



Save the Manatee® Club

The Voice For Manatees Since 1981

August 25, 2025

Hernando County Board of County Commissioners
John Law Ayers Commission Chambers,
20 North Main Street, Brooksville, FL 34601

Re: Ordinance – Manatee Protection Zone Located at Mud River and Weeki Wachee Gardens Area

Dear Hernando County Commissioners,

Save the Manatee Club is writing to express our support for the establishment of the year-round manatee protection zone in the Mud River and Weeki Wachee Gardens area of Hernando County. The Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act of 1978 declared the State of Florida a refuge and sanctuary for manatees. The creation of this manatee protection zone, the first zone of its kind in Hernando County, will play a major role in making our waters safer for boaters and manatees. We ask that the Hernando County Board of County Commissioners approve this zone.

Manatee protection zones exist to protect manatees from watercraft strikes and harassment by regulating the speed and operation of vessels in areas where manatee sightings are frequent. These zones can provide manatees with safe havens to rest, feed, reproduce, give birth, or nurse undisturbed by human activity. Manatees are found in Hernando County waters year-round and are most commonly seen in the Weeki Wachee Estuary and adjacent spring-fed rivers. Mud River and Salt Creek flow into the Weeki Wachee River, which terminates at the Gulf of Mexico, forming the Weeki Wachee Estuary. During winter, when the ambient water temperatures drop below 68° Fahrenheit, manatees must seek out sources of warm water to maintain their internal body temperature, as prolonged exposure to cold can lead to cold stress syndrome and even death. In Hernando County, manatees gather at several coastal springs and in spring-fed rivers during the wintertime, primarily 'Hospital Hole' in the lower half of the Weeki Wachee River and 'Jenkins Creek Spring' to the south. Outside of winter months, manatees use the calm, protected waters of the estuary to mate, feed and rest.

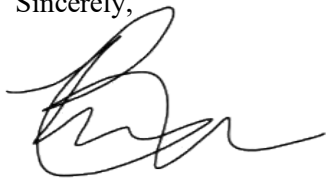
In partnership with Weeki Wachee residents, organizations and local businesses, Save the Manatee Club has been collecting opportunistic manatee sightings in this region of Hernando County for several years, documenting patterns of manatee use in the estuary. We receive sightings year-round with photos of mom-calf pairs, mating herds, and animals that have been rescued and returned to the wild and are fitted with radio-telemetry tags. Tagging data from radio-tagged animals show the Weeki Wachee region as important winter and summer manatee habitat.

Following an increase in manatee rescues and deaths in this region in recent years, there has been substantial local interest in protecting manatees in the estuary from boat strikes and harassment. Currently, boat speeds in the Weeki Wachee Estuary and Mud River were largely unregulated, apart from boating safety zones in the upper Mud River, the Bayport Channel, and within 500 ft of a St. Mary's Fish Camp boat launch. Outside of these regulated areas, manatees are at risk of injury and death from boats traveling at high speeds. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission records information on all manatee carcasses collected, including the cause of death. Nearly all manatee carcasses recovered in the county were collected from the Weeki Wachee River, the Mud River, the Estuary, or from adjacent waterways. Moreover, all

twenty-one carcasses confirmed to have died from watercraft collisions were recovered from this region where no speed zones are currently in place. We applaud you for recognizing just how dangerous this area is to those imperiled manatees that frequent these local waterways, and the critical need for establishing boat regulations designed to protect manatees in Hernando County. By approving this manatee protection zone ordinance, Hernando County is showing its commitment to conserving manatees and providing a safer boating environment for all waterway users.

We thank you for taking the time to review and consider this ordinance. We would also like to express our appreciation to the Hernando County staff who initiated this effort to create a manatee protection zone in the Mud River and Weeki Wachee Gardens Area. Thank you for understanding the importance of protecting our manatees and their habitat, and for taking the steps necessary to conserve this species for future generations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tiare J. Fridrich', with a stylized, flowing script.

Tiare J. Fridrich, MPS
Manatee Biologist
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