Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Recreation and Parks

# Interim Operation and Facilities Plan For Silver Springs

## Introduction

The 242-acre Silver Springs attraction was acquired by the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (Trustees) in 1993. The original acquisition concept approved by the Trustees was that the seller (Florida Leisure Acquisition Corporation) would be permitted to continue operating a tourist attraction on the property for a period of up to 20 years after the purchase. During the lease term, the property was to be restored to a more natural, environmentally sensitive condition and certain structures were to be removed to prepare the property for eventual management by the Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) as a state park. Since acquisition, the property has been operated by several lessees. The current lessee, Festival Fun Parks, LLC (also known as Palace Entertainment, or Palace) operates under a lease that expires on December 31, 2029.

Palace has stated its intent to end its management of the attraction. Should Palace no longer manage the property, DRP may be requested to assume management as part of the state park system by merging it with the current Trustees lease for Silver River State Park. Ultimately, the combined properties could be managed as part of a comprehensive regional network of public lands in Marion County and surrounding areas. This interim plan, however, is intended to guide the management and operation of the property during the transition period until a long-range management plan can be developed through the normal park planning process. The objectives of this interim plan are to:

- Ensure that Silver Springs remains open to the public with a minimum of disruption to recreational opportunities and visitor services.
- Reduce the water resource impacts of the attraction's facilities on the springs and river.
- Identify facilities for removal that are in poor condition or are not essential for state park management.
- Identify infrastructure that is in need of immediate repairs, upgrades or renovation.
- Identify opportunities for private sector concessionaires and other business partners to assist in operating the park after direct management of the property is assumed.

## Property Description

The Silver Springs attraction and Silver River State Park comprise a total of 4,660 acres of uplands, wetlands and submerged land. Silver Springs is one of Florida's most significant natural and cultural features. Silver Springs is the headwaters of the Silver River, a spring run stream which flows 5.5 miles before joining the Oklawaha River.

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Silver Springs and the surrounding state park are part of a larger network of federal, state and local conservation and recreation lands that encompass almost 500,000 acres (see Vicinity Map). The two properties are located at the center of this network, connecting them with Ocala National Forest, Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, Indian Lake State Forest and several large tracts owned by the St. Johns River Water Management District. Additional connections to other public lands exist beyond those areas.

The focal point of the attraction is the Silver Springs complex that has drawn the interest of visitors for nearly 150 years. Public use of the property is focused on three principal areas: the attraction area surrounding the headsprings; Ross Allen Island; and Wild Waters park. Large parking areas accommodating some 1,750 vehicles have been constructed to support earlier levels of use. The highly developed portion of the property represents approximately 38 percent of total acreage (see Current Uses Map).

**Natural and Cultural Resources**

Intact natural communities on the property include the spring run stream and floodplain swamp below the headsprings. A band of heavily altered sandhill uplands is located along the southern boundary. A variety of invasive exotic plant species are present in these areas, particularly in the floodplain swamp. The attraction and its support areas represent about 93 acres of heavily developed land and an additional 70 acres of less intensive development with a remaining overstory and some understory trees and shrubs. Exotic plant infestations are obvious problems in several of the developed areas. The presence of imperiled plant or animal species on the property is not known at this time.

Resource management activities during the transition period will include the initial phases of removal and treatment of invasive exotic plants. Other activities are recommended to reduce the impact of the developed area on water quality and attenuate the quantity of water entering the spring/river system. Preliminary natural communities mapping and identification of imperiled species will begin with the exotic plant management activities and continue with the management planning process discussed below.

The cultural resources of the property include the historic tourist attraction that has operated in many forms since the late 1800s. The attraction includes a building complex and shoreline promenade designed by International Style architect Victor Lundy of Sarasota, Florida. The buildings were dedicated in 1957 and were recognized as being architecturally significant when Lundy received awards for them from Florida Architect magazine and the American Institute of Architects.

