



Artist Bradley Theodore makes vibrant portraits of pop icons

ACCENT, 1F



The Palm Beach Post

SUNDAY, MAY 1, 2022 | PALMBEACHPOST.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Plan to make rail crossings safer

Brightline, FDOT seek grant to help fund their \$45M project

Mike Diamond Palm Beach Post | USA TODAY NETWORK

Brightline and the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) have applied for a federal grant to help fund a \$45 million project to stop

the carnage along railroad crossings in seven Florida counties.

Brightline and FDOT would each contribute \$10 million; another \$25 million is being sought from the federal government.

Since 2018, when Brightline trains opened for service, there have been nearly 60 fatalities in South Florida, 16 of which were in Palm Beach County. In 2019, Florida was ranked the third-highest state in the nation for railway trespassing casualties and the second highest for casu-

See **CROSSINGS**, Page 18A

Inside

Where, when, how: A list of Brightline train deaths in Palm Beach County. **18A**



A white tail deer leaps Thursday in the Avenir Conservation Area that is being restored in Palm Beach Gardens. PHOTOS BY GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

Avenir returns ranch to nature

Deal sees developer restore wetlands, add wildlife corridor

Kimberly Miller Palm Beach Post | USA TODAY NETWORK

2,400
Acres of restored ecosystem in Avenir Conservation Area

4,752
Total acres

10,000
Number of native plants added

10
Miles of public walking trails

PALM BEACH GARDENS – The wading birds exploded from the grassy wetlands like confetti from a popped balloon. Gawky wood storks and great blue herons with sparks of pink roseate spoonbills circled and swooped, then settled again in a prey-rich pond in the far western reaches of Palm Beach Gardens.

Within earshot, machines cleared land in the mid-April sun for fairways and golf cart paths and clubhouses and tennis courts and pools and shops and offices and 3,900 homes.

But the development isn't threatening the wetlands, it's restoring them.

See **RESTORE**, Page 21A



An animal track is seen in moist soil inside the Avenir Conservation Area.

PBC's pick of Broward firm leaves contractors fuming

Mike Diamond

Palm Beach Post
USA TODAY NETWORK

Damon Robling had reason to believe that his Greenacres-based construction company would be awarded one of two contracts to oversee renovations of Fire Rescue stations during the next five years.

After all, the county's purchasing agent and a special master, a county-appointed lawyer to review the bid process, concluded that his company and Kast Construction of West Palm Beach were the most qualified to monitor the work.

But on March 22, the commission voted 4-3 to ignore the recommendation of its purchasing agent, replacing Robling with CORE Construction, a company whose partner is D. Stephenson Construction. Both CORE and Stephenson are based in Broward County.

The contract is expected to be worth at least \$2 million.

The purchasing agent, Kathleen Scarlett, found that CORE/Stephenson were not entitled to receive credit for having a local office in Delray Beach. She reported that the lease limited occupancy to just one person, hardly enough to qualify for local preference points. Without the points, CORE/Stephenson fell to the third most qualified firm, and the work would have been given to Robling if the commission accepted her recommendation.

Nonetheless, Commissioners Mack Bernard, Dave Kerner, Maria Sachs and Gregg Weiss voted to give the work to CORE. Mayor Robert Weinroth and Commissioners Melissa McKinlay and Maria Marino voted against doing so.

The vote not only angered Palm Beach County-based contractors; it also upset Marino.

"If some of our board members don't

See **PICK**, Page 24A

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ICUs empty as COVID increases

Cases are less severe, but they're rising; so are hospitalizations. **1B**

'Red Raider blood'

Dolphins select Texas Tech WR Erik Ezukanma in fourth round. **1C**

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Restore

Continued from Page 1A

Avenir, a sprawling community in its construction adolescence, is taking a snaggle-tooth cattle ranch back to a time before canals veined and drained its landscape, before bahiagrass was grown as food for cows, choking out native flora.

When finished, the Avenir Conservation Area will include 2,400 acres of restored ecosystem with more than 10 miles of public walking trails. The restoration will also connect long-separated natural areas, creating a wildlife corridor and allowing a more natural flow of water in the Loxahatchee Slough that has not been seen in decades.

“The only native thing here were cabbage palms left by the cattle guys because they threw some shade,” said Ed Weinberg, president of the natural resource management firm EW Consultants, which was contracted to restore the property. “The development part funds the restoration. No one voluntarily goes and does this. It’s either tax dollars or the developer.”

