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## New lot eases holiday parking at Siesta Beach

By *Thomas Becnel*

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At 10:30 a.m. Saturday — on a Fourth of July weekend, no less — Megan Folger slipped into a front-row parking space in the new lot at the south end of Siesta Beach.

“Pretty cool, right?” she said, smiling under her sunglasses. “When we came in, we were like, ‘No way!’ My sister came yesterday and she couldn’t find a spot.”

Other Saturday drivers couldn’t believe their luck, either.

“Is this open?” they asked. “Are you sure?”

Fantasy parking didn’t last long, however, especially on a holiday weekend at Siesta, which was rated the No. 1 beach in the nation by “Dr. Beach” in 2011.

By 11 a.m., the main parking lot was full. By noon, drivers were circling for spots in the new lot, too.

Some complained that it was a long walk to the concession stand and the beach. They grimaced at a fenced-in staging area with heavy equipment and huge piles of dirt and sand.

Others admired the design and landscaping for the first phase in a \$21 million renovation project for Siesta Beach. Traffic islands sport palms and sea grapes, shrubs and sunflowers.

Mark Evans, an engineer from Atlanta, liked what he saw. He liked the idea of making improvements at a beach that was already popular.

“It’s all about being the best,” Evans said. “You can always be good, but it’s better to be excellent. If they keep up these standards, they’ll always have the No. 1 beach.”

In the next year, the rest of Siesta’s parking areas will be replaced. The beach pavilion will be renovated. A new pedestrian esplanade will run the length of the beach.

Taxpayers and tourists can keep track of the project at [www.SiestaBeachInfo.com](http://www.SiestaBeachInfo.com).



*Herald-Tribune staff photo by Thomas Bender*

The first half of the new Siesta Beach parking lot is now open at the public beach. The new lot was filled by noon on Saturday. (July 4, 2014) (Herald-Tribune staff photo by Thomas Bender)

On Saturday morning, plenty of beachgoers were still buzzing over the Friday night fireworks show on Siesta.

They parked in the new lot. They nodded at signs that said “Pardon Our Dust.” They followed arrows that said “Beach Access.”

Amy Ford, a visitor from Macon, Ga., expected the worst in Saturday traffic and congestion at Siesta Beach. Instead, she found free parking and an empty space.

“I want to live here,” Ford joked. “I’m in love with Sarasota. I’m in love with Siesta Key.”

Kathy Love went to the beach with her daughter, who lives in Orlando. They were relieved to find the new lot open to the public.

More parking, less hassle.

“I can say that I’ll go to the beach more after seeing this,” Love said. “You won’t have to leave at 8:30 in the morning to beat all the traffic.”

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