



# CITY OF FOLEY PROPOSED 2022 GOMESA PROJECT

## PROJECT NAME:

FOLEY NATURE PARKS EXPANSION & ENHANCEMENTS PHASE II

## SUBMITTER CONTACT INFORMATION:

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## PROJECT LOCATION:

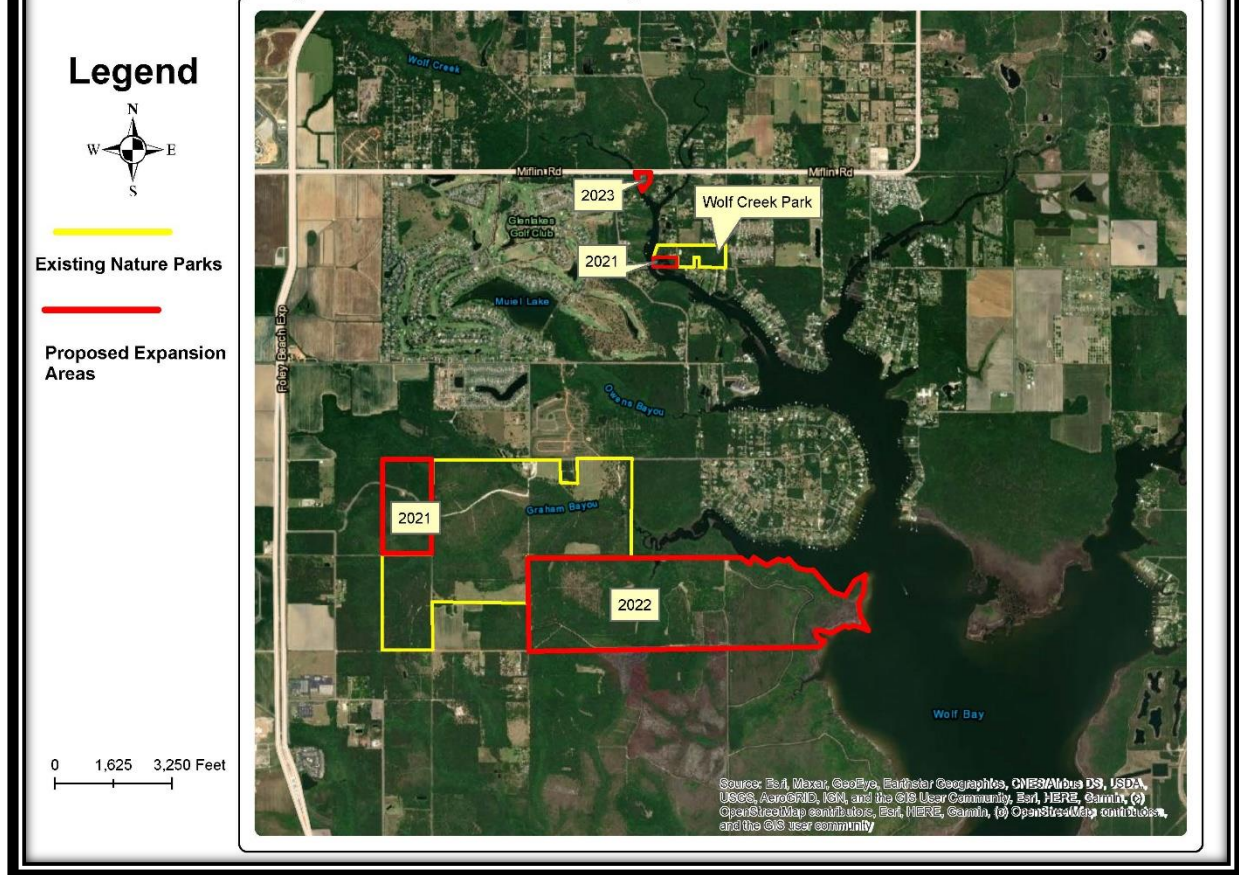
### **Enhancements:**

Graham Creek Nature Preserve: Wolf Bay Drive, Foley, AL 36535  
Wolf Creek Park: Hance Lane, Elberta, AL 36530

### **Expansion:**

Additional Acreage for Graham Creek Preserve: Northeast of Russian Road, Foley, AL

## Foley Nature Parks Expansions & Enhancements



### PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Foley is a fast growing city which attracts people nationwide for proximity to the beach, shopping, retail, dining and entertainment. The addition of the sports tourism complex and Owa has significantly increased the visitor traffic in the city throughout the year. Many people are still discovering Foley's nature parks that sit on the streams of Wolf Bay. Wolf Bay's pristine conditions allows for safe recreational opportunities. Furthermore, Foley has implemented progressive low impact development regulations to protect the natural resources while still allowing growth in our area. Although the city actively seeks grants for improvements, it continues to invest large amounts of capital dollars into environmental projects and the nature parks. City staff are actively involved with the local watershed groups and the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, including serving on multiple committees.

