

FAQs – Construction of a New Visitor Center for the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Q: Does the Refuge Complex currently have a visitor center?

A: Yes – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service leases storefront space in the Winn Dixie Shopping Plaza on Big Pine Key, Monroe County, Florida, 179 Key Deer Blvd. Big Pine Key, FL, 33043, that includes office space, a staff restroom, and display area that includes a bookstore operated by the Friends and Volunteers of Refuges (FAVOR) -- the Refuge Complex's Friends Group. About 25,000 people visit the current visitor center where staff and volunteers provide the public with information about the refuge. When the new visitor center is finished, this facility will close, saving nearly \$90,000 per year in lease costs.

Q: Why does the Refuge Complex need a new visitor center in a different location?

A: For a variety of reasons, the existing visitor center is inhibiting the good exchange of information with the public and inhibiting reaching additional interested entities due to its poor location. The storefront is not easily sighted (poor visibility) within the shopping center and the parking area is very congested making it difficult to park and gain access to the facility. Additionally, the government is leasing space for the current facility that is not sustainable into the future considering flat and declining federal budgets. A return on investment of less than six years would be expected by constructing a stand-alone new visitor center on refuge property. The Service estimates that a potential three-fold increase in visitation to a new visitor center could be realized as a result of the visibility of the facility on the Overseas Highway. Finally, the new facility would result in enhanced identity of the Service and National Wildlife Refuge System in the area as a conservation steward of important local public lands.

In recognition of the importance of a close connection between fish and wildlife resources, the American character, and the need to conserve wildlife for future generations of Americans, we plan and implement a variety of fishing, hunting, interpretive, wildlife viewing, photography, and outreach and education programming. We also manage special use permits, recreation fees, and concessionaires.

We support cultural resource protection, accessibility programs and management of our large and mission-critical volunteers Friends programs. We educate young people about career opportunities and promote public service as part of a lifelong commitment to natural resource conservation. Collectively, these programs work to foster understanding and appreciation of the need to conserve America's wildlife and associated natural resources.

The 2009 Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuge Complex Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) outlined a 15-year strategy to manage the four refuges within the complex. That process included public scoping and comment, and the development of a new visitor's center was outlined as a means to achieve its goals and objectives, specifically Visitor Services Goal 4:

“Promote an understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural resources and provide visitors with a quality, safe, and enjoyable experience compatible with wildlife and wildland conservation,” and Objective 3 Strategies “ *Consider relocating the visitor center operations to a Service-owned facility on U.S. Highway 1 on Big Pine Key*

Q: Where is the new visitor center proposed to be located?

A: The new visitor center will be located at 30587 Overseas Highway/ U.S. 1, Big Pine Key, Monroe County, Florida, on one-acre parcel of previously developed refuge-owned property.

Q: Will the proposed construction adhere to Monroe County building requirements (i.e. will the Service get a Building Permit)?

A: While the federal government is not required to attain state or local permits to develop on federal property, we work closely with our partners to ensure any development is appropriate for the area. We consulted with Monroe County, and contractors will adhere to building requirements set forth by Monroe County in developing the site as a visitor center. Permits will not be issued but the construction will be compliant with county building code and the structure will fit in with the local community surroundings in form and function.

Q: What about the possibility of increased road congestion or accidents on Big Pine Key as a result of the Service developing the site as a new Visitor Center?

A: The current visitor center in the Winn Dixie Shopping Plaza receives about 25,000 visitors annually. The predominant route visitors take to get to the facility is by turning onto Key Deer Blvd from the Overseas Highway and entering the shopping center parking lot. We anticipate local congestion will be relieved in the vicinity of the Key Deer Blvd and Overseas Highway intersection as well as within the Winn Dixie Shopping Plaza parking lot as a result of moving the visitor center out onto the Overseas Highway.

Visitors to the new facility will turn off of the highway to enter the visitor center parking lot from either the east or westbound direction. We will coordinate with Monroe County on any potential traffic study or modification needs to ensure congestion is minimized and avoided. Finally, street signage will be repositioned to ensure visitors are more easily directed to the new facility on Overseas Highway. This is expected to relieve vehicular traffic on the interior neighborhoods of Big Pine Key.

Q: Where is the funding coming from to build a new Refuge Complex Visitor Center?

A: Federal budgets have been flat or declining since at least 2010. The refuge parcel proposed for development of a new visitor center was acquired through a land swap specifically for that purpose in 2008 and we have been working diligently to secure appropriate external funding since that time for a new visitor center. In light of not receiving sufficient funding for a larger facility, we identified station funds (local Refuge Complex base funding) that could be used to

develop a more modest facility in fiscal year 2016. The selection of a modular multi-purpose building with Service engineering assistance was the preferred method to complete the task at a reasonable cost. We are currently working with external partners to support the construction of the stand-alone public restroom structure associated with the facility. We anticipate using Refuge funding to build the public restroom and are seeking reimbursable matching grant funding to ease the financial burden of the Refuge Complex for that cost.

Q: If the Service moves forward with construction of the new visitor center, when will it be completed and what will it look like?

A: Since the proposed 1840 square foot structure is modular and fabricated by a company that makes multi-purpose buildings, it is expected to be constructed and open for visitation relatively quickly. The Conestoga Cabins – Cropper Island model will be on concrete piers like other structures in the Keys. It will be fully accessible to persons with disabilities, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant, and should be open before September 30, 2016. It features a metal hip roof, a light-colored finished exterior and a wooden deck. The concrete piers will be about five feet above grade and will need to cure appropriately before the modular sections are delivered and assembled on-site. Once piers are ready, it will only take a matter of days to get the structure placed and secured. While the company manufactures cabins, finishes are intended to fit in well with the Florida Keys style of architecture.

Examples of this style can be found at: <http://conestogalogcabins.com/property-type/multi-purpose/cropped-island/>

To view an artist's rendering of the visitor center, visit:

http://www.fws.gov/refuge/National_Key_Deer_Refuge/About_the_Complex.html

Q: Will there be a grand opening and what would the hours of operation be once opened?

A: Yes – the Service will have an opening ceremony to which the public will be invited.

The hours of operation will be the same as the current visitor center hours:

Monday through Friday 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday 10 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Updates will be published on the National Key Deer Refuge official website and Facebook page: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/National_Key_Deer_Refuge/About_the_Complex.html

<https://www.facebook.com/floridakeysrefuges>