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REPORT

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River of Grass Greenway

Feasibility Study and Master Plan

AECOM Technical Services 2014
150 North Orange Avenue, Orlando, FL 32801

T: 407 843 6552
F: 407 839 1789

This document has been prepared by AECOM on behalf of the National Park Service's RTCA Program, MDPROS Department and the NPC.

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AECOM Contact : Nick.Kuhn@AECOM.com

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Jaime Doubek-Racine - Community Planner

Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces (MDPROS) Department
Jack Kardys – Director
George Navarrete – Deputy Director
Maria I. Nardi – Chief, Planning and Research Division
Joe Webb, RLA – Park System Planning Section Supervisor
Mark Heinicke, CPRP, CLARB – Project Manager

Naples Pathways Coalition (NPC)
Maureen Bonness – Board Member/ ROGG Executive Committee Co-Director
Patricia Huff – ROGG Executive Committee Co-Director

Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center
Franz Gimmler

Steering Committee Members and Participants:
Pedro Ramos – Superintendent, Big Cypress National Preserve
Bob DeGross – Chief of Interpretation, Big Cypress National Preserve
Lucie Ayer – Executive Director, Collier Metropolitan Planning Organization
Kirby Wilson – Park Manager, Collier-Seminole State Park
Reed Jarvi, P.E. – Transportation Planning Manager, Collier County Transportation Planning
Laurie Beard – Transportation Planner, Collier County Transportation Planning
Ken Jeffries - Transportation Planner, Florida Department of Transportation District 6
Dexter Sowell – Biological Scientist 2, Florida Department of Forestry
Sammy Hamilton, Jr. – Mayor of Everglades City
Patricia Huff - Everglades City
Dan Kimball – Superintendent, Everglades & Dry Tortugas National Parks
Fred Herling – Supervisory Park Planner, Everglades & Dry Tortugas National Parks
Renee Rau – Park Manager, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park
Jeff Kneisley – Park Ranger, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park
Aaron Kaster – Project Manager, Florida Department of Transportation District 1
Sarah Webber – ROGG West PD&E Consultant, Johnson Engineering, Inc.
Stewart Roberston, P.E. – Florida Department of Transportation District 6, ISD Office Consultant, Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc.
Kevin Godsea – Project Leader, Florida Panther and Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuges
Ben Nottingham – Refuge Manager, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge
David Henderson – Bicycle/ Pedestrian Coordinator, Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization
Tim Lamm – Project Coordinator, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida
Jennifer Veiga, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida
Heather Ferrand – Forester, Picayune Stand State Forest
Jerry Krenz, AICP – Senior Planner, Land Stewardship Division, South Florida Water Management District
Bijaya Kattel – Senior Planner, Land Stewardship Division, South Florida Water Management District
Ken Jeffries - Florida Department of Transportation District 6
Dan Cotter - Section Leader, Land Stewardship Division, South Florida Water Management District
Russ Muller - Florida Department of Transportation District 1

Consultants:
AECOM
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MindMixer

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Part 01
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Origination

The idea for the proposed River of Grass Greenway (ROGG) was born out of a notion to provide public access to one of the most unique and well-studied landscapes in the world. Building on the allure of a long-distance hiking and biking experience for a variety of users, the ROGG is envisioned to bring awareness to the Greater Everglades ecosystem, including the ongoing ecological restoration in the region. The concept of the ROGG comes at a time when there are growing concerns about the environmental impacts of providing vehicle-only access to our National Parks. Multi-use trails and alternative transportation access have proven to be effective means of reducing natural resource impacts, while still encouraging access to sensitive natural areas. Well-planned, multi-use trails such as the ROGG allow access to natural areas, provide pathways for alternative modes of transportation and enhance opportunities for improved fitness.

