

## New native plant center shaping up in South Padre Island

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SOUTH PADRE ISLAND — Thor Lassen is counting on the generosity and involvement of donors and volunteers to give life to a native plant center at South Padre Island designed to help maintain the area's ecosystems and tourism and educate the public.

Lassen is president of Ocean Trust, a marine conservation foundation that promotes sustainable use of the oceans.

“Currently, the city of South Padre Island has to buy plants out of a city in North Carolina for their beach and dune restoration programs, and that just didn't quite make sense for us,” he said.

So, Lassen teamed up with Cameron County officials to apply for federal funds to build a native plant center. After several years of work, the center is hoping to open its doors in a matter of months as the Cameron County Native Plant Center.

It is located at 6809 Padre Blvd. in South Padre Island, near the South Padre Island Convention Centre.

Among its many partners already on board, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service's Texas Master Naturalists will lend a hand in the center's mission of teaching, researching and restoring the area's ecosystems that provide habitat for birds, fish and other wildlife that attract tourists.

“There was no source of native plants that we could readily find on a regular basis here in the Valley,” Lassen said. “We want to be a partner with the city and county to provide plants that are going to be used to stabilize our dunes and protect our shorelines on the Lower Laguna Madre side.”

Maintaining an abundant supply of the special plants necessary was the initial purpose of the new plant center.

“With public support, we're looking at eventually having three buildings on the site,” Lassen said. “With funds we've been able to acquire, we've managed to build a visitor's center, which is now being furnished. As funds allow, and still on the drawing board, are an educational center and a plant production center.”

Tony Reisinger, the AgriLife Extension agent for coastal and marine resources in Cameron County and Texas Sea Grant, said Texas Master Naturalists from both local chapters are already helping.

“Master Naturalists from both the South Texas Border chapter in Hidalgo County and the Rio Grande Valley chapter in San Benito share the territory of Cameron County,” he said. “So both chapters are helping propagate plants, and once the center opens, they will help educate the public about native plants and their importance.”

Reisinger said the constant production of native plants is important to South Padre Island.

“If a storm, for example, washes away plants from our sand dunes, we'll be able to restore our beaches much quicker if we can replace them with a local supply of plants instead of having to order those plants from Florida or North



Thor Lassen (left) and Tony Reisinger discuss landscaping at the new Cameron County Native Plant Center in South Padre Island located on Padre Blvd. near the South Padre Island Convention Centre. (AgriLife Communications photo by Rod Santa Ana)

Carolina,” he said.

Lassen began working in Cameron County in 1995. Educated in environmental and marine science at the University of Virginia and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, he’s been recognized for the seafood sustainability and restoration partnerships he has established among the private sector, government and conservation interests throughout the world.

“Ocean Trust has worked with Cameron County and Cameron County Parks and Recreation on several restoration projects,” he said. “But we’ve always had to propagate our own plants. In the process of growing our own plants, we can have a public garden. Visitors can come learn about the plants we have here on the beaches and dunes and the submerged aquatic vegetation in the wetland community, the seagrasses.”

Initial funders of the center have been the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Impact Assistance Program, as well as private funding from Ocean Trust members such as Bonefish Grill.

“Bonefish Grill is a national seafood chain that has pledged one dollar from the sale of every Ocean Trust Tropic Heat martini toward our grassroots efforts to make our coastal communities more sustainable,” Lassen said.

Even before opening their doors, the nature center has already completed its first project: the rescue of 20 mature palms and yuccas that were set to be destroyed in the development of a local construction project.

“With the funds we’ve received from Bonefish Grill, we were able to step in and transplant those plants to our nature center,” he said. “We were able to plant them in front of our visitor’s center as the first step toward educating everybody about the very unique ecosystem here at South Padre Island that is enjoyed by so many year after year.”

To volunteer or for more information, go to [www.oceantrust.org](http://www.oceantrust.org) or contact Lassen at 703-434-1444 or [tjlassen@oceantrust.org](mailto:tjlassen@oceantrust.org).



Thor Lassen, president of Ocean Trust, left, and Tony Reisinger, AgriLife Extension agent for coastal and marine resources in San Benito, meet in the newly constructed Cameron County Native Plant Center visitors area to discuss floor plans for future buildings of the complex. The native plant center at South Padre Island will open in the coming months. (AgriLife Extension photo by Rod Santa Ana)