

Plans for ‘re-wilding’ land parcels on display in Sarasota

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By EARLE KIMEL, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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SARASOTA, Fla. (AP) — Conservationists hope to turn a grassy area next to the popular Celery fields in north Sarasota County back into a “wild” space.

The idea for the 33 acres on the western edge of the 400-acre Celery Fields is to create a forest that would attract birds next door to a site that’s already a bird haven, to make it even more wildlife friendly.

“Right now, they’re just fields of grass in these three parcels. It’s like a lawn, essentially,” said Sam Valentin, a spokeswoman for the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast.

People can get a first look at the concept plan for the “Re-Wilding of the Quad Parcels” at a Saturday open house hosted by the Conservation Foundation and the Sarasota Audubon Society.

The Quad Parcels, so named because they straddle the intersections of Palmer and Apex roads, are just east of Interstate 75 off Fruitville Road, east of downtown Sarasota.

The northwest parcel already contains Sarasota County’s Apex Road fire station.

The foundation and Sarasota Audubon hope that transplanted native plants and trees will provide a haven for a variety of wildlife.

“We’re going to create a woodland area to attract different woodland birds and songbirds and a host of other wildlife that are attracted to woodlands,” Valentin said. “We’re going to bring in additional water that will not only filter the water before it goes into Philippi Creek and the bay but also will provide additional habitat for water birds.

“We’re going to work on creating more of a littoral zone in the existing pond that’s there, so it’s more of a shelf and less of a drop off, which will also help wading birds.”

The open house is scheduled for 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Saturday at the Audubon Nature Center, 999 Center Road, Sarasota.

“It’s the public’s chance to come have their questions answered and see our concept designs first hand,” Valentin said.

The project management team includes site plan engineering firm Kimley-Horn, construction manager Willis Smith Construction and Steve Suau of Progressive Water Resources as the owner’s representative.

The parcels are still owned by Sarasota County – a conservation easement was placed on the three parcels by the County Commission in 2019 and formalized in 2020 – and Suau was instrumental in creation of the Celery Fields when he worked for Sarasota County.

The concept plans, which have been developed in the last year-and-a-half, are about 60% complete, Valentin noted. That’s enough to give the public a look-see but not enough to nail down construction costs of what will ultimately be a multi-million-dollar project.

Both the foundation and Sarasota Audubon are working on fundraising efforts, and so far have received contributions from the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation and the Gulf Coast Community Foundation.

The Sarasota Audubon Society will manage the properties. For more information on contributing to the fundraising efforts, visit conservationfoundation.com/quads or sarasotaaudubon.org/donate.

ENSURING ENVIRONMENTAL CONTINUITY

Many of the environmental practices that will be used as part of the re-wilding process dovetail with those outlined in the Community Playbook for Healthy Waterways – which Suau helped write – that the Gulf Coast Community Foundation released in January 2021.



Passive recreation opportunities planned include hiking trails, shaded picnic areas, ADA-compliant walkways, bird observation platforms and blinds and a children’s discovery area.

Once the plan progresses, past 80% completion, the specific nature of those amenities – such as whether there will be bird blinds or just observation decks – will be defined, along with the cost.

Ultimately the concept plan must be approved by Sarasota County.

The phased-in construction timetable will be established after that, with the issue of permits influencing it as well.

Kimley-Horn is currently involved in a similar process, as part of the improvement of the 80-acre Warm Mineral Springs Park in North Port.

Parking is currently planned for the southwest parcel, which will also include a solar pavilion and restrooms and a native vine tunnel. It will be connected to the other two parcels via crosswalks at both Apex and Palmer roads.

The southeast parcel includes a stream, the mix of native trees and prairie land and access via a gravel path.

The northeast parcel, which centers around an existing lake includes an osprey nest, expanded littoral zone and access via a concrete sidewalk.

Bench overlooks are planned in both of those areas.

Valentin stressed that the wildlife habitat offered in the Quad Parcels are meant to supplement the Celery Fields.

“There you have a lot of wetlands – there’s not really a forested area,” she said “So this woodland area is going to be additional habitat that’s not already found at the Celery Fields that will attract an even greater diversity of birds.”

A main purpose of the Quad Parcel project is to help shield the Celery Fields from the industrial and commercial development currently occurring to the west.

“At the same time it’s going to create new wildlife habitat and there will be opportunities for passive recreation for the community to enjoy,” Valentin said. “So while the focus of it is that additional diverse habitat, it’s going to be a place for community enjoyment as well – just like the celery fields is a place that has become a real community treasure.”

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