

Florida Currents

PEACE RIVER ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

MAY 2021

81st Meeting Is Unlike Any Other

PRECO member Dan Durrance waits in his vehicle to register for the co-op's first-ever virtual annual meeting.

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A Grassroots Effort

Residents rally to preserve Old Florida land near Bradenton

By Sandra Gurvis

In May 2016, as Brenda Russell was moving into her new home in the Braden Woods area of Lakewood Ranch, she was approached by a neighbor.

“I had come from Washington, D.C.,” Brenda says. “This total stranger walks up to me and asks, ‘Would you be interested in helping to save the preserve?’”

“The preserve” was the general term for about 33 undeveloped acres of Old Florida wetlands, wildlife and foliage through which the Braden River flows, forming a doughnut hole nestled within the Braden Woods and River Club subdivisions.

In December 2015, residents learned that land was to be used for a proposed subdivision. Plans included construction of a thoroughfare, which would add traffic from a road connecting two major intersections.

“Instead of putting up one home per acre, as is typical of this area, they were going to build four per acre,” says Brenda, who became a major player in Keep Woods—a citizen action group dedicated to the land’s preservation.

Since the Braden River provides much of the fresh drinking water for Bradenton, “not only would this ruin

the foliage and drive out wildlife, but it would also have a negative impact on our water supply,” Brenda says.

Years’ worth of effort led to formation of what is now known as the 44-acre Floyd C. Johnson and Flo Singer Johnson Preserve at Braden River.

A Little Slice of Heaven

The story begins with the late Carl Bergstresser—a lifelong resident and co-founder of Keep Woods. His 11.53 acres formed the initial kernel of Johnson Preserve.

“This was his family’s land—where he grew up hunting, fishing and camping,” says Gary Hebert, president of Keep Woods.

In 1945, Carl’s grandparents built the original Linger Lodge fishing camp, which is next to the preserve. The family had sold much of the land, but in 2001 Carl built a house on his acreage.

“It was his little slice of heaven,” Gary says.

Lee Amos of Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast described Carl’s land in an article in the Sarasota Herald Tribune: “Pine-needle-lined foot paths wind through scrubby palmettos and wildflowers—a rare remnant of longleaf pine forest, complete with gopher tortoise. The path crosses a clear-flowing stream via an old farm bridge, and enters a shady forest of live-oak, festooned with air plants and orchids.”

Upon his death from pancreatic cancer in 2016, Carl donated the land to Conservation Foundation.

Visual delights include huge blueberry bushes, ancient hickories and red cedars, and the blackwater Braden River. The river is tea-colored from the adjacent woodlands, but is in fact a freshwater stream.

“If your cup of tea was 10 feet deep, it would look black, too,” Lee says.

On any given day, a visitor might see deer, tortoises, endangered swallowtail kites, snakes and an occasional bobcat. The preserve also serves as a natural floodplain.

A Difficult and Contentious Acquisition

The real challenge was in getting the other 32 acres—and bridging a gap among neighbors.

Brenda says it was a contentious effort, with those who backed preservation wearing white shirts and those who opposed it donning red shirts at meetings.

Sy Inwentarz and Owen Harris, two other residents involved in Keep Woods, recalled how they were rudely



With the support of Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, Keep Woods organizers spent countless hours making the Johnson Preserve a reality. With a map showing the massive area are, from left, Gary Hebert, Sy Inwentarz, Owen Harris and Brenda Russell. PHOTO BY SANDRA GURVIS



Hiking trails in the Johnson Preserve lead through lush vegetation filled with nature, such as the Eastern gray squirrel (right). It is an untouched piece of Old Florida. PHOTOS BY SCOTT VEIX

treated at gatherings where they pleaded their case.

“Neighbors stopped talking to neighbors, and there was a lot of hostility,” Sy says.

Initial acquisition had seemed straightforward, since Keep Woods had the support of the Conservation Foundation, which owned Carl’s parcel of land.

“Developer Pat Neal and his family had purchased the other 33 acres from the original buyer, Albert Myara,” Gary says.

Keep Woods lobbied Manatee County to buy the Myara land for the preserve, but the county declined.

Pat eventually got approval from the Manatee County Commission to build the suburb, “yet he also showed a willingness to work with us, as he was a Florida native and appreciated what we were trying to do,” Gary says.

At the heart of the controversy was money—specifically, coming up with the \$3.1 million at which the county had appraised the Myara land.