The City of Foley acquired Graham Creek Nature Preserve to preserve the pristine aquifers for future public water wells. In 2008, Graham Creek Nature Preserve formally opened as a nature park with small educational programs, passive recreational opportunities and conservation of the 484 acres. Since that time, the park has grown with

multiple recreational opportunities including many multi-use trails, canoe/kayak launch, archery park, two playgrounds, three pavilions and three full disc golf courses. There is also an Interpretive Center to offer visitors information and provide meeting space. In 2012, the City received an Alabama Coastal Area Management Program grant to build an innovative outdoor classroom for educational programs at Graham Creek. This launched the initiative for a Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom. This international program bases learning through natural outdoor elements using the five senses and imagination. Graham Creek's classroom has been recertified every year since 2012 based on the programs and the learning elements. Graham Creek Nature Preserve contains the only Nature Explore designed and certified Outdoor Classroom in the State of Alabama. Currently Graham Creek Nature Preserve is the second largest municipal owned contiguous nature preserve in Alabama. Once land acquisitions of adjacent parcels are complete in 2021, Graham Creek Nature Preserve will be the largest. This park receives close to 50,000 visitors annually.



Wolf Creek Park is 25 acres located off of County Road 20 on Hance Lane. This parks sits on the shores of Wolf Creek and includes a cove which is always filled with fish and shore birds. During the winter, pelicans, cormorants, herons, ducks and even osprey nest in this area. The park also includes a fishing pier and pavilion on Wolf Creek that is heavily used. There is a canoe launch on the cove which allows for novice paddlers to feel more comfortable learning to operate kayaks and canoes. A boardwalk crosses the cypress wetlands to access the creek from the cove. This property was purchased by Baldwin County with GOMESA funds, but the city of Foley funded the majority of the improvements. There are restrooms planned for construction in 2021 to make the park more desirable for families and visitors.



Foley has taken much pride in the development of our Nature Parks as there has been much regional recognition. Expansion of the nature parks is key to continue the conservation efforts underway in coastal Alabama. From invasive plant removal to prescribed burning operations, Foley continues to manage the habitat for the rare plant and animal species found in this area. Natural trails allow visitors to experience the habitats while not impacting them. Educational programs have expanded to reach over 4000 students annually including programs, field trips, educational presentations, summer camps and adult workshops.



This project would include acquiring land to the southeast of Graham Creek Preserve. This would allow expansion of the preserve to include an additional 500 acres. It would be included in habitat management operations which include invasive plant removal, native plantings and prescribed burning operations. Long term there would be natural trails. Gopher tortoises are currently located on the site so conservation of those burrows would be included in the habitat management plan. There are tidal marshes located on the north and east shores of the property which serve as nursery grounds for many fish species. The introduction of fire to the pine forests would likely expand rare plant species. Restoration would also be a part of the future plan for this property. Many years ago, timber operations built dirt roadways that have since collapsed and eroded causing hydrologic changes. The goal would be to restore the habitats after acquisition. Furthermore, sea level rise models show the western shore of Wolf Bay rising faster than the eastern shore. The conservation of this property would assure areas for marsh migration as the sea levels rise.

Another part of this project is nature park enhancements. At Graham Creek Nature Preserve, the Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom would be enhanced with additional exploration learning amenities. These elements would include replicas of an osprey nest, a beaver den and a spider web as well as some handicap accessible swings and a small pavilion. Graham Creek offers several disc golf courses that brings hundreds of visitors daily. This recreational activity has encouraged eyes on remote areas of the park while having minimal impact. The city proposes to add a course (baskets and tee pads) in the southwest corner of the Preserve. This area will continue to undergo prescribed burning operations, but offer an amateur wooded course. In 2021, Graham Creek added a Sustainable Science Center area with a hydroponics operation, a native milkweed greenhouse, and an educational gathering space. In 2022, we would like to incorporate a butterfly enclosure exhibit to raise monarch, swallowtail and other native butterflies and moths. This project will incorporate an ecological approach to learning about pollinators and their habitats as well as expand our educational offerings to the public and schools.

At Wolf Creek Park, visitors enjoy multitudes of birds nesting and fishing in the cove. The project includes designing and constructing an elevated wildlife observatory platform. As almost all of our parks are topographically flat, this area has a steep slope on the eastern shore of the cove which provides for an excellent viewing opportunity. The design would include approximately 300 feet of boardwalk with a landing at a height of 15 feet. Another small enhancement would be a play area near the existing pavilion, a natural surface walking trail and interpretive signage. These enhancements would offer a variety of ages with passive recreational opportunities.

## JUSTIFICATION:

This project meets GOMESA authorized uses A (conservation), B (mitigation of damage to natural resources) and C (implementation of a federally approved CCMP). Specifically, the project will protect coastal areas through conservation of wetlands and uplands including tidal marsh, bottomland hardwoods, pine savannas and forested uplands. These areas also include habitats for rare and Alabama endangered plants and animals. The project will also be implementing the federally approved Mobile Bay National Estuary

Program Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan for Alabama's Estuaries and Coast 2019-2023. Objective ERP-3 applies to improving ecosystem resilience through protection, restoration and conservation of beaches, bays and backwaters. This project will not only provide for conservation of the backwaters, but it will also provide for restoration through habitat management practices and restoring natural riparian areas. Furthermore, the project will accomplish one of the conservation land acquisition management measures from the Wolf Bay Watershed Management Plan. Objective ERP-5 applies to the promotion/expansion of human connections. The project will open up more areas for public access to our coastal waters. With recreational amenities included in the project, there will be a large draw of families and visitors to explore and play in these natural areas. Objective EPI-3 applies to improving community understanding of how estuaries and coasts support what people value most about living in coastal Alabama. This project would include signage that explains various habitats encountered near the enhancements.

