Siesta Beach getting $21.5 million facelift

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Sarasota County kicked off a $21.5 million facelift of Siesta Beach on Wednesday as officials ceremoniously shoveled white sand and waxed poetic on the popular tourist attraction.

"Can you repeat after me? Long time coming," County Commission Chairman Charles Hines asked the crowd of more than 75 people who enthusiastically chanted the phrase back at a cool, windy celebration.

"Beautiful beach, but it's ready for its updating," Hines said.

The county is funding the project with a $12.5 million loan, a voter-approved penny sales tax for infrastructure and the tourist development tax that is charged on revenue from short-term rentals and hotels.

The changes include more parking, pedestrian walkways, an esplanade, a new public safety and concessions building, picnic shelters and a playground.

STAFF PHOTO / ELAINE LITHERLAND
County officials and community members gather during a ground breaking event for the Siesta Beach Park Improvement Project on Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2014. The $21.5-million project is projected to take two years to complete. Plans to modernize and improve parking, restroom, landscaping and other amenities, while also restoring the historic beach pavilion and creating a 15-foot wide esplanade throughout the beach park are among the highlighted items within the project. (1.22.2014) (Staff Photo by Elaine Litherland)

Jon F. Swift, Inc., the construction manager for the project, began setting up equipment and supplies at the end of December and is scheduled to wrap up work in December 2015.

The beach will remain open while the construction occurs.

"It's going to be a mess for a while," Commissioner Nora Patterson warned the crowd.

"This being the absolute jewel of all of our tourist attractions...We can't shut it down to get this project done quickly. So tolerate it, it's going to be about a two-year project. But I think that everybody will love it," Patterson said.