



July - September 2008

Volume 4 issue 3

BANYANbanter

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE CRESCENT LAKE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Informing residents of issues and events in and around our neighborhood



Photo by Emily Hall

Tree for the ages, for all ages

The unique, magnificent Banyan tree on the northeast side of Crescent Lake has been an icon of our neighborhood for generations of St. Pete folks. But as much as we enjoy the tree, we wondered: How much do we really know about the tree? In this edition of the *Banyan Banter*, neighbor Andy Smith chronicles the history of our great tree, and the young people at the city's TASCOCO center, located in our neighborhood, produced a wonderful collection of photographs. Our package begins on page 9 — we hope you enjoy the story, photos, and our beautiful Banyan tree!

President's Perspective

C'mon neighbors ... Join our board (really need you)!



By Carolyn Fries
President, Crescent
Lake Neighborhood
Association

In the last issue of the *Banyan Banter*, we asked readers to come forward and volunteer for the Crescent Lake Neighborhood Association (CLNA) board to assure continuity in neighborhood leadership.

Not a single person responded.

Now, I'd like to share a story about what can be accomplished through active involvement in your community and also what happens when involvement wanes.

If you've been to Crescent Lake Park recently, you no doubt noticed we now have a beautiful paved observation area at the north end, complete with a new fence, benches and trash can. The new overlook is a wonderful complement to the Lake Restoration Project and I have noticed many people enjoying the lake plantings and wildlife from this new vantage point.

You may recall a *Banter* article regarding an account with more than \$10,000 collected from Crescent Lake neighborhood residents through a 1994 special district tax assessment to fund Crescent Lake Neighborhood Plan projects.

A great deal of time, energy and debate was spent by CLNA in those years to write and obtain approval for the neighborhood plan and implement the tax assessment. In late 2006, as incoming CLNA president, I was astounded that these tax monies were still sitting in a city account and not even earning interest. In fact, the city was *paying* a maintenance fee of \$175 per year on the account.

All that effort by so many neighborhood people and the project monies had gone dormant for 13 years!

Over the past two years, the CLNA board and I have worked hard for the neighborhood to make the new overlook project happen.

We solicited committee members to review the neighborhood plan and make a recommendation to the board on how to use the funds.

We wrote articles for the *Banyan Banter* alerting residents regarding upcoming presentations and votes.

We worked with city staff to find the most cost- and time-efficient method to free the money for our preferred project.

We worked with city engineers to design and provide a cost estimate for the project, and we oversaw the final construction. CLNA board members even spent several hours one afternoon guarding the wet cement from those eager to make their mark.

At the risk of forgetting someone, I'd like to thank the following neighborhood residents and city personnel who were involved in the overlook project.

Neighborhood: Phil Celli, Gary Crosby, Juanita Mullaney, Lucy Trimarco, Rich Wall

City: Susie Ajoc, Leslie Curran, Steve Ochsner

Do you enjoy the results of projects like this and our award-winning Lake Restoration Project?

Have you attended neighborhood events such as the Easter Egg Hunt, 4th of July in the Park, Fall Harvest Festival or Luminary Walk?

Do you find the *Banyan Banter* informative and interesting?

Please don't assume someone else will step up to a leadership role.

Take a moment now to contact a board member (contact information is on back page of this publication) and volunteer for a 2009 CLNA board position. The future of our neighborhood association depends on it.

Mark Your Calendar: Neighborhood meeting, Monday, Aug. 18, 7 p.m.

State House Rep. Bill Heller to be featured speaker

Neighbors, please mark your calendar now to join us for our upcoming neighborhood meeting, set for 7 p.m. Monday, August 18, at the Huggins-Stengel clubhouse at 1320 5th Street North.

Our special guest will be Bill Heller, our representative in the Florida House of Representative. Joining him on our agenda will be Leslie Curran, our City Council representative, and a member of our community police team.

Our meetings have good discussions on relevant topics to our neighborhood and the city, so please do attend.

