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Ellie Schiller Education Center closed after Town Council vote;

Trails and tower remain open at WGP

By Jeff M. Hardison © July 10, 2019 at 3:39 p.m.

YANKEETOWN -- On July 1, the Yankeetown Town Council voted to permanently close the Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve (WGP) Ellie Schiller Education Center, according to a July 8 email from the Friends of the WGP.

The Friends of the WGP plan to meet in August to discuss the impact of the closure and options for the future, according to what was noted in the WGP Friends' July 8 email.

Yankeetown Town Clerk-Treasurer-Administrator Sherri MacDonald provided insight Wednesday (July 10) when she was asked about this situation.

Yankeetown Mayor Jack Schofield, Vice Mayor Jean Holbrook and Council members Jeffrey St. John, Eddie "Buck" Redd and Daniel "Danny" Pearson, MacDonald said, must care for the fiscal health and welfare of the town.

Faced with what appears currently to be insurmountable expenses for the operational costs of the WGP Ellie Schiller Education Center, MacDonald said, the Town Council voted to temporarily close the structure for use.

One big expense is the required replacement of a septic tank, MacDonald explained. The Yankeetown Town Council in April sought bids to replace a septic tank, MacDonald said. The lone bidder submitted a bid for \$47,000, MacDonald said.

She said the WGP is in an extremely sensitive environment.

When no bids were submitted after the second request for bids closed on June 28, the Town Council voted July 1 to temporarily close the education center.

An increase of \$3,000 more for elevator maintenance this year, she said, added to the expenses of electricity and telephone service at the building.

There were only nine applications for using the education center building this year, MacDonald said, and there were only 13 applications for its use the year before.

The Town Council conducted two workshops with the Friends of the WGP, the Trustees of the WGP and anyone else who was interested in helping with the costs for operating the education center, MacDonald said.

A temporary fix for the septic tank replacement issue, she said, was the use of port-o-lets for those occasions where the facility was used most recently. Apparently, that is not a viable option for an ongoing solution to the problem.

While the Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve Ellie Schiller Education Center is closed until further notice, MacDonald said the gates are open from dawn until dusk for the public to use the trails and the tower at the Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve.

The Friends of the WGP note the following on a website for the preserve.

The WGP is a 413-acre parcel of undeveloped wetlands located on Florida's Nature Coast. It consists of mixed hardwood, pine, and cabbage palm forest, tidal marshes, and several salt ponds.

The preserve has a 30-foot observation tower, salt pond boardwalk, Gulf accessible canoe/kayak dock, and a 4,500 square foot education center.

As noted in this story above, the education center is closed for now.

Individuals who are looking for a great place for nature photography, hiking, paddling, or bird watching are welcome to come and enjoy the preserve.

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The Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve is located at 1001 Old Rock Road, just off Levy County Road 40 West, in Yankeetown. The Preserve is open daily from dawn to dusk.
The Town of Yankeetown owns the preserve.