

City of Gainesville Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department Department History

The Department's history has evolved over the years through growth and through mergers with similar City departments. The history outline captures some of the growth and changes over the years until the most recent merger in 2005 that created the department as it exists today.

In the 1960's there existed the City's Recreation Department which grew to become the Parks and Recreation Department in the 1980's. Concurrently the City's Cultural Affairs Department emerged in the late 1970's and then later in the 1980's expanded to the Nature and Culture Operations Department.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's the City of Gainesville Recreation Department was established and had its first offices at the Thelma Boltin Center, which was referred to at that time as the Senior Citizens Center. Mr. Ray Massey was the department's first director. During the 1960's and 70's the department was titled Recreation Department but it included park maintenance for the active parks, recreation centers, aquatic and athletic facilities, and playground areas and programs. There was not a maintenance plan in place for street medians, trees, City Hall, the Gainesville Police complex or Evergreen Cemetery. This resulted in these maintenance functions being directed to the Recreation Department because of its park maintenance staff performing similar duties.

In 1979 the Cultural Affairs Department was established when the historic Thomas Hotel was converted from two empty, dilapidated buildings into City administrative offices. The historic portion, today's Building A, which originally was the home of local businessman Major William R. Thomas and his family, was purchased in 1978, carefully restored, then converted into a community cultural and arts resource center. The complex was re-named The William R. Thomas Center.

The first Cultural Affairs Department Director, Lemuel B. Moore, III, arrived in **1979** to an empty but beautifully restored Mediterranean revival-style building complete with two-story colonnades, a glass skylight roof and no equipment, staff or furnishings for the department offices except for an empty orange crate. During the early years, the department focused its mission on the establishment and organization of programs and services, building solid community support through the Thomas Center Associates and its new Cultural Affairs Advisory Board. By the early 1990s the department had been designated as the Local Arts Agency of Alachua County, which established its eligibility for state and national grant resources, as well as solidifying its stature within the community as the defining institution for arts and culture resources, events and activities. Several large special events were born in the 90's which remain the cornerstone of cultural experiences for citizens and tourists today.

In the mid 1980's the Recreation Department merged with the Department of Buildings, Streets and Grounds. The department was responsible for maintaining all active parks, right-of-way mowing, trees, Evergreen Cemetery, landscapes at City Hall, the Gainesville Police Department complex, fire stations, medians and various neighborhood entranceways, and also the City Beautification Board. Ironwood Golf Course was purchased in 1992 adding to the department's long list of parks and facilities utilized by thousands of citizens.

In the mid-80s the Cultural Affairs Department had successfully undergone its first significant expansion, adding the nature parks component to its operation by assuming the operations for Morningside Nature

Center, 278 acres including the Living History Farm, and Bivens Arm Nature Park. From these, a second division was created and the department was renamed the Cultural and Nature Operations Department. In 1986, Steven R. Phillips was hired as the Nature Manager. Over the next 12 years, the division grew adding new nature parks, trails and greenways protecting the City's natural resources for all to enjoy.

The new department also was assigned to operate the Downtown Plaza located in the heart of Gainesville, and the Wilhelmina Johnson Resource Center, a neighborhood and community facility housed in what had been one of Gainesville's early fire stations.

In the early 1990's the Arborist position was created, the process for reviewing site plans was turned over to the department from the Planning Department. In the late 1990's, the Cemetery Coordinator position was created and the Urban Forestry program was created.

In 1996 the Nature Operations Division was reassigned to the Parks and Recreation Department, and Cultural Affairs continued on once more as the Cultural Affairs Department, allowing it to focus more intensively on its mission and core services for the arts and cultural community. The Nature Operations Division continued adding passive parks to its inventory. Satellite projects such as the Hogtown Creek Greenway, initiated in 1992, began to reach operational stage and staffing was gradually expanded to operate and maintain the City's many nature parks and areas.

In 2006, the merger of the Parks and Recreation Department and the Cultural Affairs Department occurred and a new department was created, the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department. In 2007, Steve Phillips became the director and leads this very broad and diverse department whose budget is approximately \$10,000,000 with 74.5 permanent employees, over 100 temporary and seasonal staff employees whose drive and dedication continues to ensure that services to the community are provided with the same pride, excellence and care that has characterized the department from its beginnings in the 1960's. The department now manages 3,200 acres of parkland with numerous cultural, recreational and natural areas and facilities.

In 2012, the department completed its very first master plan, "PRCA Vision 2020", approved by the City Commission on November 15, 2012. The master plan will guide the department into the future bringing together the many mergers over the years to become one major department striving for quality in everything we do!

In 2013, the department received its first accreditation then one of 119 agencies achieving this accomplishment. Now five years later there are 178 distinguished departments in the country. The process requires that every five years, a new assessment occurs to retain accreditation.

On September 27, 2018, the City of Gainesville Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department, re-confirmed itself as one of an elite group of agencies from around the country who have become re-accredited through the Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). This distinguished accomplishment was awarded during the 2018 NRPA Annual Conference in Indianapolis, Indiana.