the ongoing operational burdens placed on City staff, the increasing public safety concerns, and the evolving use of the property away from its intended recreational purpose, staff recommends that the City Commission discontinue overnight camping at Peace River Park.