“Obviously, it would be difficult if not impossible for us to raise this much,” Brenda says.

After almost three years of back-and-forth, the

Neals gave Conservation Foundation a hard deadline of March 31, 2018, for the purchase.

“Manatee County suggested area residents tax themselves to buy the land and finance the purchase over 30 years,” Gary says, noting the assessment would be 53 cents for every \$1,000 of property value. “If your home was worth \$200,000, your annual tax would be a little over \$100.”

Getting people to agree to tax themselves was no small task.

“Some people just didn’t want to pay the extra expense, no matter how small the amount,” Sy says. “They saw it as just one more tax, rather than a way to preserve our environment.”

At least 50% of the 1,440 postcard ballots sent to area





Clayton McCurry, who takes care of the home of Johnson Preserve donor Carl Bergstresser, considers himself and his family fortunate to live amidst nature, with visitors of all sorts, below. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLAYTON MCCURRY

A Real Dream Job

When Manatee County ranger/naturalist Clayton McCurry was offered the opportunity to live in Carl Bergstresser's old house on Johnson Preserve in exchange for providing 24-hour security, "It was like a dream come true," he says.

In 2018, Clayton, his wife and two daughters, now ages 7 and 11, moved from Sarasota. Along with overseeing the land and its wildlife, Clayton manages prescribed burns to help control the foliage. The three-bedroom, two-bath ranch was built in 2001 on concrete blocks to mitigate flooding from the adjacent Braden River. It had been vacant a few years.

"We needed to do a bit of a cleanup, but it was in pretty good shape overall," Clayton says, noting the real benefits lay outside the four walls. "At any given time, deer, turkeys and even hogs wander through our yard."

Clayton and his family frequently enjoy picnics and fishing at the river landing. Visitors include soft-shell and terrapin turtles, gophers and an occasional alligator.

"Where there is water, there are gators," he notes. "We go outside at night and see the stars and hear the animals. My daughters can learn about nature firsthand without having to depend on devices."

He and his wife take photographs of the critters in and around the property.

"I am a fourth-generation Floridian, so this is just paradise for me," Clayton says.



residents in late 2017 had to be returned with a "yes" vote by the second week in January for the tax to pass.

"Unreturned cards were automatically considered to be negative votes," Brenda says. "Many people were out of town for the holidays, and some homes were in foreclosure or otherwise unoccupied."

The initial results were 46.8% in favor—just shy of the goal. Keep Woods members stopped families who had not yet voted in their driveways and asked them to check their trash for discarded ballots.

In the end, they garnered enough notary-affirmed "yes" ballots to push the count to just more than 50%.

A Beautiful Payoff

After much back-and-forth and less than two weeks before the March 31 deadline, the county commissioners did a sudden about-face. Manatee County would buy the land from the developer if the preserve proponents could raise \$1 million by the builder's deadline.

Rather than seeing this as an impossible task, Keep Woods backers and Conservation Foundation went into overdrive, going door to door and calling in favors. Members stood on street corners and carried signs.

By securing a lead gift from the Manatee Fish & Game Association and a \$500,000 challenge grant from the Floyd C. Johnson and Flo Singer Johnson Foundation, they managed to raise \$1.029 million.

"It felt like we were going to crash and burn at any moment, yet we pulled it off," Sy says.

The red shirts—a sign of the original animosity in the community—are now gone. What remains is a natural treasure that opened in June 2020. Keep Woods members pulled together with neighbors and others to clean up the road and clear foliage and paths.

In 2018, Conservation Foundation named Keep Woods as its "Conservation Partner of the Year."

"There was a core group of about 10 to 15 of us who never gave up," Sy says.

Future plans include on-site parking, a river overlook, a kayak launch, a shell-paved walking path and possibly a pavilion/shelter house.

"We are operating with limited funds," Brenda says. "There's still a lot of work to do." ■

To visit Johnson Preserve, enter through the pedestrian-only trailhead at 6804 99th St. East, which is open from sunrise to sunset. Signage is minimal, and parking is only available on the shoulder on the preserve side. The dirt trail can be rugged, with lots of branches and puddles, so dress accordingly. Take bug spray. For easy access to the Braden River, stop at Jiggs River Landing Preserve, 6106 63rd St. East. Its 7 acres includes a boat ramp with freshwater fishing, kayaking and canoeing, as well as boardwalks, picnic areas, a playground, concessions and other amenities.