

Phipps Ocean Park Master Plan

By Jan Sjostrom

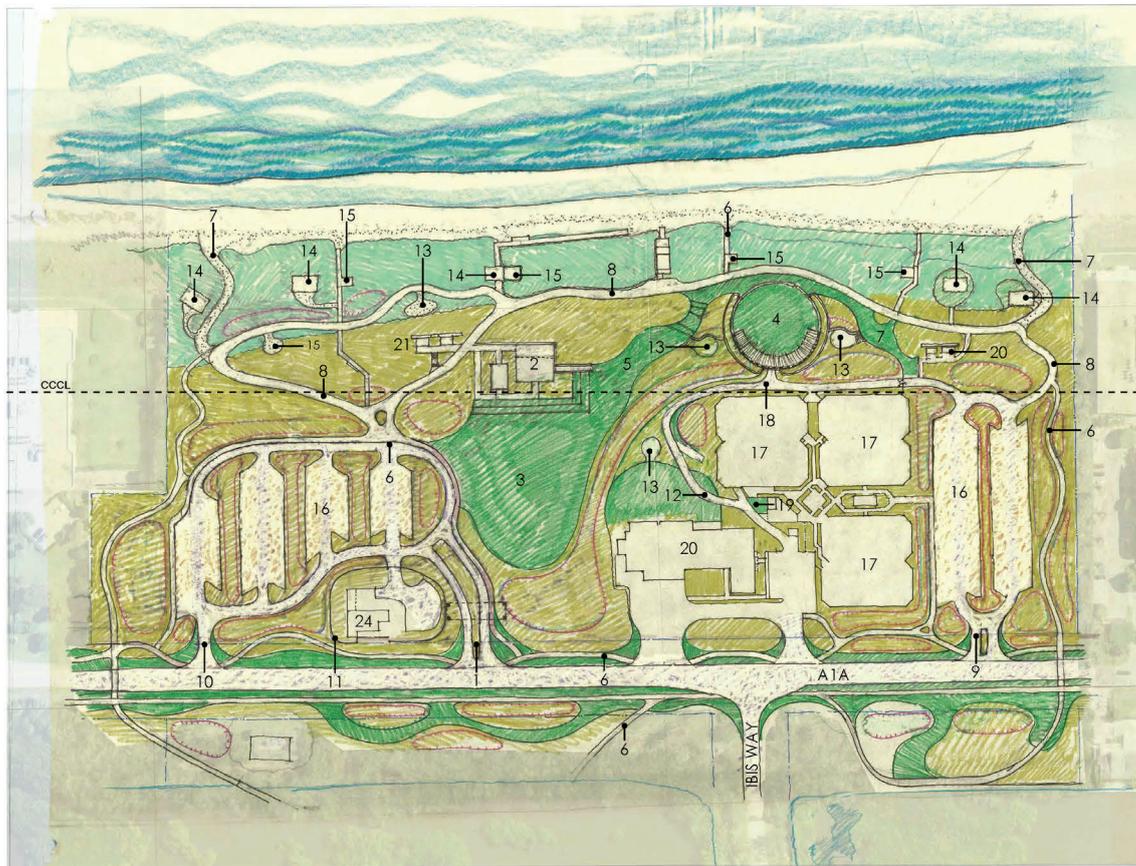
There aren't many reasons to visit Phipps Ocean Park unless you frequent the beach or play tennis. Youngsters might go there for the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach's fourth-grade program re-creating a school day in the 1886 Little Red Schoolhouse, which was southeast Florida's first schoolhouse. But the park might soon become a destination for a far wider audience if a \$140,000 master plan spearheaded by the Foundation and crafted by Miami-based landscape architect Raymond Jungles comes to fruition.

Envision the 18-acre park, which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Intracoastal Waterway, as an oasis, threaded with hiking trails traversing stands of native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Instead of a flat lawn stretching up to the dune, imagine hillocks and hollows and vistas taking in the ocean, schoolhouse and mangrove islands. Think of birds singing and butterflies fluttering among the wildflowers. "The goal is to create something that people would really use," said Amanda Skier, the Foundation's Executive Director. "Palm Beach has everything, but there are few places where you can go and connect with nature." Planted entirely with native species, the project, which will be undertaken in phases, will reinforce the town's green initiative and be an example of how native plants can be used to create beautiful and ecologically sustainable gardens.

