

# Siesta Beach projects: What to expect

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Visitors to Siesta Beach Saturday will see work beginning on a long-awaited renovation of facilities and parking. The heavy machines and work crews gathering at the east end of the park won't affect most beachgoers for months, but this work is only the beginning of a two-year, \$21.5 million project meant to remodel facilities at what Sarasota County promotes as "America's Number One Beach."

## What to expect now

Saturday, work crews will start gathering equipment and running earthmovers near the tennis courts at the east edge of Siesta Beach Park. The contractor, Jon F. Swift Inc., is preparing to start the first phase of construction, which includes a new tennis court and parking lot just east of those that exist now.

Sarasota County gave the contractor permission to work on Saturdays until March 1 to keep the project on schedule after rain delays earlier this year. A drainage project along Beach Road is continuing at the same time.

## Parking

With some minor exceptions, construction should not affect beach parking until after July 4, said Brad Gaubatz, the project manager for Sarasota County Public Works. The plan calls for construction of a new lot on the east end of the park in time for the July 4 weekend, before later phases of construction begin in existing parking lots. At times over the next two months, work crews will occupy narrow sections of the parking lots as they bury cables needed for the project, Gaubatz said.

The construction plan is designed to provide new sections of parking and facilities before disrupting others. The project is supposed to add 143 parking spaces for beach visitors when it is complete.

## The need

Talk of renovating the aging facilities at Siesta Beach started more than a decade ago. Parts of the beach have been open as a public park for nearly 60 years, and the historic pavilion was built in 1959.

The top priorities have long been more parking — always a headache during busy tourist seasons — and modernizing bathrooms that have seen better days. Supporters of the renovations said



*Staff photo / Elaine Litherland*

Work continues at the Beach Road Drainage project at Siesta Key Beach on Friday, Dec. 27, 2013. More equipment and supplies will be staged nearby on Saturday in preparation for a \$ 21.5 million Beach Improvement Project.

that, because the beach is often touted as the best in the country and draws millions of visitors each year, it should have worthy facilities.

After many public discussions, the county settled on a plan that would add parking, improve the bathrooms and revamp much more of the park. But even as county commissioners stressed the need for improvements, some criticized the price tag, which ballooned to nearly \$27 million last year before parts of the plan were shelved to save money.

### **The cost**

The county expects to pay \$21.5 million for the project, including a \$17.5 million construction contract. The money will come from a \$12.5 million loan, tourist development taxes and a voter-approved penny sales tax for infrastructure.

County officials have said borrowing money while construction costs are cheap and interest rates are low will save money over the long term. However, the county budget director also has said it will reduce the county's ability to borrow money for other projects for several years.

### **Future of the beach**

Once the project is complete in 2015, the historic pavilion will have been restored, a new pedestrian esplanade will be built and the park will have new and improved parking lots and bathrooms.

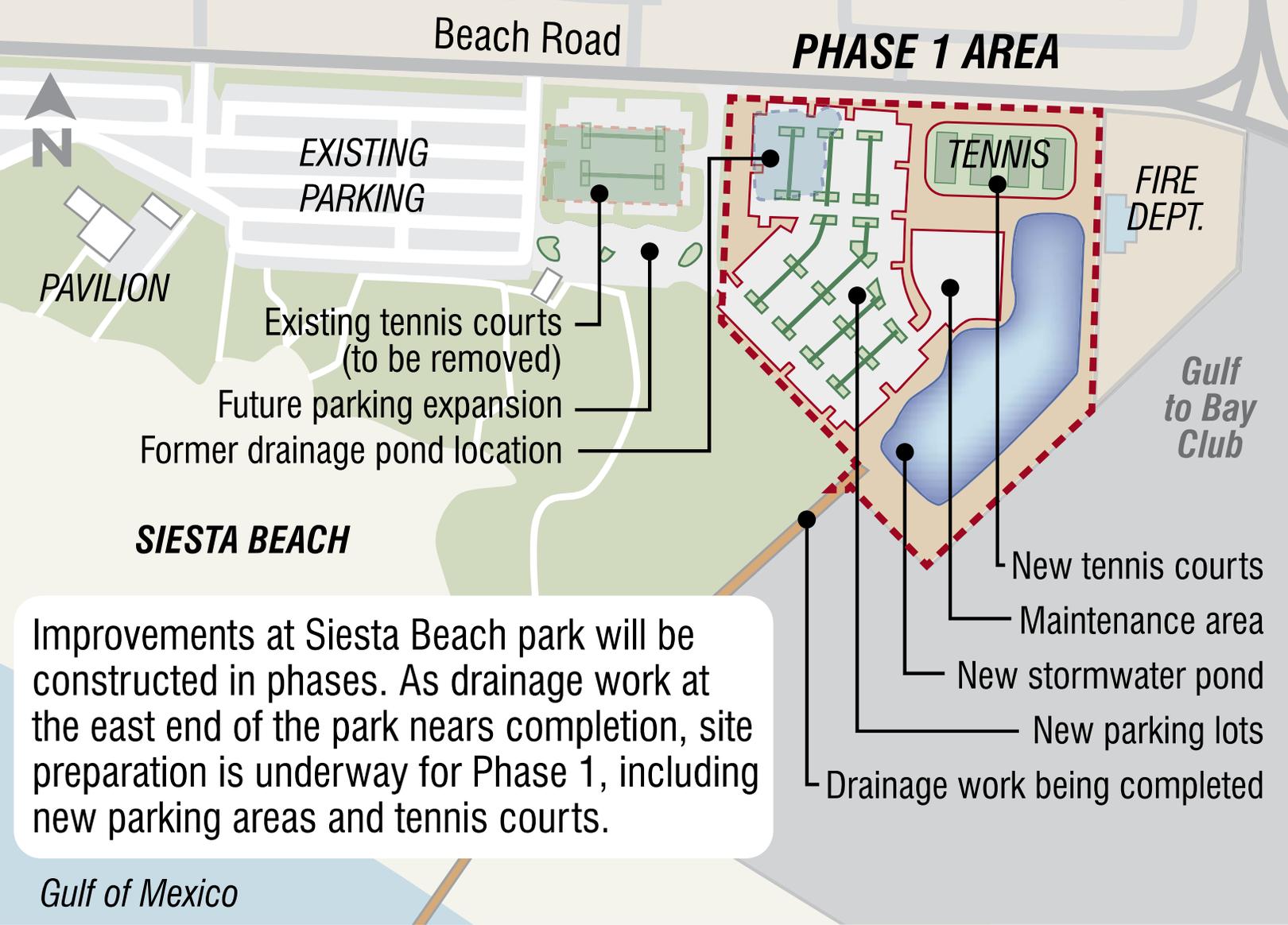
Access points will comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, some buildings will be relocated or rebuilt, and an upgraded and elevated concession area will be added, along with upgraded picnic tables and playground equipment. Some nuisance vegetation such as Australian Pines will be replaced with native plants.

County officials say the first phase of construction will be completed in July. They have not committed to an exact timeline for the following three phases.

A county website for updates on the project is expected to be available in about a month.

For more information, call 941-861-5000.

# Siesta Beach improvements underway



Improvements at Siesta Beach park will be constructed in phases. As drainage work at the east end of the park nears completion, site preparation is underway for Phase 1, including new parking areas and tennis courts.

- New tennis courts
- Maintenance area
- New stormwater pond
- New parking lots
- Drainage work being completed

SOURCE: Sarasota County Public Works

STAFF MAP / BARRY McCARTHY