

Breaking ground on the Beirut Peacekeepers Tower

By Hector Flores

We had a wonderful turnout for Wednesday's Beirut Peacekeepers Tower groundbreaking at the William R. Gaines Jr. Veterans Memorial Park. The three-story tower will be a memorial to Gaines and his fellow servicemembers killed in the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and a teaching tool to raise awareness of their mission and the service and sacrifices of our military personnel then and now.

Gaines was a 1981 Charlotte High School graduate. His brother, Michael, and surviving family members created a foundation to memorialize him with improvements to the former Sunrise Kiwanis Park on Edgewater Boulevard in Port Charlotte. Charlotte County is proud to partner with Bill's family on the project and I want to share with you some of the work already made and planned for the 40-acre park.

In Phase 1 of the project, we added a secondary access drive from Edgewater Drive, additional parking, a military-themed, handicap-accessible playground, a pavilion, sidewalks and security lighting. The cost of those improvements was just over \$2.5 million. FPL installed solar shade panels in the parking lot at no cost to the county as part of its SolarNow program.

Thanks to voters' approval of the 1% local option sales tax in 2020, we'll be adding two new pavilions, exercise trails, fitness equipment, a tennis court, pickleball and bocce courts, a splash pad, an additional restroom and a community building. The cost of those Phase 2 improvements will be \$1,750,000.

The county is also partnering with the Gaines Foundation and the veterans nonprofit Paddle For Heroes on an ADA-compliant kayak launch at the existing launch area. The County Commission last year approved \$215,000 for the site work and permitting costs and Paddle for Heroes will fund the rest. The foundation has already funded a pair of monuments at the park to honor first responders and veterans.

The state of Florida allocated \$2 million to the tower project.

Last year, Florida Weekly recognized the efforts of the Gaines Foundation and Charlotte County to make these park improvements with a Flamingos Award for Best Transformation of a County Park.

I want to thank Michael Gaines for his energy and commitment to honor his brother, Bill, and all of our veterans and first responders. I look forward to seeing the ribbon-cutting of the Beirut Peacekeepers Tower and I hope you'll join us.

You can follow the progress on the tower's construction and other park improvements on the Gaines Foundation website, www.wrgainesjr.org.

Readers may reach County Administrator Hector Flores at Hector.Flores@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.