Weinberg said it’s unusual for a developer to set aside so much land for preservation, but it wasn’t just Avenir’s largesse that led to the restoration.

The property was the last undeveloped land in the city of Palm Beach Gardens, which made it valuable to environmentalists, city leaders and developers. Years of negotiations, which whittled down the number of homes from 7,600 in 2016 to the current 3,900, led to the final arrangement that earmarked about 50% of the property for the conservation area.

Palm Beach Gardens Media Relations Director Candace Temple said the city



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Buttonbush grows in the Avenir Conservation Area being restored in Palm Beach Gardens; a cattail thrives; and a dragonfly perches on some vegetation.

PHOTOS BY GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

set the bar high for conservation and “Avenir rose to the challenge.”

Drew Martin, conservation chairman for the Sierra Club in Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties, fought Avenir, disliking its location 2 miles west of the Beeline Highway and Northlake Boulevard — a location that will drag more traffic along Grassy Waters Preserve, which is the main water supply for West Palm Beach, Palm Beach and South Palm Beach.

“We give them credit for doing what they said they would do, and we appreciate the fact they are doing what they promised,” Martin said. “We don’t give them extra credit because they are getting to do a development that we don’t

think is good planning.”

Avenir is expected to increase the number of households in Palm Beach Gardens by 16%.

The Avenir land, which totals 4,752 acres and is about 10 miles southwest of The Gardens Mall, had a storied history under the ownership of Illinois native Charles Vavrus Sr.

Vavrus, who is the namesake of the Vavrus Ranch where Avenir is building, died in 2014. But his colorful clashes with government were often in the news, including during the Scripps Research Institute’s move to Florida in the early 2000s.

Vavrus stood to be paid \$51 million for his land in an early plan with Scripps, but the deal fell through when environmentalists fought development on nearby Mecca Farms.

“We were concerned building on Mecca Farms would spur development on Vavrus,” said Everglades Law Center Executive Director Lisa Interlandi. “It’s

an important parcel because it’s a connection between the Corbett Wildlife Management Area and the Loxahatchee Slough.”

Palm Beach County had long tried to buy the Vavrus property but Charles Vavrus “didn’t like government and didn’t care much for the county,” said Karen Marcus, a former Palm Beach County commissioner and president of Sustainable Palm Beach County.

“The good part of this story is Avenir did set aside 50% of the property for this preserve,” Marcus said. “At least we got some of it.”

Now three years into the restoration project, about 1,000 acres is complete and being managed to keep out invasive species. Currently being rebuilt from the scrub that once housed 2,000 head of cattle are pine flatwoods, freshwater marsh, strand swamp, mesic pine flatwoods, and wet and dry prairies. Rehabilitation has meant tearing out non-native plants and filling in canals that left the land unnaturally dry.

More than 10,000 native plants have been added to the preserve, which Weinberg hopes to have finished within the next two years.

The restored wet prairie where the wading birds foraged this spring was once a stand of invasive melaleuca trees with clumps of papery white trunks that blocked birds from foraging.

One of the most important, but unseen, restoration efforts is to raise the water table over about 2,000 acres, Weinberg said. That’s done by installing a water control structure that will maintain a higher water table and allow for a steady release of water to the surrounding areas.

“Before all of us got here and messed with everything, there was always water,” Weinberg said. “But when it’s agricultural land, they can’t let it get too wet or too dry.”

That’s good for humans and cows, but not Everglades natives.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FOREST OAKS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

The Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners (BCC), in accordance with the requirements of Chapter 190, Florida Statutes, and other authority, will hold a public hearing to consider the creation of the Forest Oaks Community Development District (CDD) by ordinance.

Date: The public hearing will be held on **Thursday, May 26, 2022** beginning at **9:30 a.m.** and may be continued to such other time and place as necessary.

Place: The Jane M. Thompson Memorial Chambers, 6th Floor, County Governmental Center, 301 North Olive Avenue, West Palm Beach, Florida.

