

Internship donation aims to aid Quads water testing

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May 20, 2022

News



Sarasota Friday, May 20, 2022 *47 min ago*

High school and college students in the Sarasota area will be eligible for future paid internships to help gather water-quality data in the Rewilding of the Quads program, thanks to a \$10,000 grant from the Gulf Coast Community Foundation to Sarasota Audubon.

The interns, who will be trained by experts in the field of sustainability, water flow and water quality, will learn water-quality monitoring techniques and then embark on a program to record data that will inform Sarasota Audubon on the effects of improvements made to the water features on lands adjacent to Celery Field known as the Quads.

In 2019, the Sarasota County Commission granted a perpetual conservation easement on the three of four parcels at the intersection of Apex Road and Palmer Boulevard, tasking Sarasota Audubon and Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, to manage the 33-acre habitat and

public its access. Both organizations are working together on the design of the parcels and held an open house in February to outline potential designs.

Envisioned improvements include extensive plantings, meadows, woodlands, trails, high and low points of terrain along a stream, shaded picnic areas, ADA-compliant walkways, a bird blind/observation platform, facilities, a discovery area for kids and more.

The northwest Quad will remain as is: There's a newly built county fire station there now. The other three are the focus of conservation.

“Working with partners like Sarasota Audubon to improve our environment and include area students in the process is a win-win for our region,” said Jon Thaxton, the senior vice president of community leadership for Gulf Coast Community Foundation. “We are grateful for organizations like Sarasota Audubon Society who conserve and restore our natural ecosystem, creating thriving opportunities for all.”

Water features in the Quad parcels will undergo regular water quality testing — a benefit to wildlife that feeds and shelters at pond edges. Best practices of stormwater pond management will be used to ensure maximum filtration of pollutants from run off as water enters the ponds.

Sarasota Audubon and Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, who are partnering to re-wild the Quad parcels, are working together with engineers on the concept design.

“Our goals are to improve the water quality by following the Healthy Ponds Collaborative guidelines, to establish an internship program to monitor our changes, and to educate the public about the benefits and vital importance of healthy ponds for our birds, wildlife and the community,” said Jeanne Dubi, president of Sarasota Audubon. “The grant will enable us to monitor changes and share data with the public to show how healthy stormwater retention ponds improve water quality.”

Interns will also assist with carbon sequestration monitoring, public park management including the recruitment and managing of volunteers, coordinating with environmental agencies, working with Sarasota County and the academic community, and developing and managing education programs for the public.

During the time of the February open house, Christine Johnson of the Conservation Foundation said the project would take 12-14 months to build if fundraising is successful enough to avoid phased-in construction.

Willis Smith Construction, Kimley-Horn Planning and Design, and Progressive Water Resources are also part of the effort. Under optimum fundraising and permitting circumstances, work could begin in early 2023. Once finished, the Quads park would seamlessly link with facilities at Celery Fields, though the habitats, and the wildlife they attract, would be entirely different.

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