



Whitney Laboratory closing in on capital campaign for expansion

By Colleen Jones
November 6, 2019

The University of Florida Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience sees more than 1,000 patients at its Sea Turtle Hospital each year.

The laboratory's cutting-edge scientific research is commissioned by institutes like NASA and recognized by the likes of the Smithsonian.

And nearly 5,500 school children from across seven counties in Northeast Florida regularly make field trips to the facility, to look through microscopes and hold marine life in their hands.

But it's fair to say that many who pass by the clustering of unassuming buildings on State Road A1A may have little idea what actually goes on inside them.

"They'll come in and be like, 'We didn't know what you did behind those bunker buildings,'" said Jessica Long, senior director of advancement.

But with the expansion planned for the laboratory just over the St. Johns County border, the Whitney Lab is poised to become a more well-known institution — one that could potentially draw more visitors to the area.

Administrators are in the midst of a capital campaign to fund a \$24 million new building that would nearly double the space it has now.

The Whitney Lab has raised about half of that amount between private donations and funding from the University of Florida. The next step is to present their case to the state sometime this year hopefully to meet the balance needed to reach their goal.

Renderings show a two-story complex to be constructed on the northern end of the property.

The 25,000-square-foot building would certainly allow for more usable space, but Long said it would also let the Whitney increase the scope of its programming, especially more community access.

"We're definitely trying to open it up to the public more," Long said.

The tone for that will be set by a “discovery” lobby the Whitney Lab would like to have in the new building showcasing its most recent research in such areas as conservation, coastal biology and disease control.

Mark Martindale, professor and director for the Whitney Laboratory, said that while the facility’s location between the Intracoastal and the Atlantic Ocean is ideal — “In one place, you can study all these things,” he said — the condition of the building itself, especially the infrastructure, reflects its 1970s-era construction.

Martindale said that even with the state-of-the art equipment the labs are using, it can be a hard sell to recruit and retain top-level scientists to live and work at the site.

Currently, the lab has 10 faculty-led units for research, from oyster restoration to genetic regeneration. Martindale envisions that number increasing to 12 or more and adding more areas of study.

Scientists would also trade in the individual cubicles in which they do their work now for a more modern, collaborative shared space.

Big changes are also in store for the Sea Turtle Hospital. The hospital, opened on the campus in 2015, provides veterinary treatment for sick and injured turtles found locally.

Many of the sea turtles the facility sees have fibropapilloma tumors that impair their vision and movement.

Others, like one staffers recently named “Edward Scissorhands,” come in suffering the effects of ingestion of plastics found in waterways.

“We had to get so much of it out of him,” said Catherine Eastman, sea turtle program manager.

An upgrade of the hospital would add more water tanks to hold and treat more turtles. The facility currently has just four 1,100-gallon tanks that often have to be divided into halves or thirds to accommodate an overflow of patients, each of which has to be segregated.

The new center would also build upon the K-12 STEM education program the Whitney Lab runs through school visits, summer training programs, and camps. They also have have a robust student internship program for undergraduates and post graduates.

Martindale sees the expansion as an opportunity to let more people know about the mission and work of the Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience.

“Because we’re doing really important things for the county, for Northeast Florida, and for science in general,” Martindale said.

Administrators envision the expanded center becoming a kind of destination museum where visitors, especially those with children, could spend hours or even a day winding through educational exhibits and hands-on activities.

“That would be our dream, my dream, everybody’s dream,” Eastman said.