**ESTIMATED COST & DETAILED BUDGET:**

Pre-Acquisition Site Assessment 2 Parcels & Engineering/Design	<b>\$75,000</b>
<p style="padding-left: 40px;">Contractual Services – Wetland Delineation, Appraisal, Due Diligence, Survey, Engineering and Design Specifications for Platform and Pavilion</p>	
Park Enhancements	<b>\$525,000</b>
<p style="padding-left: 40px;">Contractual Services –Elevated Wildlife Viewing Platform; Pavilion</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Direct Costs – Butterfly Enclosure; Playground Amenities; Interpretive Signage; Trail Development; Disc Golf Course Baskets and Pads</p>	
Land Acquisition 1.5 Parcels at 500 acres	<b>\$4,000,000</b>
<b>TOTAL PROJECT COST:</b>	<b>\$4,600,000</b>

**GOALS & OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT:**

The goal of this project is to expand and enhance the nature park system in the city of Foley along Wolf Bay streams. The acquisition of additional parcels would increase sensitive lands in conservation with public access. Another goal is to manage the lands with appropriate habitat management techniques to restore native landscapes. The park enhancements would provide additional access capabilities to remote areas for all ages and abilities of visitors. These goals will be accomplished through acquiring sensitive lands and enhancing existing nature parks with passive recreational amenities. The goals

will also be accomplished through incorporating invasive control programs on the properties and adding a prescribed fire regime where appropriate.

**PROJECT SCHEDULE THAT INCLUDES KEY MILESTONES:**

The project is estimated to be completed in 18 months with a tentative schedule as follows:

Project Task

Pre-Acquisition Site Assessment 2 Parcels	6 months
Park Enhancements (Design & Construction)	15 months
Land Acquisition (following site assessment)	12 months

**COST SHARING:**

The city of Foley has developed two outstanding nature parks over the past ten years. Graham Creek Nature Preserve has a master plan which has driven the habitat management operations as well as park enhancements. Operating costs of the parks which include habitat management has been completely city funded. The city will leverage staff time for management of this project as well as operation costs for lands acquired and installation of some enhancements. Foley is committed to funding the development, growth and long term management of its nature parks.



## RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PROGRAMS:

This project meets the goals and objectives of many programs. The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's Coastal Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) has several goals consistent with this project including conservation of lands and expansion of human connections. The city has been very active on their multiple committees. Along with the implementation of the CCMP, the Wolf Bay Watershed Management Plan was completed in 2020. One major concern was public access in the watershed. This project is a priority in the implementation of the plan as it will provide additional conservation land for the public to use. It is noted in the Wolf Bay Watershed Management Plan as a targeted acquisition for conservation in the watershed.

The city has also partnered with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to provide grants for enhancements within the nature parks. From our master plans to our Outdoor Classroom to canoe launches and boardwalks, ADCNR has helped the Nature Parks grow into an outstanding community asset. The Alabama Forestry Commission has been a partner since the park opened to assist with habitat management operations. This project would add lands that would be managed through prescribed burning operations with the Forestry Commission. Graham Creek Nature Preserve has been recognized as an Alabama TREASURE Forest and was recently recognized as the Alabama Success Story by the National Cohesive Wildfire Strategy. This project would only complement our existing programs with the Alabama Forestry Commission. Wolf Bay Watershed Watch is another example of partnerships with the nature parks. As a local grassroots nonprofit, the watershed has supported efforts to develop the nature parks over the years and will continue to work with park expansion plans. The Gulf Coast Resource Conservation and Development recently partnered with the city to fund "Homer's Home for Pollinators." This included a greenhouse to grow native milkweed and other pollinator plants. The project also includes workshops to develop pollinator gardens with citizens. We expect this to be a popular program and look forward to continuing our partnership with the Gulf Coast RC&D. The city has been very active in programs that encourage natural resource conservation.

## FUTURE GOALS:

The City of Foley manages the second largest municipally owned contiguous nature preserve in the State of Alabama with Graham Creek Nature Preserve. The addition of acreage to the west and southeast with the funding from GOMESA will push Graham Creek to the largest. The conservation of almost 1062 acres in the Graham Creek Nature Preserve would allow the flourishing of native plants and animals. Once these properties have been acquired, habitat management operations will begin with restoration, burning and invasive control. A comprehensive Foley Nature Parks master plan will then be developed to guide all operations. Furthermore in 2023, the City proposes to apply for funds to add acreage on Wolf Creek and a tributary of Bon Secour River. The City looks forward to continued partnerships for conservation and restoration efforts along the coastal areas of Baldwin County.