



## GICIA sets sights on \$20 million Mercabo purchase

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■ **STAFF REPORT** – The Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association announced this week that board members will be working in earnest in the next few weeks to secure pledges from community members to purchase the Mercabo facility at the base of the Boca Grande Causeway.

The purchase price of the property is \$20,600,000. According to the GICIA, an offer was made by a hotel and resort developer to buy the 30-acre property on Gasparilla Road (771), which includes 185 wet slips and 4,700 feet of sea-walled bay frontage. But just weeks before that offer was made, Charlotte County renewed its effort to amend its comprehensive plan again, weakening the current Coastal High Hazard Area regulations, allowing for a proposed increase from 3.5 units per acre to up to 65 units per acre.

In light of that fact, the GICIA has set its sights on purchasing the property. “The project

is extremely time-sensitive, which will make fundraising efforts challenging,” said Misty Nichols, executive director of the GICIA. “However, the GICIA board of directors, including several former board members, feels so strongly that the only way to minimize these impacts to Boca Grande is to control these 30 acres as GICIA conservancy property.

If the GICIA is successful in the acquisition of this parcel, we would work with certified arborist Rick Joyce to return the parcel to its natural state, creating a preserve.” Joyce has consulted with the GICIA on its more than 200 acres of Association property, including the Bike Path, Loomis Key, Sam Murphy Park and the 16 Edmund and Jinny Pratt lots.

“These conserved lands are critical to the fabric of the Boca Grande Community,” Nichols said. It will be an island-wide effort to raise the necessary funds to buy the property. The GICIA board of directors unanimously voted to commit \$1,000,000 of land conservancy funds toward the purchase. Over the next 30 days board members will seek pledges from the community, and in mid-December the board will reconvene to assess the status of the fundraising and vote on whether to proceed with closing the transaction on January 15, 2016.

In 2010 Friends of Cape Haze were successful in reversing changes Charlotte County had made in their comprehensive plan. Recent legal action by FOCH was successful in getting the county to rescind the recent revisions Charlotte County made, changes that FOCH and the Sierra Club claim fail to control density after certain language within the “Charlotte 2050” plan was removed. In March of this year the GICIA announced its support of FOCH’s legal efforts to reverse Charlotte County’s changes to the comprehensive plan, changes that opened the door for the potential density increase at the Mercabo and Fishery properties.

Since January of this year, two parties — Boca Norte, LLC, current owners of the Mercabo facility, and Caribbean Bay Mortgage Lender, property owners in Placida — petitioned to intervene in the suit. Boca Norte, LLC is registered in Venice. The company has owned the Mercabo facility for years. The property was used as a marine motor testing facility, and is zoned for RSF 3.5 IG and MP, or residential single-family and general industrial and marine park usage.

“It is our hope that every resident of Boca Grande will understand the importance of protecting this strategic gateway to Boca Grande,” said GICIA President Bayne Stevenson. “It is equally important to know that we will not have a second shot at acquiring this parcel and preserving it forever.” Anyone with questions regarding the purchase of the property can call the GICIA at 964-2667 or email [gicia@embarqmail.com](mailto:gicia@embarqmail.com), or stop by the GICIA office in the Boca Grande Community

Center to get a pledge form.



## 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.

## TAGGED WITH

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