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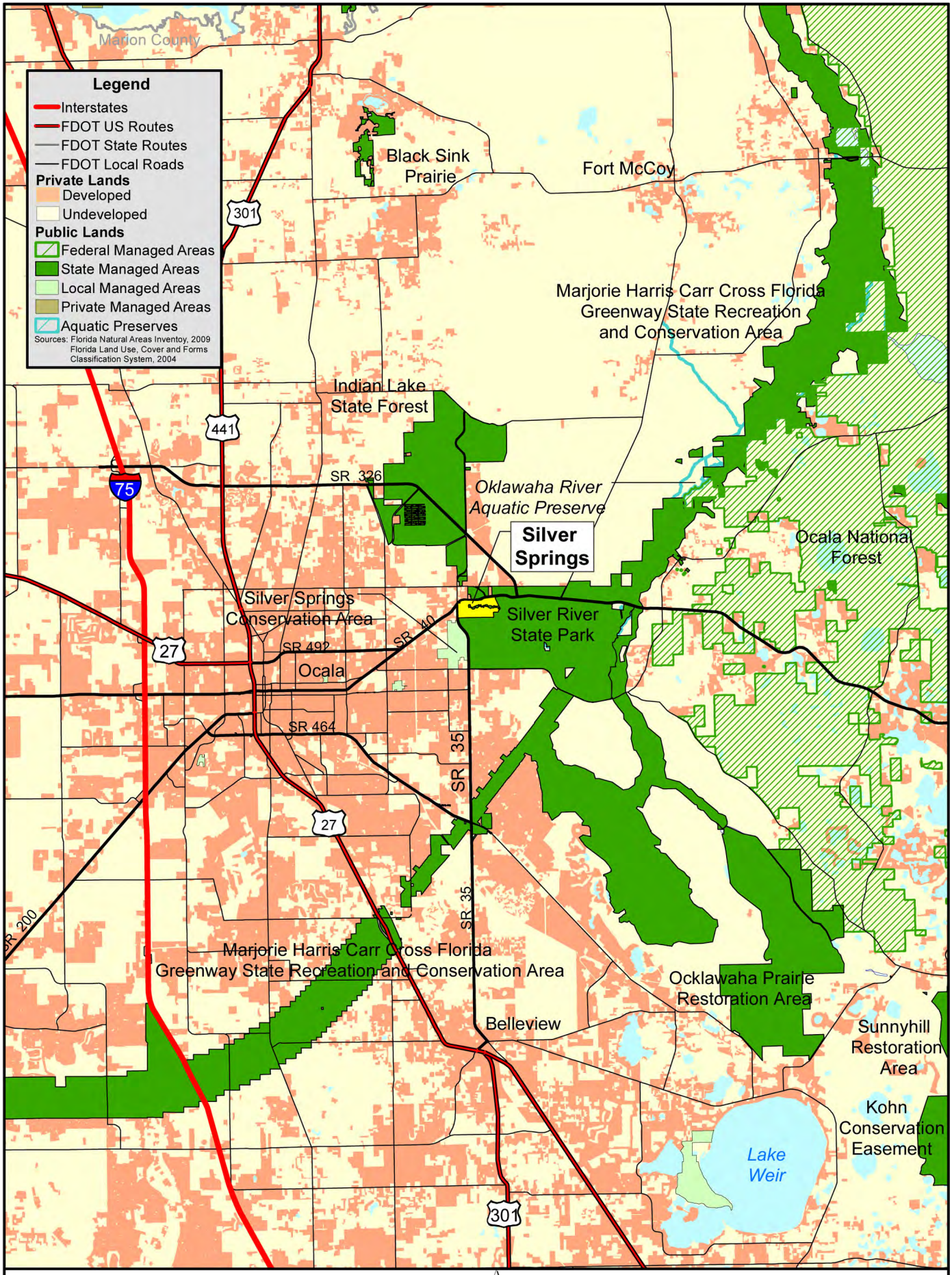
Marion County
Legend
Interstates
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FDOT State Routes
FDOT Local Roads
Private Lands
Developed
Undeveloped
Public Lands
Federal Managed Areas
State Managed Areas
Local Managed Areas
Private Managed Areas
Aquatic Preserves
Sources: Florida Natural Areas Inventoy, 2009
Florida Land Use, Cover and Forms
Classification System, 2004
Black Sink
Prairie
Fort McCoy
301
Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida
Greenway State Recreation
and Conservation Area
Indian Lake
State Forest
441
