

BONITA BEACH PARKING PASSES

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By Commissioner Ray Judah

The Lee County Commission's recent action to discontinue the parking sticker program at Bonita Beach Park was extremely difficult, but necessary. Since 2004, Bonita Springs residents have enjoyed the use of county owned Bonita Beach Park at a reduced rate compared to the rest of Lee County residents and visitors. Understandably, Bonita Springs residents are upset that Bonita Beach Park will change to metered-only parking at \$2 per hour.

Specifically, the interlocal agreement between Lee County and the City of Bonita Springs offered Bonita Springs residents an annual \$10 beach sticker at Bonita Beach Park. The approximately 4,000 beach stickers sold on an annual basis generated \$40,000 dollars of which Lee County received only \$10,000 from the City of Bonita Springs.

The cost to operate and maintain Bonita Beach Park is approximately \$310,000 per year and, unfortunately, the revenue collected at Bonita Beach Park due to the sticker program did not adequately cover expenses such as janitorial service for restrooms, and maintenance of landscape and property. Furthermore, the budget of the Lee County Parks and Recreation Department has sustained a five million dollar reduction over the last three years. The City of Bonita Springs is also experiencing severe budget constraints and was unable to cover the true cost for properly operating and maintaining Bonita Beach Park.

There was also an issue of fairness and equity as Lee County does not have a beach sticker discount program with any other municipality. Volunteers registered with the Lee County Parks and Recreation Department and involved with programs such as Turtle Time and beach cleanup are eligible for free beach parking passes.

Lee County will continue to provide a \$60 annual beach sticker at Bonita Beach Access #1 on the north side of Doc's Restaurant and Bonita Beach Access #10. The eight small parking areas between Access #1 and Access #10 remain completely free parking.

The annual sticker is valid at most county owned beaches, boat ramps, and regional parks where there is a charge to park.

Lee County is blessed with beautiful beach parks providing public access and enjoyment. Maintaining and managing our beach parks is a responsibility that Lee County government must assume to protect the value of our natural assets.