Title: The title of the ordinances is:

AN ORDINANCE OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT OVER THE REAL PROPERTY LEGALLY DESCRIBED ON EXHIBIT “B” TO THIS ORDINANCE COMPRISING APPROXIMATELY 79.01 ACRES; NAMING OF THE INITIAL MEMBERS OF THE BOARD; ESTABLISHING THE NAME OF THE DISTRICT AS FOREST OAKS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT; DESIGNATING THE PURPOSE OF THE DISTRICT; DESIGNATING THE POWERS OF THE DISTRICT; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; PROVIDING FOR REPEAL OF LAWS IN CONFLICT; AND PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.

Purpose: The purpose of the public hearing is to inform the public about the elements of the petition to form a uniform community development district in Palm Beach County. The information presented at this hearing will be used by the Commission in granting or denying the petition (as set forth in Section 190.005(2), Florida Statutes (“F.S.”) and also to afford the petitioner, affected units of local government, and the general public a fair and adequate opportunity to appear at the hearing and present oral and written comments (submitted to the Commission at or before the public hearing) relevant to the creation of the Forest Oaks Community Development District (CDD). The proposed CDD is approximately 79.01 acres of land located south of Lake Worth Road, approximately 0.75 miles east of Florida Turnpike, as shown on the map.

If adopted, the ordinance would create a community development district and designate the land area served. The creation of such a district pursuant to Chapter 190, F.S., is not a land development authorization or approval. All planning, permitting and other regulatory requirements pertaining to development within the land area shall adhere to general or special law or applicable local ordinance.

The CDD is designated to serve the needs of its property owners by financing, constructing, operating and maintaining all or a portion of the infrastructure and community facilities needed by district property owners, including the surface water management system, water distribution system and wastewater collection and transmission facilities. The estimated cost to provide the CDD infrastructure is \$59,000,000. The CDD will make use of non-ad valorem assessments levied on all property owners in the district and will make use of user fees for bond retirement, maintenance, etc. These CDD assessments and fees will be over and above County taxes. The full text of the “Statement of Estimated Regulatory Costs for the Proposed Forest Oaks Community Development District” can be reviewed, copied or procured at the office of the County Planning Division as noted below.

The specific legal authority for this action is Sections 190.004 and 190.005, F.S.

For further information, contact the office of Special District Services, Inc., 2501A Burns Road, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida 33410 at Telephone 561-630-4922 or Toll Free 877-737-4922. All affected units of general-purpose local government and the general public shall be given an opportunity to appear at the hearing and present oral or written comments on the petition.

Should any person decide to appeal any decision made by the Commission, he or she will need a record of the proceedings and may need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record must include the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal may be based.

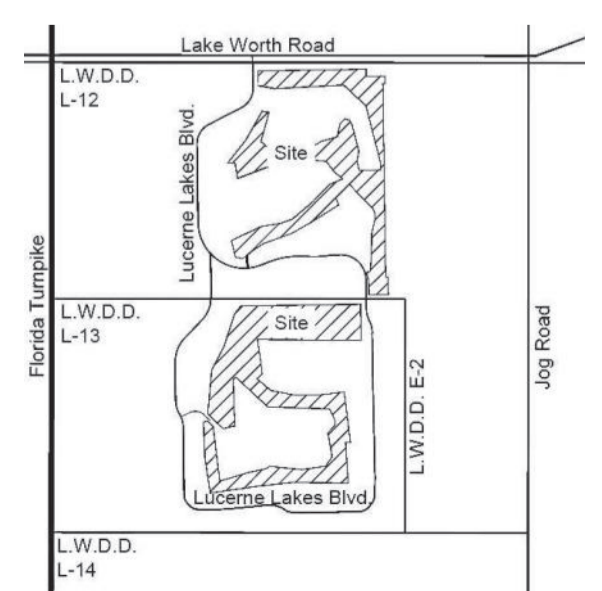
In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, persons with disabilities needing special accommodations to participate in this proceeding should contact Special District Services, Inc., 2501A Burns Road, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida 33410, no later than five (5) days prior to the hearing, at telephone number 561-630-4922 or toll free 877-737-4922 for assistance; if hearing impaired, telephone The Florida Relay Service Numbers at (800) 955-8771 (TDD) or (800) 955-8700 (VOICE), for assistance.

This notice is published pursuant to the requirements of Chapter 190.005(1)(d), Florida Statutes.

By: Mattamy Palm Beach LLC

PUBLISH: PALM BEACH POST

May 1, 2022
May 8, 2022
May 15, 2022
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