75
SR 326
Oklawaha River
Aquatic Preserve
Silver
Springs
Ocala National
Forest
Silver Springs
Conservation Area
Silver River
State Park
27
SR 40
SR 492
Ocala
SR 464
SR 35
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SR 35
SR 200
Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida
Greenway State Recreation and Conservation Area
Ocklawaha Prairie
Restoration Area
Belleview
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SILVER SPRINGS
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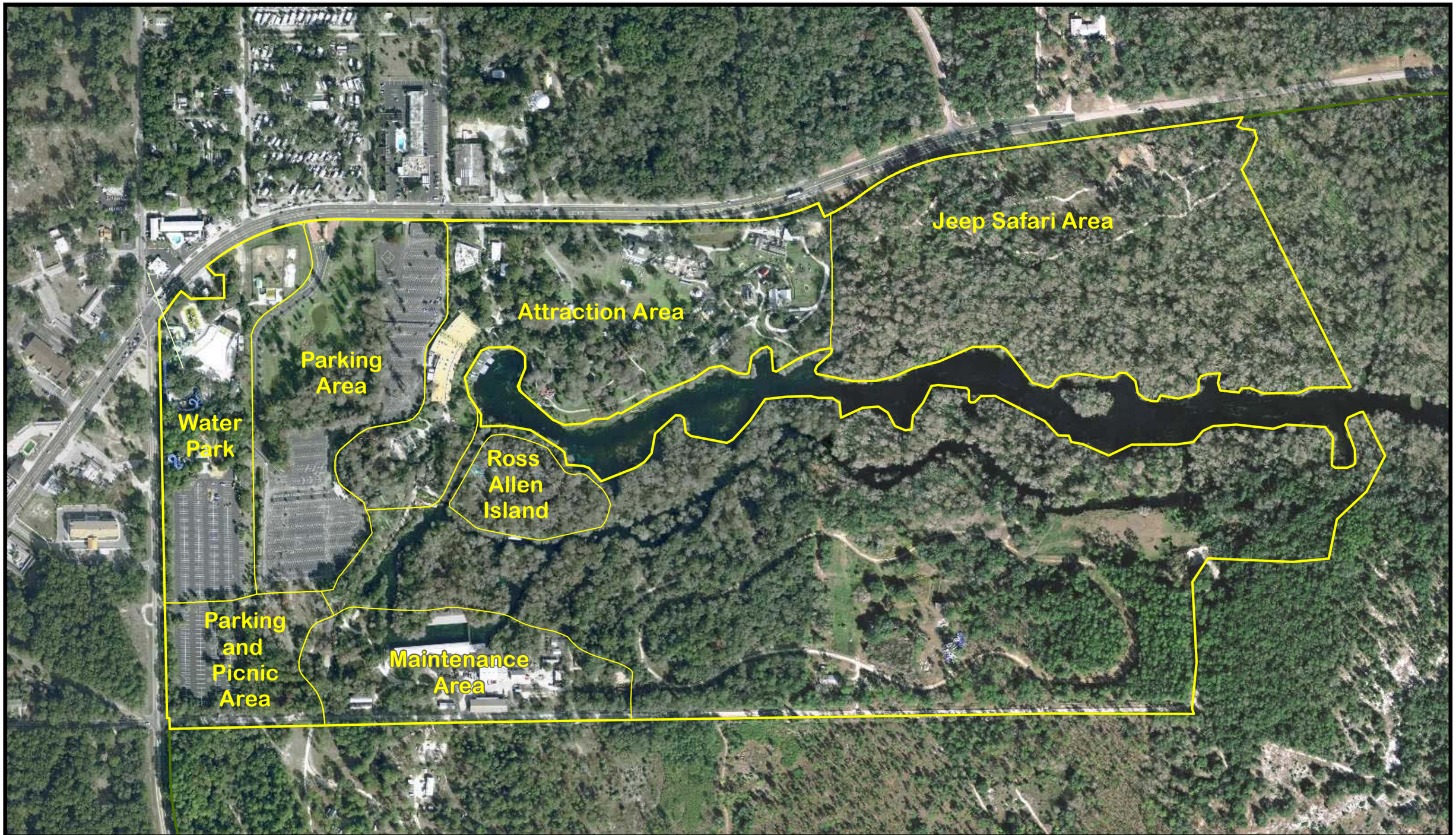
Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Recreation and Parks
VICINITY MAP