Drawing upon the historical corridor of the Tamiami Trail, designated as U.S. 41 /Tamiami Trail/S.R. 90 (hereafter U.S. 41), the proposed ROGG links seven national and state parks, preserves, forests, and wildlife refuges. Many of these natural areas have received intensive focus in recent decades as part of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), the largest ecological restoration project in the world. Through these alternate transportation connections, the ROGG will provide an opportunity for millions of residents and visitors of South Florida to experience the Everglades landscape and culture in a sustainable manner. Connecting Naples and Miami, the ROGG is envisioned as a pathway that may parallel to U.S. 41 that is suitable for a wide range of non-motorized transportation and recreation activities such as walking, bicycling, bird watching, photography, fishing and general enjoyment and education of the Everglades ecosystem.

The concept of the ROGG was originally conceived by the Naples Pathways Coalition (NPC) in 2006 and envisioned as a hard-surfaced trail separate from Tamiami Trail. Between 2006 and 2009, the NPC presented the concept of the ROGG across the South Florida region and worked to obtain letters of support from municipalities, local regulatory agencies, and private interests. In 2009, the National Park Service (NPS) Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program in collaboration with the NPC submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to fund a feasibility study and master plan for ROGG through the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Program (TRIP). The grant for this work was funded by the FTA through an interagency agreement with the NPS RTCA. The NPS RTCA contracted with the Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces Department (MDPROS) to serve as the project manager for the study. In 2012, MDPROS contracted with AECOM Technical Services, Inc. (AECOM) to provide planning, public outreach, documentation, and vision development services to assist in the preparation of the Feasibility Study and Master Plan.

The objectives for the ROGG feasibility study and master plan identified by the FTA agreement with the NPS RTCA include:

- Identification of potential alignments, routes, links, and connections;
- Determination of alignment of intersections and access points;
- Identification and mapping of previous research and analysis of the corridor;
- Identification and analysis of necessary considerations for the proposed corridor area;
- Determination of legal feasibility and compatibility with surrounding land parcels;
- Identification of environmental constraints and needed mitigation;
- Promotion of public participation;
- Analysis of the demand, use, and benefits of the ROGG;
- Assessments and other necessary tasks to determine the feasibility of the ROGG and an efficient and ecologically sensitive design to meet the viable goals of communities, multiple agencies, jurisdictions, and various organizations.

1.2 Feasibility Study and Master Plan Approach

The approach for the Feasibility Study and Master Plan includes a variety of assessment, public outreach, and documentation tasks accomplished over an estimated 18 month schedule. The Project Team consists of MDPROS and a team of consultants led by AECOM, including Alta/Greenways, a trails planning firm with extensive international experience, and transportation planning firm Nelson Nygaard. these organizations worked in coordination with the NPS RTCA and the ROGG Executive Committee from the NPC. Collectively, these tasks included pre-planning, existing conditions analysis, conceptual corridor vision development, development of an implementation plan, and compilation of the Feasibility Study and Master Plan Report. The following provides a brief overview of these tasks:

- **Pre-Planning** – This step consisted of the identification of stakeholder groups, development of the process for engaging the public, and initial evaluations of the corridor and comparable projects. MDPROS, in association with the NPS RTCA, established a project Steering Committee comprised of approximately 16 representatives from a variety of land management agencies, regulatory agencies, tribes, and other key groups found within the general ROGG Study Area. A Public Involvement Plan (PIP) was developed to provide a schedule and plan for engaging the public using a variety of different techniques ranging from public meetings to a project website for public comment for the duration of the project.

  A kick-off workshop and corridor tour was conducted with the Steering Committee and Project Team in September 2012 to develop a common understanding of existing conditions; and to discuss general opportunities and constraints, and management within the corridor. The Steering Committee tour consisted of ten selected locations throughout the corridor Study Area to allow committee members to get an overall understanding of the breadth and diversity of the proposed ROGG. In November 2012, the Steering Committee met with the Project Team to review best practices and lessons learned from comparable existing greenway corridors from around the country and the world.

- **Existing Conditions Analysis** – This task consisted of the compilation, review, and assessment of existing data, reports, and site physical conditions relative to the ROGG. Geographic Information System (GIS) maps and data were compiled and distilled into base maps for initial site evaluations. Technical reports such as regional environmental studies, regulatory documents, traffic studies, and recreation plans were assessed for potential relevance to the ROGG planning process.

