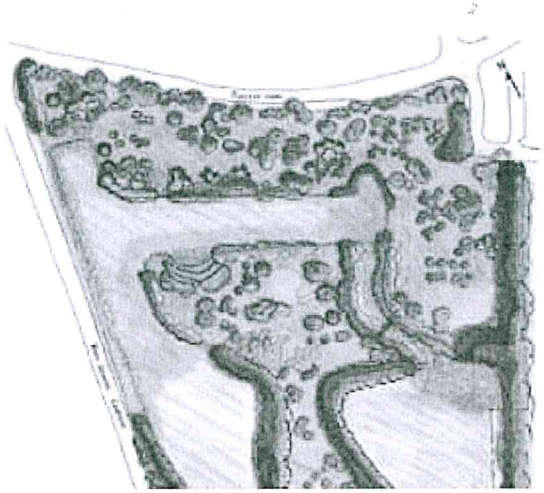
BOCA BEACON

GICIA Mercabo Cove project moving along

Featured News, The News April 10, 2020



SUBMITTED BY THE GICIA – The GICIA's Mercabo Cove is moving along smoothly and TSI Disaster Recovery Engineer Theresa Cauthen reported to the Land Conservancy Committee that they are slightly ahead of schedule. Construction on the Mercabo Cove Restoration Project began on March 2.

The project is designed to transform the basin area of the Mercabo Preserve into a marine sanctuary that will provide long term benefits that include improved water quality, enhanced fish and bird habitat, reduced seawall maintenance costs and visually enhanced views of the preserve site.

As many people know, the Mercabo Site was once the home of Mercury Test Center. When the GICIA purchased the 30-acre parcel it housed nine buildings including dry boat storage, conference center, office and small hotel, room for 185 wet slips, and 4,700 feet of bayfront located at the entrance to Gasparilla Island.

The GICIA's initial vision for this site was to completely restore the uplands to create a visually attractive native bird and wildlife sanctuary that would be forever protected from development. Once the upland restoration was completed the GICIA began to explore the possibility of creating an aquatic sanctuary by restoring the existing basin.

The basin consists of a dredged and completely armored L shaped area that is highly visible from the causeway. Once the buildings were removed and the uplands were

planted with native vegetation the possibility of restoring the basin became the focus.

The initial idea was to explore options for softening the look of the existing seawall while reducing the amount of costly seawall maintenance and repairs. As we began working with consultants and engineers on methods for stabilizing the wall and softening the appearance, we realized that a plan could be devised that would improve the aesthetics of the site, reduce seawall maintenance and more importantly enhance habitat and improve the water quality. That is when the Mercabo Cove Project was born.

Several different methods will be used to help stabilize the remaining seawall while enhancing fishery habitat.

These include reef balls, which were delivered to the site last week; rip rap created from the removed concrete sidewalk and seawall caps that have been removed from the site; and reinforced culvert pipe (RCP). Reef balls are hollow and typically have several holes of varying sizes, which provide protective areas for juvenile fish to hide from larger predators. They are made of concrete and treated to create a rough surface texture, which promotes settling by marine organisms such as oysters. Reef balls used in front of seawalls in shallow water will be partially exposed during low tides, which provide shorebirds areas for foraging.

Initial placement of rip rap and RCPs began last week. The rip rap will create many nooks and crannies for fish and other sea life and encourage oyster recruitment. The RCPs will be placed vertically in front of the remaining seawall and used as planters for nearly 600 mangroves. As the mangroves grow the prop roots will extend over the tops of the RCP eventually covering them.

Red mangroves are extremely important to the marine ecosystem as their extensive root systems enhance fisheries' habitats and trees' canopies provide roosting and nesting habitats for birds.

This innovative project is estimated to cost $2 million and the GICIA is extremely pleased that the Boca Grande Community has continued to support the restoration of the Mercabo Preserve site. This unique project will provide enhanced habitat for juvenile snook and tarpon, the critically endangered smalltooth sawfish, and dolphin and manatee.

"It will be exciting to watch this restoration project unfold over the next four to six months," said Bruce Carbonari, GICIA President.

If you would like more information, contact the GICIA Office at (941) 964-2667.