

OPINION: Celery Fields project is taking shape

[heraldtribune.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2022/03/03/celery-fields-project-game-changer-sarasota-county/932439002](https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2022/03/03/celery-fields-project-game-changer-sarasota-county/932439002)

GUEST

Jeanne Dubi and Christine Johnson



Our community stood firm for more than three years in support of a buffer zone to prevent commercial encroachment on the western edge of the Celery Fields. Sarasota County listened and two years ago, commissioners gave Sarasota County citizens an incredible gift – three of the Quad Parcels.

Sarasota Audubon Society has been tasked with managing the land and Conservation Foundation holds the conservation easement. Our two organizations are partnering to improve these 33 acres for wildlife and people.

Last month we held a public open house to showcase our shared vision for "Re-Wilding the Quad Parcels" We will continue – through your input and our work with the county – to make our community vision a reality.

The Celery Fields is the county's primary stormwater collection zone; it is vital to protecting our water quality and providing flood protection. One of our primary goals in re-wilding the Quad Parcels is to help clean and store water before it goes into Phillippi Creek and the Bay.

By planting more native plants and trees around the existing retention pond on the northeast parcel and by adding a stream on the southeast parcel, we will improve the water quality as it moves into Phillippi Creek and Sarasota Bay. The pond will also serve as a learning tool to demonstrate how effective stormwater ponds can be in filtering out pollutants when they incorporate native plants and are sustainably maintained.

With a goal of increasing the biodiversity of the Celery Fields, we also envision wooded areas throughout the three parcels. We will add hundreds of trees to create forested areas. This will provide habitat for woodlands birds and wildlife while also creating an important stopover for migratory birds. The native plants we will add around the existing pond will further benefit wildlife by creating additional areas for wading birds.

Our concept design is for the southwestern parcel to be the primary place for community gathering with parking, walkways that meet Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, open areas, picnic tables and more. We will have paths to connect to the trails leading to the other, more densely wooded parcels.

We also see the Quad Parcels as an important teaching and learning site for interns in high school and college. Working with educators and scientists in our community, interns will learn how to conduct wildlife surveys, test water quality, manage a public park and more.

As of right now, our concept designs are at 60%. Once we hit 80% we will have a better idea of exact costs, but until then we know this re-wilding will cost at least a few million dollars.

Our next steps include reviewing the concept designs with county staff and launching the public fundraising campaign. We hope to break ground in the fall and if everything runs smoothly, we expect the transformation to take at least two years to complete – if we have raised all the money. Otherwise, the project will be completed in phases.

We are extremely grateful for the confidence shown in this project with early gifts from Sarasota Bay Estuary Program to help underwrite pond improvements – and Gulf Coast Community Foundation to implement activities featured in their Community Playbook for Clean Waterways. We also thank the Barancik Foundation for its generosity and foresight along with other private foundations and generous donors.

For more details, visit sarasotaaudubon.org or conservationfoundation.com/quads.

ADVERTISING

Jeanne Dubi is president of the Sarasota Audubon Society and Christine Johnson is president of Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast.