  In November 2012, the Project Team conducted site evaluations over the entire corridor to assess the base maps and technical documentation in the field. A summary of this site review was presented to the Steering Committee in January 2013. At this meeting, the Project Team also reviewed other potential projects occurring within the Study Area that had the potential to affect the planning of ROGG. The results of the Existing Conditions Analysis are included in Part 2 – Research and Analysis of this report.

- **Conceptual Corridor Vision Development** – This task consisted of the development of concepts and alternatives to be collated into a conceptual master plan and considered for feasibility. It also included an assessment of the costs and benefits provided by the ROGG. This task was initiated with a series of public workshops held in various portions of the corridor to provide extended opportunities for public comment and input to the feasibility study and plan. Workshops were held in Naples (January 29 – February 2, 2013), Everglades City (February 26 – March 2, 2013), and Miami-Dade County (March 12 – March 16, 2013). Regional associations, clubs, and organizations with special interests along the ROGG corridor were specifically invited to participate in the workshops. Individuals that attended were interviewed to document ideas and concerns. Participants were invited to provide input on potential routing alternatives, trailhead and gateway opportunities, and ways to connect to existing destinations along the corridor.

  The feasibility of concepts that emerged from these workshops was refined based on criteria developed during the workshops that included resource impacts and benefits, expected costs, and estimated economic benefits. These criteria were used to improve the

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conceptual master plan for the corridor. The conceptual master plan and associated assessments were reviewed with the Steering Committee and the public through a variety of presentations. The results of the Conceptual Corridor Vision Development task are documented in Part 3 – Corridor Vision and Feasibility.

- **Implementation Plan Development** – This task consisted of assessing potential funding sources, partners and sponsors, short- and long-term maintenance and upkeep, and cost benefit analyses. These assessments were reviewed with the Steering Committee to identify actions for short-term, mid-term, and long-term implementation of the ROGG. The results of the Implementation Plan Development task are documented in Part 4 – Implementation of this report.

- **Final Feasibility Study and Master Plan Report** – The Project Team prepared a Feasibility Study and Master Plan report for review by the Steering Committee. Comments from the Steering Committee were incorporated into a final Feasibility Study and Master Plan report along with summary materials. Non-profit and environmental groups, interested individuals, and elected officials were educated and informed about the ROGG Feasibility Study and Master Plan through presentations in various public forums.

These tasks have been completed and documented as part of the report in four chapters (see **Diagram 1**). The first chapter identifies the project origin and approach. The second chapter provides an overview of the existing conditions, literature and comparables relevant to the feasibility of ROGG. The third chapter establishes a feasibility criteria and tests each option for trail routing developed during extensive public involvement. The fourth chapter contains a project management plan complete with funding opportunities and cost benefits. Additional information may be found in the appendix of the document.