Agenda for Aug. 18 neighborhood meeting:

7 p.m.: Welcome: Carolyn Fries
Police Report: District II Officer
City Council Report: Leslie Curran
Treasurer Report: Gary Crosby
Membership Report: Nancy Wall

7:30 p.m.: Guest Speaker: FL Rep Bill Heller

8:15 p.m.: Lake Project Update: Gary Crosby
Lake Overlook Update: Phil Celli
Closing Remarks: Carolyn Fries

New overlook big hit at park

After over a year of planning, the CLNA board is proud to announce the completion of the Crescent Lake overlook project.

Located on the north end of Crescent Lake in front of the playground, the overlook is an example of what an involved neighborhood board and association is all about.

Using monies from a 1994 special district tax assessment allocated for Crescent Lake neighborhood plan projects, the 2008 CLNA board initiated the challenge of finding a project to benefit the residents of Crescent Lake. Designed to complement to the already successful Lake Restoration Project, the overlook was built with two things in mind.

The first was to replace the rusted chain-link fence that ran along the concrete top of the storm drain. The second was to provide a scenic overlook to enjoy the new plantings and subsequent wildlife that the “Friends of Crescent Lake” have worked on as part of the lake project.



Photo by Phil Celli

LOOK OUT FOR OVERLOOK: *The new scenic overlook on the north end of Crescent Lake has quickly become popular among neighbors and visitors, as an inviting spot to check out Crescent Lake and the wildlife who call our lake home.*

After designs by the CLNA board and Steve Ochsner from the city, construction began.

Crews leveled the ground, poured concrete decking, replaced the chain-link fence with a green decorative fence and added two benches along with a trash can.

The overlook has become a big success. With the area now much more inviting, neighbors and visitors to the lake are drawn to the deck and to looking out over the lake. It's ideal for families, as the overlook is only feet from the playground. Enjoy, neighbors!

As new plantings begin to grow, volunteers clean, “weed” lake

By Gary Crosby

The longer days of summer and the runoff of the season's rain into the lake has spurred a seasonal growth cycle in the lake.

The plants installed in April on the south end of the lake are showing good growth. However, along with the benefits of the season on the lake plantings, there comes the rapid invasive growth of water lettuce, ludwigia and blue green algae.

The Florida native plants recently installed are a benefit to the lake in that their rapid growth removes the influx of fertilizers and other nitrogen and phosphorous containing chemicals that enter the lake by way of the storm water drains.

As a gardener who removes weeds and debris that hinder the growth of the plants in the field, a small number of volunteers have been in the lake about every weekend “weeding” the native plant stands and removing trash and debris from the south end of the lake.



Photo by Gary Crosby

On a recent workday two of the many volunteers who have donated their time do their share to continue “weeding” the native plant stands and removing trash.

Volunteer as your time allows: Join our Crescent Lake project!

Looking for an easy way to volunteer time for a great community project on your own schedule? Then get involved in our lake restoration project, which was named the best neighborhood project in the city in 2007. Join fellow neighbors and local residents, adults and kids (it's a perfect community service project for a family!), by pitching in at upcoming workdays as your time allows, or help in other ways. It's a great group of locals who take pride in how their volunteerism is resulting in healthier water quality and a more beautiful Crescent Lake. Interested? Contact Lucy Trimarco at 821-2133 or lucyt@ij.net, or Gary Crosby at 823-8014 or mgmccrosby@tampabay.rr.com to join fellow volunteers.

By removing the unwanted plants, the native plants can continue to expand and the new colonies can better establish themselves. In mid-June, a publicized workday attracted a larger number of volunteers. Together, the volunteers removed more than 20 bushel baskets full of the unwanted plants from the south end of the lake.

Thank you to all who continue to make our lake restoration effort such a great, rewarding project.

The weekend efforts continue and the project can always benefit from your efforts, whether it is by showing up on a Saturday morning to assist in the lake or by picking up any loose trash you see around the park. Every effort counts!



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New 'Water Goats' installed, designed to reduce lake litter

By Gary Crosby

Litter containment devices, affectionately called Water Goats, were installed at the Crescent Lake storm water drain culverts in June.