# Silver Springs

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0 250 500 1,000 Feet

## Current Uses

The Florida Master Site File maintained by the Department of State, Division of Historical Resources (DHR), identifies one historic/prehistoric and five prehistoric archaeological sites on the property. During the transition period, DRP staff will consult with DHR staff regarding immediate management needs of these cultural resources.

Work to stabilize and repair the historic buildings will be included in the facility repair and maintenance activities that occur during the transition period, discussed below. More detailed management recommendations for the property's historic and archaeological resources will be developed in consultation with DHR during the subsequent management planning process.

**Interim State Park Operation**

If DRP assumes daily operation of Silver Springs, its management duties will begin on the effective date of its lease from the Trustees. Should this occur, the following recreation and interpretive activities will be continued (or initiated) during the transition period:

- Glass bottom boat tours of the springs and river;
- Concerts and special events;
- Wild Waters park;
- Swimming, canoeing and kayaking;
- Hiking and nature trails;
- Interpretive programs based on the park's natural and cultural resources, including connections to the Silver River Museum and other features of the existing state park;
- Interpretive programs focused on the region's water resources and ongoing efforts to protect and restore them.

DRP will solicit proposals from private sector businesses to provide a range of visitor services at Silver Springs. DRP currently works in partnership with private businesses across the state through more than 100 concession agreements. These partnerships meet a wide variety of visitor service needs, generate substantial economic benefits to local communities, and provide revenue to the state parks while reducing the operating costs of the parks. Initially, primary emphasis will be placed on continuing the concert series, expanding special events, operating the Wild Waters park, and providing typical visitor services such as food service, equipment rentals and retail sales (see Interim Operation and Facilities Plan Map). Vendors to provide additional concession services will be sought later consistent with the park's long-range management plan.

Many visitor services, such as ticketing, food service, a gift shop and restrooms will be provided in the historic building adjacent to the glass bottom boat docks (the "Town Center"). Additional functions for that main building and the historic "Cypress Room" will be determined through the management plan process and after additional interpretation programming work is completed. Additional activities that require the construction of new facilities will be considered through the management plan process.

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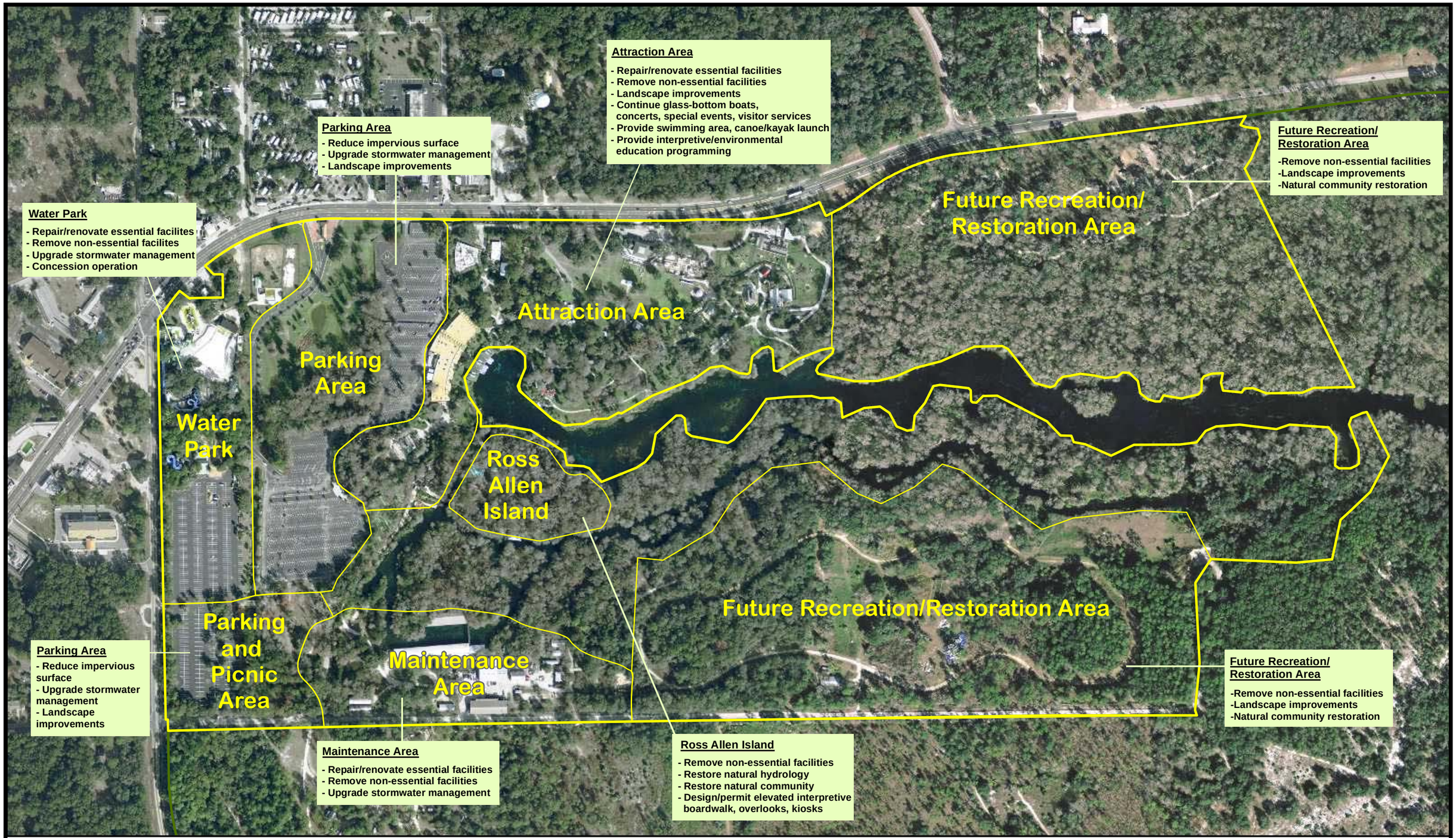


