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7 October 2011

Memorandum

To: Joseph Dipasgua – City of Tarpon Springs

From: G. Jeffery Churchill – Principal Ecologist

**Re: Linger Longer RV Park
Seagrass and Preliminary Protected Species Surveys**

As requested by the City of Tarpon Springs, Florida George F. Young (GFY) has conducted seagrass surveys in conjunction with the hydrographic survey performed to determine the suitability of the site for use as a public boat ramp. At the request of the City, GFY has also conducted preliminary protected species surveys of the site to determine the potential for protected species to constrain the proposed project plans. This memorandum will summarize our methodology and findings.

The seagrass study involves several phases. First, information from the latest SWIM seagrass mapping was obtained from the Southwest Florida Water Management District (2010 study). Second, recent aerial photography was obtained from Pinellas County and the SWFWMD. Third, snorkeling divers swam a series of transects perpendicular to the shoreline at the site to look for seagrasses.

The SWIM seagrass data from the SWFWMD identified no seagrasses in the vicinity of the Linger Longer RV Park property in 2010. The closest seagrasses are located across the Anclote River channel approximately 460 feet to the southwest of the site near an island. Review of the current aerial photography identified the same seagrass beds, but none any closer to the site. Diver transects were conducted on 6 October 2011 and no seagrass was observed. Based on these findings it is unlikely that seagrass occurs near the site or would affect the potential use of the site as a public boat ramp.

Concurrent with the seagrass surveys GFY also conducted a preliminary protected species survey of the site. The purpose of the study was to determine what constraints to development may be present on the site due protected species listed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission or the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. This report summarizes the study methodology and findings.

The study involved the review of aerial photography, the SCS Soil Survey for Pinellas County, on site field surveys and conversations with regulatory agency staff. The Official



List of Endangered and Potentially Endangered Fauna and Flora in Florida (FFWCC June 2010) was utilized as the basis for the protected status of species. Information on the distribution of species and habitat utilization by species was obtained from Matrix of Habitats and Distribution by County of Rare/Endangered Species in Florida (FNAI 1990), the literature and experience of the investigators.

Field surveys were conducted on 6 October 2011. Pedestrian surveys were conducted throughout the site. Special attention was paid to habitats which might be suitable for use by protected species. Data recorded included observations of wildlife including sightings, vocalizations, scat, sign, burrows or nests. A qualitative assessment was made for each of the wetland areas on site. These data are utilized in determining the potential for development constraints associated with wetlands or protected species.

The majority of the site has been previously developed and operated as an RV Park for many years. As a result of this development there are no natural vegetative communities found on the site except for a narrow mangrove fringe on the northern portion of the shoreline. The lack of native habitats reduces the potential that the site is utilized by protected species. However, there are some protected species that do not have specific habitat requirements.

The site is largely open with Bahia or St. Augustine grass as the dominant ground cover. Mixed into the grass are herbaceous species and other grasses including *Bidens alba*, *Crotalaria* sp., sand spurs (*Cenchrus* sp.), toothache grass (*Ctenium aromaticum*), and many others. A few native trees are scattered throughout the site including slash and long leaf pine, live oak; and exotics such as Australian pine and Chinese tallow also occur. Many of the pines are quite large and were likely there before the RV park was developed.

Given the lack of natural vegetative communities, a few protected species that may utilize the site include the Gopher Tortoise, Sherman's Fox Squirrel, and the Bald Eagle. Each of these species has shown itself to be adaptable to developed areas. Each of these species will be considered further below.

The threatened Gopher Tortoise typically occurs on well drained sand soils. They will occur where there are any number of vegetative communities, as long as there is food. They can eat a variety of grasses, herbaceous species, and succulents. Portions of the site are underlain by *Astatula* fine sands that are excessively drained and well suited to the Gopher Tortoise. Two active Gopher Tortoise burrows were observed on the site during the field review, one located just inside the fence on the north end of the site and one near the south end of the site.

Prior to the development of the RV Park it is likely that the Gopher Tortoise occurred on the site. While the RV park was operational it is likely that the Gopher Tortoise was eliminated from the park by the development activity to construct the park and latter by the general



operation of the park. However, since the park has been out of operation a few Gopher Tortoises have probably migrated back into the portions of the property that provide suitable habitat. Over time more might be expected.

At this time it is unlikely that there are more than five Gopher Tortoises on the site, but more would be expected over time. Current regulations prevent work within 25 feet of an active or inactive Gopher Tortoise burrow. Relocation of the tortoise can also be permitted. Due to the low number of tortoise on the site and the ability to relocate the tortoises if necessary it is unlikely that the presence of the Gopher Tortoise on the site will have any significant impact on the proposed development. Both Gopher Tortoise observed were well away from the shoreline and the location of any proposed boat ramp improvements. However, their presence will need to be considered in developing the plans for a project on the site.

The Bald Eagle is another protected species that has shown an ability to occur in developed areas. A search of the FFWCC eagle locator site found that eighteen Bald Eagle nests occur within 5 miles of the site. The closest of these is located approximately ½ mile to the northeast of the site. Reports from local residents suggest that these Bald Eagles may utilize the large pines on the site overlooking the Anclote River as perches. However, the closest known Bald Eagle nest is far enough away from the site so that the project should not be affected by the Bald Eagle.

A third protected species that is known to utilize open grassy areas with scattered oaks and long leaf pines is Sherman's Fox Squirrel, a Species of Special Concern. During the pedestrian surveys we observed Long Leaf Pine Cones that had been stripped of the seeds in the fashion typical for Sherman's Fox Squirrel. Although none were observed it is likely that Sherman's Fox Squirrel utilizes the site at least for foraging. The squirrels have a large home range (approximately 85 acres) and could utilize the site without having a nest on site. Regulations protect the nest of the Sherman's Fox Squirrel, but do not regulate habitat. Therefore it is unlikely that the potential presence of the Sherman's Fox Squirrel will have an impact on the project.

A fourth protected species expected to occur near the site is the West Indian Manatee. They occur in the Anclote River adjacent to the site and congregate seasonally at the nearby Anclote Power Plant in the warm water discharge during the colder months of the year. Permits for any in water work necessary to construct a public boat ramp will be subject to standard conditions from both the Corps of Engineers and the State for work in waters where manatees may occur. Fortunately most local marine contractors are familiar with these conditions and they should not have a significant effect on the project.