A walk on the wild side: Greenway another 'step' closer to fruition

By LANCE SHEarer

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NAPLES — The Gordon River Greenway Park has taken another step toward completion, with Collier County leaders approving a 60 percent-complete design for the $2.3 million project.

Years in the making, the park will provide miles of nature trails along the Gordon River and Golden Gate Canal.

The 124-acre park will meander through much of the unseen natural areas of Naples, close to commercial areas and residential developments. The new trails will provide public access, including handicap-accessible paths, to land acquired after county citizens voted several years ago to tax themselves in an effort to save the Naples Zoo as well as provide conservation lands.

The Gordon River Greenway is envisioned as part of a north-south system of trails extending through the entire county.

"We're still finalizing the permitting process — it should be wrapped up in the next couple of months," said Barry Williams, director of Collier County Parks and Recreation. "Our goal is to begin construction as early as May. Typically, this kind of project takes nine to 12 months," so he anticipates completion in spring or summer of 2013.

The move to provide a greenway and bring people to nature has generated controversy over whether doing so will harm the very ecology it puts on view. Asphalt vs. grass parking areas, treatment of runoff water, the disturbing of gopher tortoise habitat and the width of boardwalks to be incorporated have all been the subject of debate among the project's many stakeholders.

J.P. Marchand of design consultant Kimley-Horn Associates presented the new plans for the greenway to the Collier County Commission this past week. Commissioners approved the 60 percent design.

The proposal calls for boardwalks spanning water and wetlands to remain at 10 feet wide for the "spine," or major through-route, but 8 feet wide for the "nodes," or side
"The shared use, bike and walking trails, will be 12 feet wide on asphalt, and those boardwalks will be 10 feet, similar to Clam Pass," Marchand said. The narrower boardwalks would be restricted to foot traffic, and be 8 feet wide, similar to those at Freedom Park off Golden Gate Parkway.

"This reduces the impact on wetlands," as well as saving a considerable amount of money, he said.

Some commissioners expressed concern that groups, including Conservation Collier, had voiced doubts about proceeding with narrower boardwalks.

"We have to look at this pathway forever, so let's do it right the first time," Commissioner Donna Fiala said.

The plan also includes two new bridges for pedestrians and cyclists — one crossing the Gordon River at the northern edge of the Naples Municipal Airport property and one over the Golden Gate Canal. Those, Marchand said, would be built of timber, keeping the look of the boardwalks.

Shared use came up in discussing the parking lot that the park will share with the Naples Zoo. The plan calls for a main parking lot to accommodate 617 cars and 10 buses, for the joint use of the zoo and the greenway. The northern half, closest to the zoo, will be paved, and the southern half will be grass, irrigated and stabilized with a geo-fabric.

"This will demonstrate the green approach," said Marchand, adding the area would include a runoff swale to filter water. "The stormwater drainage will be designed as if it were all pavement. There will be no discharge."

A project of this nature and scope requires regulatory approval from numerous boards and agencies. In addition to the County Commission, the county Planning Board and Environmental Advisory Board, the South Florida Water Management District, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Coast Guard, and even the FAA must sign off on the plans.

Commissioners heard from representatives for the Conservancy, the Naples Zoo, Conservation Collier, and the Southwest Florida Land Preservation Trust — which said the Trust doesn't concur with the reduction in boardwalk width, but would fight the battle with county advisory boards — as well as Public Services Administrator Marla Ramsay of the county staff.

"We want to discourage bicycling on the outlying trails. They're more to observe wildlife," Williams said following the meeting. "The board gave good direction. We're working with a lot of stakeholder groups, and trying to build it right."