The lake project group, Friends of Crescent Lake (FOCL), and the developer/supplier of the devices, Mark and Sheron Maksimowicz of New Earth Industries believe these devices are a long-term solution to significantly reduce litter in the lake. The cost of the devices was covered by grant funding through the Tampa Bay Estuary Program.

Trash and debris brought into Crescent Lake by the 16 culverts that empty storm water runoff (and the trash picked up along the way) into the lake have been a concern since the beginning of the lake project in early 2007.

The original trash "containment fences" at the culverts either were removed, in disrepair or were not effective. As a result, each rain event would deposit a new load of debris into the lake. This was quite disheartening to the volunteers who have continued to come out to remove the litter. It seemed like an endless cycle.

Effort was extended to find or develop a long-term solution to contain debris from entering the lake through the storm water drain system.

Mark and Sheron joined forces with the lake project last year and bring with them a passion in finding ways to not only clean our existing litter-filled waterways but also in developing systems that prevent trash and debris from entering water environments.

Upon installation, Mark and Sheron have been monitoring the effectiveness of the Water Goats and clearing out the contained debris and will continue through August. A long-term monitoring and maintenance plan for the devices is yet to be developed.

Focus will now be put on the other source of lake litter: the wind-blown trash and debris and the debris intentionally put in the lake by users of the park.

This issue can be addressed through public awareness, behavior change and possibly more trash containers.



Photo by Gary Crosby

Mark and Sheron Maksimowicz of New Earth Industries stop to pose for a photo following installation of one of the new Water Goat litter containment devices at Crescent Lake. The Water Goats, now installed at all of the lake's storm water drain culverts, are designed to significantly reduce litter in the lake

We can all do our part when using the park. I am reminded of a past environmental awareness program that received national attention: Don't be a Litter Bug! Please, pick up and properly dispose of loose litter and remind others to do the same.



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City Council Perspective

With ballpark issue delayed, time to decide future of Pier



By Leslie Curran
Council Member, District 4
St. Petersburg City Council

It's hard to believe that it's the end of July. Time is flying by us, and we as a City Council and community as a whole have a number of issues we will be facing in the near future.

I am very pleased that after making numerous requests of the Rays ownership group to withdraw its stadium proposal and slow the process down, the Rays have decided to do just that.

There will not be a referendum item on the ballot in November. Instead the mayor has formed a community group, led by Progress Energy President Jeff Lyash to initiate discussion and present recommendations for a possible new location for Tropicana Field, and the potential redevelopment of the current site.

In my opinion, this is what should have been done to begin with! The historical impact and importance that baseball has in this community can not be minimized, but at the same time we as a community need to come together to develop a plan that will benefit both baseball and the citizens without disrupting our waterfront park system, and with no additional expense to the taxpayers.

Another icon that is in dire need of some serious rehabilitation, and will be facing possible redevelopment in the near future is the St. Petersburg Pier.

Many questions need to be answered as we move forward with this project, and decisions need to be made after we have considerable input from the citizens.

At the July 10 City Council meeting, an agreement was approved between the city and Collaborative Labs at St. Pete College to conduct an in-depth "Pier Community Visioning Session."



The city is initiating a series of sessions to help determine the future of the St. Petersburg Pier.

This process will include collaborative sessions with Pier tenants, individual community representatives and stakeholders that would be representative of local businesses. Also included is developing an "Ideal Pier-Top 10" online survey tool to include responses from 10,000 constituents as to their thoughts on the Pier, along with a City Council session to refine the vision for the Pier.

After this is concluded, a written presentation will be made to the city.

If you are interested in participating in one of these sessions, please feel free to call my assistant, Judy Tennison, at 727-893-7117, or e-mail her at judy.tenison@stpete.org. The actual time schedule will be announced soon.

I also invite all of you to participate in the upcoming Budget Public Hearings tentatively scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 4, at 6 p.m. and Thursday, Sept. 18, at 6 p.m.

