



## GICIA begins to unveil plans for The Preserve

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### ■ SUBMITTED BY THE GICIA

The Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association has an insert in this week's Beacon to acknowledge and thank the many, many donors who have supported our bold initiative to purchase and protect the 30-acre Mercabo property, now known as the ."

Our board and staff are tremendously grateful for your unprecedented generosity and foresight in helping us with this important mission – one with FOREVER IMPACT for our community. We also thank our predecessors at the GICIA, whose vision and judgment created and guided an organization that is clearly aligned with the values of our community. Thank you all.



The GICIA has received bids and will be executing contracts for the demolition of the nine Mercabo buildings in the very near future. Our general contractor will be All Phase Construction, Inc. which will oversee the demolition work to be performed by Forristall Enterprises, Inc.

The final scheduling is being determined and will be influenced by the recent discovery of a "tenant at will," a family of ospreys nesting on one of the nine buildings. Permits are in process to relocate the nest once the fledglings have abandoned it.

It is anticipated that actual demolition will begin in May and be completed in six to seven weeks. The osprey nest, although inconvenient, proves that we're moving in the right direction.

We have been working with Roger Debruler, the Charlotte County marine resource program assistant. Roger is in charge of the artificial reef construction program and will lead the effort to have recycled blocks of concrete (which must weigh at least 1,000 pounds) barged to the two fully permitted reef sites in the Gulf, one 10 miles offshore, one 11 miles.

The County has funds available for the reef construction. It has also planned to use smaller chunks of concrete for rip rap to reinforce the existing seawalls and provide critical marine habitat in shallow waters, which will support the shore bird nesting initiative on the southern portion of the peninsula.

We are pleased that these buildings will have a second life.

Also, in the second life category, almost all of the furniture and fixtures in the existing Mercabo lodging and conference facilities have been given to nonprofits in the area. The list of organizations that we have been able to assist includes:

**Murdock Baptist Church:** A church that is heavily involved in ministering in a number of areas in Charlotte County and Englewood, including running after-school Bible clubs at three elementary schools and one middle school, providing food to the needy in our public schools, hosting free events for public schools, and much more.

**Jesus Loves You Ministries:** Homeless outreach in Charlotte County primarily working to feed and provide hygiene/showers to the homeless who are living in the woods in Charlotte County.

**New Operation Cooper Street:** A community center that provides programs for children in the African-American neighborhood of Punta Gorda.

**Make it Count Sports:** Works with underprivileged kids in Punta Gorda to provide a mix of academic tutoring and athletic training. They also work to mentor children to keep them from making poor life decisions.

**Wounded Warriors:** Works to honor and empower local wounded warriors.

Local business owner Bobby Miller of Grande Aire Services has very generously removed all the outdated HVAC equipment, including unusable kitchen equipment.

Essentially, the buildings have been stripped.

Bayne Stevenson, chair of the GICIA Land Conservancy Committee, presented the proposed plan for the restoration of The Preserve at the GICIA annual meeting. The plan was discussed at length, with questions and suggestions coming from the audience.

The plan was developed by Rick Joyce, our skilled and enthusiastic certified arborist, who has consulted with the GICIA for almost 20 years. Rick was guided by the Board's goals and objectives to create a natural sanctuary for native wildlife and birds.

GICIA also has plans to work with marine biology experts to explore methods for contributing to the submerged lands of The Preserve, which are within the boundaries of the Gasparilla Sound/Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve.

The vision for the landscape design balances our desire to enhance the view shed as one turns onto Boca Grande causeway with our goal of creating critical shore bird nesting areas and wildlife habitat.

This proposal includes a planting band approximately 75 feet wide that will be consistent with the landscape design of the GICIA Bike Path. The view of The Preserve will complement the landscape features of the protected GIBA peninsula and islands, the five-mile GICIA-owned Bike Path and the Mary Sharp Park, a seven-mile chain of protected property all the way to our historic village.

As a protected wildlife sanctuary, The Preserve will have limited public access. There will be no public parking facilities. Access to The Preserve will be limited to GICIA-sanctioned tours and educational events aimed at promoting ecologically sensitive land use.

Again, many thanks to all. This is an exciting project for our community. We look forward to an onsite celebration this fall.

A presentation regarding plans for the property will be made at the Preserve site on April 13 at 5 p.m. If you are interested in attending, RSVP the GICIA office at 964-2667.



## POSTED BY **MARCY SHORTUSE**

Marcy Shortuse is the editor of the Boca Beacon, and has been with the paper since 2007. She is also editor of the Boca Beacon's sister publication, Gasparilla Magazine. She has more than 20 years of experience writing and editing local newspapers and is originally from the Chicago area.

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