

Trails, bridges, planned for FISH Preserve

By **Leslie Lake** - August 8, 2022



The FISH Phase IV conceptual design shows anticipated picnic and parking areas, footbridges and trails. - Submitted

CORTEZ – With a new round of imminent funding, long-awaited enhancements are coming to the 100-acre FISH Preserve in Cortez.

After what Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage board members characterized as a long and tedious road, beginning with their purchase of the first parcel in 2000, they discussed a tentative timeline at an Aug. 1 meeting, with permitting for the Phase IV project anticipated in October or November, followed by a release of funds.

New funding will pay for land contouring, drainage and earth moving and opens the door for the addition of loop trails and footbridges.

“We are committed to finish Phase IV with trails and bridges for connectivity,” FISH Treasurer Jane von Hahmann said.

As in 2016, when the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (SBEP) completed the restoration of nearly half of the preserve through a cooperative funding agreement with the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) and FISH, the Phase IV funds will be managed by SBEP.

“We are blessed to be the recipients of this program,” von Hahmann said. “The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program are the ones that will get the funding and manage the funds and we’re OK with that. We will reap the benefits.”

She said Phase IV will cost roughly over \$300,000.

"Originally we thought \$250,000 but everything has gone up," she said.

The preserve is the only undisturbed parcel of land on north Sarasota Bay, von Hahmann noted. It was conceived as a barrier between encroaching development and the historic commercial fishing village of Cortez.

"We have owned the property since 2000 but we've been working on this project since 2009-2010," she said.

The environmentally sensitive land immediately east of Cortez has served as an important fisheries habitat for the section of Sarasota Bay south of Cortez fondly referred to as "the kitchen," with its bounty of fresh seafood.

"Sold in the 50s and long slated for development, in later decades the property, sadly, was also used as a dumping site for construction debris," according to the FISH website.

In 2000, the organization and community members came together to raise the money to purchase the land immediately east of the village. The first \$60,000 mortgage payment was raised from donations made by citizens and conservation-minded companies.

"The annual Cortez Commercial Fishing Festivals, held in February of each year, and donations from our more than 700 members and a host of friends all over the country enabled FISH to pay off the mortgage in 2005. No federal or state funds were used in the effort," according to the website.

"This parcel of land is one of the only untouched waterfront properties on Sarasota Bay and one of the last true working waterfronts in the state of Florida. The preserve came close to getting paved over by developers, however, the community came together to purchase the property just in the nick of time," according to the website. "This initial land purchase has been paid off! Since 2005, FISH has been able to purchase several additional parcels of land within the FISH Preserve's boundaries that remained in private hands."

Restoration was done by the firm Earthbalance, which resulted in more wetland acreage, improved tidal circulation and the re-establishment of natural hydro-periods, according to the organization's website.

"The restoration also achieved the removal of exotic vegetation, such as Brazilian pepper and Australian pine, which were a major concern particularly in the transitional wetlands and coastal islands," according to the website. "In place of problematic exotics, the project planted native species, which will contribute to the recovery of natural habitats. In addition to removing piles of refuse at the site, the contractor created saltwater wetlands in a 2-acre area recently prepared by clearing Australian pines and other exotic trees."

A major grant was provided by the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP) which has led to the creation of a new tidal stream system in the southeastern corner of the FISH Preserve. The SARP grant allowed for the creation of new wetlands areas with a limited bit

of exotic and invasive plant removal in uplands areas as well. Replanting of native species was primarily a volunteer effort with participation from the Manateens and Baybuddies organization of the Sarasota Bay Estuaries program.

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