Your input is important to me and much appreciated. If you can not make either of the public hearings, please feel free to e-mail or call my office with your concerns.

In closing, I would like to thank all of you for your dedication to your neighborhood. You certainly make my job a lot easier!

Please feel free to contact me any time at City Hall at 727-893-7117, or at Interior Motives Gallery at 727-898-6061. You can e-mail me at intmotive@aol.com. Meantime, keep up the good work and stay involved.

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Home Beautiful Award

With bit of Charleston and quality touches, our newest homes have history of own

By James McGee

The CLNA board's most recent selection for the Home Beautiful Award has a new twist.

This time, instead of selecting a single home, as we usually do, we decided on a mini-development in our neighborhood with similarly styled homes.

Called Crescent Lake CityHomes, this development is an interesting choice for the award because the homes, which are unmistakable with their design, are among the newest homes in the neighborhood. Located on the block of 14th Avenue between 4th and 5th Street, Crescent Lake CityHomes consists of 13 homes, three on the South side of 14th Avenue and 10 on the North side of 14th Avenue. The remaining two homes, the largest of the CityHomes, directly face Crescent Lake.

Ray Easterlin, the developer of the CityHomes, drew inspiration from "Charleston-style" homes with a steep roof pitch, vertical architectural and quality work and touches both inside and outside the homes.

He decided to purchase the properties to turn his idea into reality. Interestingly, according to Ray, the property was once owned by a Pennsylvania farmer who also had a very large ownership interest in Wrigley Chewing Gum.

The farmer originally owned one vacation home on the block, but over time acquired the adjacent properties and tore those houses down to give himself more space.

Eventually, the entire property was bought by a St. Petersburg family that ultimately sold the land to Ray for his development.

In 1999, when Ray acquired the properties, he had to have the lots replatted, since the north side property officially contained six lots and the south side contained two lots. He was able to turn the six original northside lots into 10 lots and the two southside lots into three.

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Photo by Emily Hall

Above, live oaks form a stately lineup in front of the mini-development of homes on 14th Avenue, while also providing ample shade and privacy. Below in a 2002 photo, Ray Easterlin, who developed the homes, stands in front of one of the homes on 5th Street N.



Before construction, Ray – who now owns one of the homes, a sure sign of the homes' appeal — carefully planted live oaks on each property and included drip irrigation. Today, not only do these live oaks provide shade and give the home owners privacy, but they line the avenue and give the homes the appearance of having been there longer than they actually have.

The homes each have similar floor plans and feature hardwood floors and screened-in porches. He planned each of the homes so they would contain an oversized garage that gives approximately 600 square feet of parking, as well as much-needed extra attic space. The 13 homes range between approximately 2,000 and 2,400 heated square feet.

Ray explained that at the time the development was coming to fruition, home buyers were looking for garages large enough to hold their SUVs. Eleven of the 13 homes have detached garages that maximize the layout of the 32' X 115' lots. The other two homes, facing the lake on 5th Avenue North, have attached garages, along with screened-in porches on the first and second floors overlooking Crescent Lake Park.

“Ray did a great job developing very appealing and uniquely designed homes that fit right into a neighborhood of traditional and historic Florida homes,” said Mike Flanagan, who lives in one of the two homes facing Crescent Lake. “He believed that home buyers would love the look and feel of the homes, and would enjoy living on Crescent Lake Park and being so close to downtown St. Pete, yet still appreciate having a single-family home. Ray also cares a lot about the Crescent Lake neighborhood, and his vision has turned into a great addition to our neighborhood.”

Indeed, Ray set out his vision for a look combining a Charleston style with throwbacks to the past, including high-quality craftsmanship, 9-foot ceilings, open floor plans and efficient use of space. The homes are a delightful enhancement to our historic neighborhood. But don’t take our word for it — take a stroll along 5th Avenue North and down 14th Avenue and enjoy for yourself!



Photo by Emily Hall


Two of the mini-development’s homes face 5th Street North, with a direct view of Crescent Lake Park.