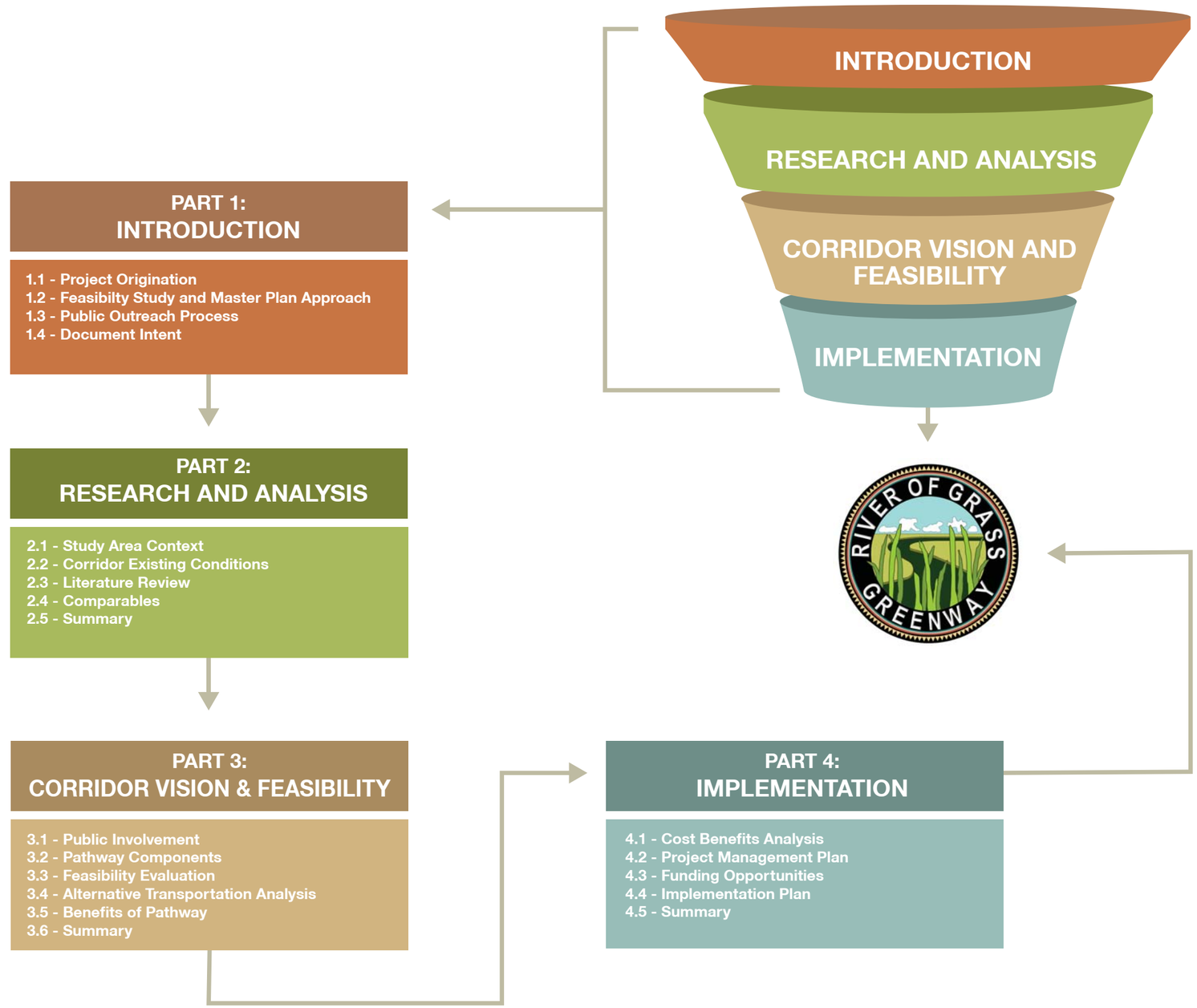

Diagram 1- ROGG Feasibility Study and Master Plan Format

1.3 Public Outreach Process

A Public Involvement Plan (PIP) was developed to guide effective outreach and timely distribution of information to participants that engaged in the ROGG Feasibility Study and Master Plan. The following diagram illustrates the techniques identified in the PIP and used as part of the Study, as well as the flow of input and feedback from the groups identified in the plan.

1.3.1 Goals

The ROGG planning process included a variety of communication channels to help stakeholders understand the scope, issues, impacts, and benefits of work completed (see **Diagram 2**). The planning process solicited input and feedback from the public as to their specific needs, issues, concerns, and recommendations.

1.3.2 Techniques and Objectives

The ROGG Feasibility Study and Master Plan relied on public participation through outreach, information exchange, feedback, and consensus. In an effort to ensure broad public participation, the planning process included the following formats:

a. Steering Committee
b. Advisory Groups
c. Primary Agency Presentation and Review Meeting
d. Community Meetings
e. Community Workshops/Planning Area Work Sessions
f. Stakeholder Interviews
g. Project Website (Miami-Dade County)
h. Public Engagement Site (MindMixer)
i. Public Presentations
j. Press Releases
k. Handout Materials

1.4 Document Intent

The ROGG Feasibility Study and Master Plan document was developed with the intent of providing information needed by all parties associated with the planning and design of the pathway. This document considered the technical aspects, recreation objectives, and public priorities identified in previous studies completed throughout the Greater Everglades region. Its four chapters include:

- Chapter 1 – Introduction
- Chapter 2 – Research and Analysis
- Chapter 3 – Corridor Feasibility and Vision
- Chapter 4 – Implementation

Supplemental information is included in the Appendix.

