

Through group's efforts, life rises from the muck

By ED SCOTT

SPECIAL SECTIONS EDITOR

Sarasota County Commissioner Charles Hines' March 21 presentation to the South Venice Civic Association was an opportunity for residents to reflect on how far the community's Siesta Waterway restoration project has come.

The goal was to clean up and beautify a county-owned waterway accessed at the intersection of Seminole Drive and Quincy Road in unincorporated South Venice. Work began in 2011.

The entire project, including the Siesta Waterway and the Briarwood Waterway, is 7,500 linear feet. Residents call a 400-foot area without homes — from Seminole Drive along the Siesta Waterway on the Quincy Road side — "The Grove."

"We want to make it a neighborhood gathering place," Lara Jansen, one of the volunteer administrators of the project, said of The Grove. "Our intentions are to put a walking trail in there, in the future, and a bench."

Some of the future beautification will require grants. Up till now most of the huge cleanup effort has been done by 75-100 volunteers for the organization, located at 720 Alligator Drive, South Venice.

"We call it a waterway now. Before we started working on it, it was 'The Ditch,'" Jansen said of the man-made drainage ditch, one of many that run through Sarasota County.

When they first considered improving the waterway, residents' primary concern was the water quality in Alligator Creek and Lemon Bay.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY LARA JANSEN

Sarasota County Commissioner Charles Hines, county project controls manager Kelly Westover, county stormwater utility manager Molly Williams and South Venice Civic Association President Walt Ernst pose for a photo after the March 21 SVCA meeting.

"It was impaired, and we were trying to think of how we could help it become better," Jansen said. "We saw this ditch that was running right into Alligator Creek and it was full of muck. It was full of trash. It smelled bad. Nothing was alive in there."

Volunteers have worked nearly 900 hours from the north end of Quincy to

Baffin Road, pulling up four Dumpster loads of trash, including a microwave oven, a computer monitor, tires, bottles, cans and dog carcasses, from the mucky water.

Jansen said she believes at one point crews that were clearing the banks of the waterway for the county were leaving the muck they generated at the bottom.

"I think people (in general) were dumping in there for 20 years," Jansen said.

But once the volunteers removed the trash and moved the muck to the side of the banks, they found that the muck wasn't polluted; it was full of nutrients.

That cleared the water, which started running freely. The sandy bottom became visible. The critters came back, along with the audible frogs. The birds and fish came back. The waterway even smells good now, Jansen said.

Now those volunteers who are not picking up trash are planting and weeding, a sign of the project's success.

Lake improvements

Attending the March 21 SVCA meeting were a number of people from Venice Gardens. While the SVCA is continuing to improve The Grove and the waterway, the Venice Gardens Lakes Group (VGLG), a subcommittee of the Venice Gardens Civic Association

WORK DAY

The next Siesta Waterway cleanup is today (Saturday), beginning at 8:30 a.m. at the intersection of Seminole Drive and Quincy Road.

(VGCA), recently set its direction with a mission statement pledging to "improve, protect and maintain our lakes and habitat."

Like the Siesta Waterway, the three Venice Gardens lakes drain into Alligator Creek and Lemon Bay. The Gardens lakes are healthy but also "nutrient rich."

The VGLG is a motivated group dedicated to a clean and clear lake system suitable for boating activities, fishing, birding and wildlife viewing.

"Our goals will improve our lakes' water quality and revitalize property values and quality of life, such as potlucks, taking walks to the lake to enjoy the birds, sunrise, sunsets and kayaking," VGLG member Kim Hedrick said in an email. "One beautified property leads to another and reverses the natural aging process."

The VGCA, at 406 Shamrock Blvd., promotes fellowship through social activities and events of interest to the community. Hedrick said group members are looking into grants and other ways to get the plants and materials they need to improve the environment.

Email: escott@venicegondoller.com