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TREE FOR THE AGES STILL AWES ALL AGES

The Banyan tree, the icon of our neighborhood, has a long and storied history. A type of fig plant that originated in India, our Banyan tree was a natural playground decades ago when local kids used to swing on a rope from the tree over the lake. Today the tree continues to attract people of all ages, drawn by its unique drop-down roots and overall magnificence.

By Andrew Smith

The large Banyan tree on the east shore of Crescent Lake is probably the most popular spot in our beautiful neighborhood. In this issue we pay tribute to what has become the icon of our neighborhood, with this story and photographs by local students.

The tree has stood strong and grown tall for a long time. One thing is certain: over the years the tree has grown wide, through the many changes in our community, beginning early in the 20th century.

In those early days, more than half of the neighborhood residents may have been part-timers. It appears the tree may have originally been part of a large private residence that included a small grove of citrus trees in close proximity. How long? That is open to debate. Most likely, it was planted in the first couple decades of the 1900's, making it almost 100 years old.

The city began to develop the Crescent Lake area around 1930, when swampy areas in the far north (near 22nd Avenue) and the far south (near 12th Avenue) were filled in, with the culverts now in the southwest corner probably being constructed at that time.

Crescent Lake Park grew as a bi-product of this development, which eventually saw trees being cleared on the now grassy area just south of 22nd Avenue, the building of tennis courts on the southern part of the park, and the acquisition of our marvelous Banyan tree.

The regular appearance of Major League Baseball players every spring at Huggins-Stengel Field on 5th Avenue North, just south of the Banyan tree, also added to the community gathering draw of Crescent Lake Park. After a practice, as players from the teams that once trained at the field during much of 1900s – which included the Yankees, Mets and Cardinals – would greet fans, the players were known to marvel at our grand tree.

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Photo by Emily Hall

Banyan trees, a type of fig plant, have a unique feature of dropping roots from their branches. If the roots take hold in the ground, they grow as thick as a tree trunk.

Banyan trees are a type of fig plant that assumes a successively larger structure by dropping additional roots from their branches, which grow into such thickness that they appear to be additional trunks. Their close proximity to other roots gives a total appearance of one trunk of very large girth.

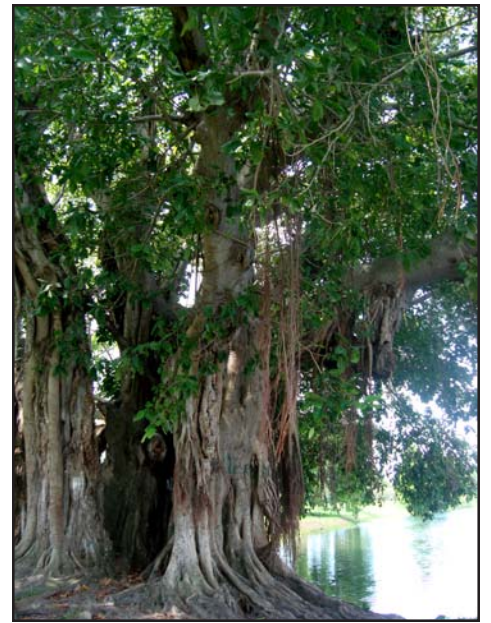
At times, these aerial roots wrap around the main trunk. The indeterminate nature of the number and shape of these dropped-down roots make every Banyan tree unique.

Banyan trees, originally from India, are called “Banyans” due to the “banias” (Hindu merchants) who often conducted business in the shade of the tree. Its tendency to spread its branches seemingly without limit has made it a symbol of eternal life to many in India.

Over time, Banyans were planted in other parts of the world, and the famous novel character Robinson Crusoe makes his home in a Banyan tree. One of the largest trees in the United States is on Thomas Edison’s property in Fort Myers, with a spread of about 400 feet.

The growth of the Crescent Lake neighborhood, which grew as the city grew, eventually saw the Banyan tree become a focal point for a neighborhood now comprised increasingly of permanent residents.

