

Group buys Gasparilla Island site for conservation

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The Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association has purchased the old "Mercabo" site at the entrance to the Boca Grande Causeway for \$20.6 million.

The money was raised in about two months through donations and pledges. The group's purchase preempts a development plan that could have placed a resort hotel on the 30-acre site, which was used as a testing facility by the Mercury outboard motor manufacturer for about 30 years. Testing at the site ended after Mercury's parent company sold the property in 2001. The site has been vacant in recent years.



STAFF PHOTO / HAROLD BUBIL

The Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association wants to make a nature preserve of the old Mercury Marine test facility at the entrance to the Boca Grande Causeway, and has purchased the site for \$20.6 million.

The GICIA plans to remove existing structures on the site and create a nature preserve.

The GICIA launched a drive to raise enough money to purchase the site last year. Charlotte County is reviewing its comprehensive plan, and many of the group's members raised concerns that the county could relax development restrictions in coastal high-hazard areas.

The seller, Boca Norte LLC, was represented by Ian Black Real Estate of Sarasota. Gulf to Bay Sotheby's International represented the GICIA.

An 11-acre site across the street that is zoned for 40 condominiums remains on the market at \$8 million.

"The community of Boca Grande and residents from the surrounding areas have been exceptionally supportive of this initiative," said GICIA President Bayne Stevenson in a press release. "There have been over 1,100 contributors to this effort, which is the only way we could have succeeded in reaching the cash closing goal of \$20.6 million."

The total fund raising goal is \$22 million. The GICIA needs to clear the site by the end of the year to fulfill the GICIA's conservancy mission and qualify for an exemption from Charlotte County property taxes.

The group's goal is to clear the site of existing buildings and infrastructure to create and enhance "much needed habitat for native birds, animals and marine life."

Mercury Marine built the test center in the early 1970s. It would run outboards around the clock at high speed until they failed to determine the cause and refine the design. The outboards were mounted on bright yellow test boats, which often were seen on Gasparilla Sound.

Brunswick Corp., Mercury's parent company, also had a private complex known as the Mercabo Conference Center, with a 30-room hotel, on the site. In 2001, the parcel was purchased by Brad Kelley of Boca Grande for \$13.6 million when Brunswick announced that it was moving the test facility and corporate retreat elsewhere, according to a Herald-Tribune report in November 2001.

Boca Norte LLC is Kelley's company.

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