# Silver Springs

# Interim Operation and Facilities Plan

**Interim Facility Management**

Subject to approval by the Trustees, Palace will make capital repairs and improvements to essential facilities and remove non-essential facilities prior to the termination of its lease. Palace may also construct new facilities as identified in this interim plan. In identifying facilities for repair, renovation or removal, DEP applied the following guidelines:

- Facilities and infrastructure that are essential for state park management should receive priority for corrective maintenance and repairs. For example, the roofs and air conditioning systems for the historic buildings need replacement.
- Removal of impervious surfaces and stormwater management improvements to reduce water quality impacts on the springs and river should also receive priority.
- Essential facilities and infrastructure that have deteriorated beyond the point where repair is economical should be refurbished or rebuilt.
- Facilities that are non-essential or incompatible with the resource protection and resource-based recreation mission of the state park system should be removed from the property.

**Essential Facilities and Improvements**--The following facilities and structures are considered to be essential for future management of the property as a state park. They should be retained on the property and repaired, rehabilitated or replaced as needed to ensure their continued operation and usefulness:

- Main entrance area;
- Antique car exhibit building ("Cypress Room")
- Parking areas--reduce in size and retrofit to improve stormwater management;
- Glass bottom boats, docks and waiting area;
- Retail area and public restrooms adjacent to glass bottom boat docks ("Town Center");
- Concert stage and adjacent grounds;
- Covered shelters adjacent to spring;
- Paradise Treats gift shop—convert to another purpose;
- Ross Allen Island—complete redevelopment. Replace buildings and on-grade boardwalks with a simplified, elevated boardwalk design. Remove animal exhibits, restore natural hydrology and re-establish native vegetation.
- South boat house/service area;
- Maintenance area, warehouses and related buildings;
- Wild Waters Park;
- Main office/administration building;
- Formal gardens area.

**Non-Essential Facilities and Improvements**--The following facilities and structures are considered to be non-essential for future state park management of the property. They are recommended for removal prior to DRP assuming management of the property:

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- Jeep Safari area and maintenance building;
- Animal exhibits and enclosures;
- Petting zoo;
- Amusement rides;
- Lost River Voyage landing;
- Kids Ahoy Playland, adjacent gift shop and restroom;
- Replica interpretive structures on Fort King Waterway;
- North boat house.

DRP anticipates that all non-essential improvements will be removed from the property by the end of the transition period. Additional funds will eventually be required to construct new facilities and to staff and operate the park. By the end of the transition period, however, the property will have been returned to a much more natural condition than exists today, and DRP's operation and maintenance costs at that point will be significantly reduced (see Interim Operation and Facilities Plan Map).

**Long-Range Management Plan**

Within one year of assuming management of the property, DRP will develop a 10-year management plan that identifies a long-range vision for Silver Springs, integrating it with Silver River State Park. As mentioned above, the management plan will inventory and evaluate the natural and cultural resources on the property and identify their protection and restoration needs. The plan will outline resource management goals and objectives, and set forth management programs to achieve those goals. The plan will include a long-range land use concept for the property in the context of the larger, regional network of public lands in Marion County and surrounding areas. The plan will also identify opportunities for greater involvement by private concessionaires, methods for streamlining the scale and operation of the attraction, and a program for integrating the recreational and interpretive opportunities of the combined properties.

The plan will be developed through DRP's normal park planning process which relies heavily on input from the local community and other stakeholders. A public workshop will be held in the local community at the beginning of the process. Additional input will be solicited from other public land managing agencies in the surrounding area to ensure a comprehensive perspective. A second public workshop and a meeting with an appointed advisory group will be held after DRP has prepared a draft management plan. When these review steps are completed, the management plan will be reviewed by the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) in Tallahassee. The ARC meeting will provide yet another opportunity for public comment on the draft plan. Typically, approval of the management plan by ARC is the final step in this process.

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**Comments are welcome.**

**If you would like to provide comments on this draft plan, please e-mail them to Lew Scruggs, Assistant Chief, Office of Park Planning, Division of Recreation and Parks.**

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Tallahassee, FL 32399-3000