

**DRAFT 02/13/2012**

## **Guest Editorial**

By: Paul Tritaik, J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Manager

### **Supporters and Friends, the J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Needs Your Input**

J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge is one of the most visited refuges in the nation and strives to meet its mission of wildlife conservation and habitat protection while providing access and opportunities for Refuge visitors to enjoy wildlife. In an effort to manage and protect fish and wildlife resources, the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge and its partners have been studying the best ways to accommodate Refuge visitor's access needs while maintaining the sanctuary of the Refuge.

This study began in May 2006, when the Refuge, working in partnership with the City of Sanibel and Lee County, applied to the Alternative Transportation in Parks and Public Lands Program (now known as the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Program). This study has been an iterative process that has involved both public input and technical analysis. Over time, the possible solutions have been narrowed to those that are compatible with the City of Sanibel and the Refuge. The study reached out to interested participants throughout the project, and refined recommendations based heavily on public input and comment. On March 29, 2012, the project partners, including members from the Refuge and the City of Sanibel, will present the Refined Draft Project Recommendations for your comments.

The recommendations being presented at the open house were developed by incorporating public comments collected at last year's public workshops (January and April 2011) and online surveys (August and September 2011). Draft recommendations that did not have a majority of public support have been eliminated. To date, over 20 draft recommendations have been eliminated, including all forms of public transit outside of the Refuge.

Remaining recommendations focus on wildlife safety on roadways adjacent to the Refuge, such as along Sanibel-Captiva Road. Hiking and bicycle use is encouraged with a new trail recommended along an upland fill area within the Refuge (parallel to Tarpon Bay Road) that would provide direct access to the City's Shared-Use Path System. This would allow hikers and bicyclists to travel to and from Tarpon Bay Recreation Area without traveling on Tarpon Bay Road. The project partners are recommending that existing signs be enhanced to provide direction and educational opportunities for Refuge visitors interested in all Refuge areas, including the Bailey Tract, which is located along Tarpon Bay Road.

Other recommendations focus on formalizing additional parking areas on Refuge property located on the former Island Water site, which is accessed from Sanibel-Captiva Road. This site is currently being used for overflow parking during special events, such as the "Ding" Darling Days. The additional parking

would assist access to the Refuge during peak season. This parking area could include bicycle rentals and a shuttle service to the Refuge and points along Wildlife Drive. This shuttle service would not be a guided tour, but would serve those who park at the satellite overflow parking area only. Another recommendation focuses on the existing Refuge Tram service, increasing the number of guided tours during peak months from five a day to every half-hour. Both of these options would include the use of "green" technologies such as small tram vehicles using compressed natural gas or solar-electric power, not gas or diesel.

Recommendations are designed to protect wildlife by providing additional options that would encourage walking and bicycling, while providing needed parking areas that would allow all Refuge visitors the opportunity to safely enjoy and protect our valued sanctuary. A full description of these recommendations will be available at the March 29<sup>th</sup> Open House.

The project partners would like to thank the citizens of Sanibel for maintaining such strong stewardship of the Island and for bringing that sense of pride to this planning process. We encourage you to attend the Open House to learn more about the recommendations on March 29, 2012, anytime between 3:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. at the Sanibel Community House (2173 Periwinkle Way). Your input, ideas, and enthusiasm have shaped the study and will continue to be a critical part of this project. Please continue to stay involved and help guide this project to a successful completion.

Sincerely,

Paul Tritaik  
J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Manager