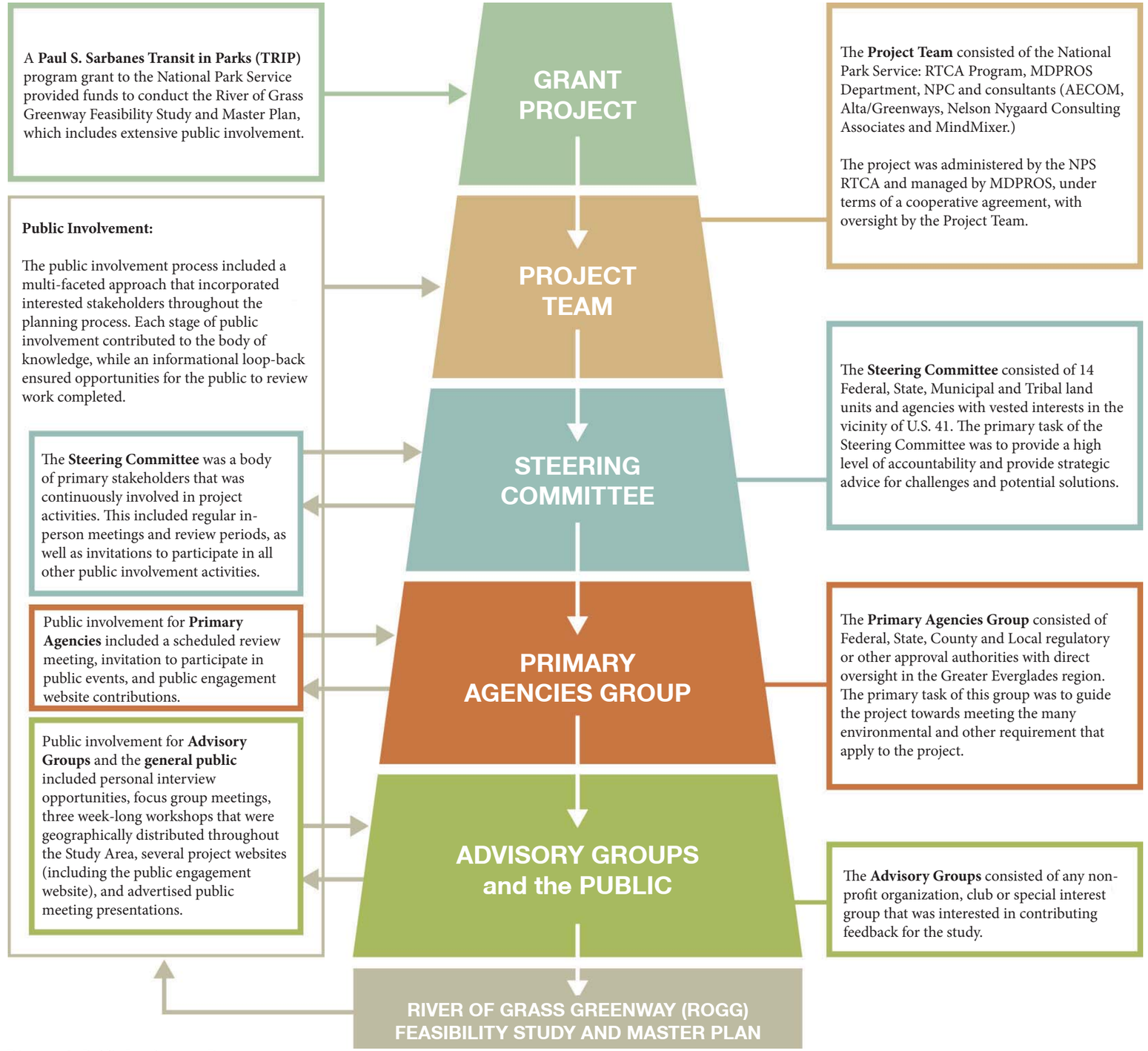

Diagram 2- Public Involvement Process

Cyclist riding along the Skark Valley Tram Road in Everglades National Park