



Merritt Island Wildlife Association

P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781 Phone: 321-861-2377

Fed ID# 59-3289841

www.merrittislandwildlife.org

Friends of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex since 1994

Brevard County Tourism Development Council
430 Brevard Ave
Cocoa, FL 32922

August 21, 2020

Re: Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge Education Center Exhibits

Dear Peter,

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA) are working together to build a state-of-the-art Community Conservation Education Center (CCEC) at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR) to welcome and educate visitors and local residents about this unique natural landscape. MIWA applied for and received a \$500,000 grant from the TDC to be used for construction of indoor and outdoor exhibits at the CCEC. The deadline to begin construction of the educational exhibits is September 18, 2020 or the \$500,000 will be forfeited.

Unfortunately, construction of the building and related exhibits has been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March, Governor Ron DeSantis issued an executive order declaring a State of Emergency in Florida in response to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Subsequently, the Department of Interior (DOI) issued guidance for DOI offices to temporarily close. Workers were placed on telework health/safety leave, depending on their eligibility. FWS's headquarter and regional offices were subjected to lengthy process delays and backlogs due to operational shutdowns and responses to the COVID-19 Emergency. The COVID-19 pandemic put the FWS's contracting efforts for this project seriously behind schedule. The FWS contract for the interior exhibits is slowly moving through channels in the regional office due to employees working remotely. Once awarded we expect the design, construction and installation process to take 12 to 14 months.

Construction of the building itself has also been delayed. Originally planned for ground breaking in 2018, FWS funding delays resulted in construction being pushed to 2020. The architectural plans are at the 95% completed stage. A planned ground breaking in June did not occur due to delays related to COVID-19. Currently, groundbreaking is planned for some time in September but there is no guarantee that it will happen then either.



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Once construction begins, it should take 14 to 16 months to complete the project. We are currently expecting to welcome the public into the new building in December 2021.

The pandemic also slowed contracting related to the both the indoor and outdoor exhibits. MIWA staff and board meetings were limited. Several vendors were interviewed, and when possible, site visits were conducted. In July, Cre8Play was selected to provide nature-themed outdoor play-structures for children. Wilderness Graphics was selected to provide the indoor exhibits. Contracts for each company are still being negotiated.

MIWA and the FWS are fully committed to providing relevant educational exhibits to engage and educate visitors. Although COVID-19 has delayed the construction of the building and exhibits, our visitors continue to seek sanctuary on the refuge in record numbers. Even with various facility closures during the recent months, nearly 3 million visits were recorded during the past 12 months, with the highest visitation in the last few months.

Due to the delays, MIWA is respectfully requesting a six-month extension for the date to begin construction of the educational exhibits for the new Conservation and Education Center at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. We anticipate that will allow enough time to finish negotiating the contracts and start building the exhibits.

Please let me know if you have any questions. My cell number is 321-794-6866. We deeply appreciate your help in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Laurilee Thompson".

Laurilee Thompson, President Merritt Island Wildlife Association