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Banyan tree is for the ages

Continued from page 10

Swimming, of course, was the most popular activity. There was a thick “community rope” affixed year-round to one of the upper branches. Vaults over the water were made safer due to the lake probably being fairly deep just off-shore from the tree, perhaps 12 feet deep or so.

There were numerous alligators in the lake at the time, but apparently most stayed much closer to the culvert and so the swimmers felt safe.

The large snook population in the lake made fishing popular near the tree, and boating was popular as well. The tree also became a place where, it seems at least, that nearly every young person living in the neighborhood carved their initials.

Fond memories notwithstanding, the popularity of the tree and its immediate environs eventually led to some unintended negative consequences by the mid to late 1970s.

The area had a somewhat significant drug trafficking problem at the time, and the tree became known as a “meeting place.” A few of St. Petersburg’s expanding homeless population typically took refuge at night in the many “nooks and crannies” of the tree.

And, because the area around the tree was not well lit at the time, the problems became exacerbated. Plus, Crescent Lake’s water had become less clean over the years and was eventually concluded to be unfit for swimming.

This led to greater attention by the St. Petersburg Police Department and the imposition of rules that brought what might be called our Banyan tree’s “recreation era” to a close.

In recent years, attention has shifted to maintaining the viability of the tree for years to come, a goal that has not necessarily been met with complete success.

In response to a hard frost in the late 1980s, the Banyan tree had its top and outer branches aggressively trimmed, perhaps excessively so, and it seemed to negatively impact the health of the tree as well as make its size somewhat less impressive.

A local arborist, John Bollender, says he worked on the tree in the mid 1990s, helping it recover to some degree. However, he believes significant arborist work will again be necessary in the near future.



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Photo by Emily Hall



Photo by Emily Hall

Banyan tree is for the ages

Continued from page 12

Bollender points to another Banyan tree in Crescent Lake Park, in the far northeastern corner. While it is less impressive in size than the east shore Banyan, Bollender says the tree is much healthier, as can be seen in the color of its leaves.

Bollender believes aeration, work on the roots and mulching are all needed to preserve the Banyan on the shore, and that it should be in the context of an explicit preservation plan.

The Banyan tree may be the one thing in our neighborhood that can't be improved on.

A number of important enhancements to our neighborhood – such as the addition of the dog park, institution of the city's TASCOS program at the Huggins-Stengel clubhouse, remake of Sunken Gardens, new and thriving pedestrian-friendly businesses along 4th Street and, more recently, the new overlook on the north end of the park and the award-winning effort to improve the appearance and water quality of the lake — have all made our neighborhood better.

Still, the Banyan tree continues to stand impressively and beautifully, remaining the enduring icon of our beautiful and growing neighborhood, providing people of all ages a vivid reminder of nature's beauty. It is no mystery why children love to explore its nooks and crannies, and why many of our lake animals gravitate to its shade and cover, and why couples often have photos taken under the magnificence of the tree's canopy, and why neighbors and visitors simply enjoy sitting by the tree and marveling at its amazing existence.

Let's be grateful for our famous Banyan tree every time we look at it. Let's also be alert to keeping it healthy and thriving so that it will endure as long as possible for future generations of neighbors and visitors.



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NEWSLETTER ADVERTISING

Advertising in the Banyan Banter is an effective and inexpensive way to reach hundreds of local potential customers. The newsletter is delivered quarterly to all residents of Crescent Lake (nearly 600 households).

1 page \$95/issue \$330/year

1/2 page \$66/issue \$230/year

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Business card \$39/issue \$140/year

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Photo by Phil Celli

Yep, that's an otter in our lake!

Ducks, geese, turtles and all kinds of birds large and small make Crescent Lake a vibrant hub of natural life. But we also have a small family of otters who hang out at our lake. While they seem to come and go from time to time, likely visiting other bodies of water through the underground network of drainage culverts, they appear to have a special affinity for Crescent Lake. Kudos to neighbor Phil Celli for capturing this happy-looking otter at the lake on a recent summer day!