The land, which was donated by the Phipps family in 1948, is owned by the Town of Palm Beach. The Foundation has leased the schoolhouse for its living history program since 1990. By far the biggest project the Foundation has undertaken, the revamped park will expand on the organization's work in its recently revitalized all-native Pan's Garden. Plans call for outdoor areas that can be used for events and new programs for children and adults, such as dune restoration classes and a plant propagation workspace.

"Florida at one time was all native," said Jungles whose plant lists for his landscape designs are at least half native. "It was a balanced ecosystem that was developed with bulldozers and really no regard for trying to preserve any ecosystem." Native plants and the wildlife that depended on them disappeared as land was replanted with tropical exotics and other non-native plants. Town Councilwoman Bobbie Lindsay, one of the forces behind the town's green initiative, remembers hearing many songbirds when she was growing up in Palm Beach. When she and her husband moved back years later, the birds were gone.





Legend

- 1. Two-way Main Entrance into Park**
Celebrate the scale and beauty. Entry portal like LLNPP. Entrance more central to park. Open major view to relocated school house and flexible open space. View takes in great lawn for larger community events and play.
- 2. Little Red Schoolhouse Center**
Relocated Schoolhouse a few feet up the dune, nestled into the grove of Specimen Strangler Fig trees.
- 3. Great Lawn**
Open space that embraces the sky, accommodates groups of all sizes. Community special events programming.
- 4. Horizon Plateau**
Gathering area with open views to the horizon line over the Atlantic Ocean. Beach overlook. Possible snack shop. Shelter element.
- 5. Connector Lawns for traversing grade**
- 6. Nature / Pedestrian Paths**
- 7. Sand Paths to Beach**
Emergency equipment access.
- 8. ADA Accessible Path**
Accommodates maintenance and patrol vehicles.
- 9. Two-way Park Entrance**
Park and tennis court parking.
- 10. One-way Exit from Main Park Parking Area**
- 11. Stone Wall around Public Works Center**
- 12. Restricted Vehicular / Pedestrian Circulation**
- 13. Picnic Areas**
- 14. Thatched Shelters**
- 15. Beach Showers / Drinking Fountains**
- 16. Parking Areas**
Minimized to allow more contiguous planting.
- 17. Tennis Courts**
- 18. Storage beneath Horizon Plateau**
- 19. Physical barrier for separating Fire Station Garden/Practice Area and Tennis back of house**
- 20. Upgrade Existing Restrooms**
- 21. New Restrooms for Little Red Schoolhouse Center**

First Draft of the Master Plan for Phipps Ocean Park by Raymond Jungles.

Educational signage will be installed throughout the park, but the strongest message will come from the pleasure of simply being inside it. “I think that’s really important because we want people to feel what it feels like to be in a native zone,” said Susan Lerner, the Foundation’s horticulturalist. “I’m convinced that the visceral experience is different.” The experience will start on State Road A1A, where a corridor of native landscaping will announce that visitors have arrived at a place unlike the manicured condominiums that surround it. The schoolhouse, which Jungles calls the heart of the park, will be relocated to a central position, visible from the road and a new main entrance.

The park sits on a valuable and rare slice of undeveloped coastline. It features a dune up to 25 feet tall and a variety of habitats, ranging from the beach, where only the hardiest vegetation survives, to the dune’s maritime forest, home to the greatest number of plants and animals. Habitats for moisture-loving plants will be created by directing rainfall into shallow retention areas. “There are only ten native species there now,” Jungles said. “There will be 60 to 70 at least when we’re done, if not a couple hundred.”

The Foundation doesn’t expect everyone to rip up their non-native gardens and create a Phipps Ocean Park of their own. But introducing even some native plants will help bring back native wildlife, decrease water demand, create more storm and frost-resistant landscapes and lessen the impact of harmful pesticides and herbicides on the environment, Jungles said. Embracing native plants brings other rewards as well, said Betsy Shiverick, chairwoman of the Foundation’s board. “I’ve talked to people in town who have put a lot of natives in, and their gardens are filled with butterflies and the beautiful sounds of great birds that haven’t been around for a while. People love to feel that they have initiated that, that they’ve been part of restoring the natural cycle.”

The Foundation will hold a community feedback session at 2 p.m. on Jan. 19 on Zoom and another in mid-February. Once the town approves the plan, it’s scheduled to be unveiled March 5 during the Foundation’s virtual dinner dance. From there, other partners will be enlisted to help fund raise and execute the project.