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## FISH Preserve opens officially with ribbon-cutting

By **Leslie Lake**



*FISH board members and SBEP and EPA participants in the project cut a ceremonial ribbon at the FISH Preserve on Nov. 3. - Leslie Lake / Sun*

CORTEZ – In the culmination of more than two decades of planning, fundraising and hard work, the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the FISH Preserve on Nov. 3.

At nearly 100 acres, the preserve is on the south side of Cortez Road, an oasis of natural beauty in stark contrast to the multiple construction projects nearby. The preservation and non-development of the preserve, adjacent to the Cortez fishing village and bordering the waters of Sarasota Bay, was precisely the goal of FISH members in 2000 when they began fundraising to purchase the property.

“The FISH Preserve came close to getting paved over by developers, however, the community came together to purchase the property in the nick of time,” according to the FISH website.

The invitation-only ribbon-cutting featured speakers Dr. Dave Tomasko, director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (SBEP); Dr. Jay Leverone, staff scientist with SBEP; FISH Treasurer Jane von Hahmann; EPA Region 4 Regional Administrator Jeaneanne Gettle and Manatee County Commissioner and SBEP policy board member Kevin Van Ostenbridge.

A special guest at the ribbon cutting was Dr. Theresa Bert, the widow of John Stevely, who was instrumental in the planning and purchase of the preserve’s parcels, and of the Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival that funded it.

Tomasko applauded what he said was the perseverance and resilience of the FISH board in making the preserve a reality.

“That’s what it takes to succeed,” he said. “This is the light at the end of the tunnel to keep what they had.”

“This is a celebration,” Leverone said. “It’s really moving to have this actually done.”

His participation with the project goes back 10 years.

“We paid for the plans and the permits and we were shovel-ready,” he said. “We were just waiting for the money for the shovels to start. That was the last hurdle we had to overcome. I guess I was the conductor, but I had a great orchestra behind me.”

Leverone said the Biden Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding of \$700,000 was critical in the completion of Phase IV.

“We talked about preserving this; what it looked like before I’m not sure we wanted to preserve it,” he said. “Over time, it really needed a facelift. The goals of what we wanted this property to look like have finally become realized.”

Leverone said 10,000 native plants have been planted recently.



“We have committed the estuary program to one year of maintenance of the plants,” Leverone said.

“Finally, we’re not quite done. We have and we continue to look to foundation or public funding for bridges, trails, signage, kiosks,” he said. “We want to make this publicly friendly, publicly usable. We want people to come and enjoy this.”

Gettle said that the preserve is “an inspiring story for us all.”

Van Ostenbridge recalled his youth when the preserve land was a hangout for teens.

“I never thought at the time we’d ultimately be turning this into a wetland mitigation project; it was essentially a dump site and a hangout site in what we all assumed was going to a subdivision – a waterfront subdivision,” Van Ostenbridge said. “It’s thanks to the foresight of (former Manatee County) Commissioner von Hahmann and the FISH board that we ended up here and when EPA came up with the money, that we were shovel-ready.”

Plaques were presented to Leverone and Bert in recognition of their contributions to the preserve.

“In recognition of your outstanding dedication to the restoration of Sarasota Bay and the FISH Preserve and the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program and the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage,” Tomasko read from Leverone’s plaque.

“There’s one person that could not be with us today,” von Hahmann said. “This is a gentleman who was part of the original purchase of this program, who was part of the original board that was FISH in 1992, he was part of Sea Grants and sat on the board. And we lost him last year to a battle with cancer.”

Von Hahmann then asked Theresa Bert to come to the podium to accept a plaque on behalf of her late husband.

“In memory of John Stevely, without his dedication to, and passion for, the FISH Preserve and the village of Cortez, the FISH Preserve restoration project never would have been accomplished. Gone but not forgotten,” von Hahmann read from the plaque.

“This is indeed a momentous day, because our only son’s wife is at this moment in the hospital having our first grandchild,” Bert said.

“I think I have a surprise for you guys perhaps,” Bert said. “In John’s and our will, we put \$50,000 to be willed to the FISH Preserve. What I would like to do is donate that \$50,000 to the FISH Preserve now, specifically for trails and bridges. So this will help build those.”

The preserve is fully restored, but public recreation is currently limited to a few foot trails.

“When you build things to make them more natural, you make the divisions. Water is so important,” von Hahmann said. “Because you can’t access the west side from the east side so now we have to do these bridges and connective trails, so people can use the entire property.”

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