

Silver Springs State Park Dedicates First-Ever Wheelchair-Accessible Glass-Bottom Boat

New Vessel Allows Access for All Visitors

TALLAHASSEE, FL, UNITED STATES, August 26, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The first wheelchair-accessible glass-bottom boat to join the Silver Springs State Park fleet was officially dedicated today.

The Florida State Parks Foundation commissioned Lay, Pitman & Associates Naval Architects to design the 37-foot boat, which includes a flat deck and spacious aisles providing easy and convenient access for wheelchairs. It is also equipped with an induction loop system that assists passengers using hearing aids to listen to the captain's narration.



Wheelchair-accessible glass bottom boat

“We are committed to making nature and our award-winning state parks accessible to all,” said Foundation President Gil Ziffer. “This new wheelchair-accessible boat allows everyone to enjoy the famous glass-bottom-boat tours at Silver Springs, which have been operating since the 1870s.”

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In keeping with the tradition of naming the glass-bottom boats at Silver Springs after Seminole tribal chiefs, the new boat is named Chief Potackee – Betty Mae Tiger Jumper, after the only woman to serve as chief of the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

Paula Russo, a former president of the Florida State Parks Foundation, initially advocated for a wheelchair-accessible glass-bottom boat and for the last several years has worked tirelessly to bring it into existence.

The vessel was built at the St. Johns Ship Building shipyard near Palatka.

"I'm so glad that this day is finally here," said Russo, who uses a wheelchair. "Silver Springs is a magnificent example of Florida's natural beauty, and everyone deserves the opportunity to experience all that it offers."

Rep. Stan McClain, Rep. Allison Tant, Sen. Dennis Baxley, and Sen. Keith Perry were among the community leaders to speak at the dedication ceremony.

Moses Jumper Jr., the son of the boat's namesake and Associate Justice, Snake Clan, Seminole Tribe of Florida, was also among the event's featured speakers.

"Since Silver Springs became a state park, we have been committed to making the park a world-class destination," said Florida State Parks Director Eric Draper. "Our goal of access for all is realized with this new glass-bottom boat available for people who use wheelchairs."

In addition to the Foundation, a consortium of public and private partners helped fund the boat, including the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, the Felburn Foundation, the Delores Barr Weaver Legacy Fund, the Florida Park Service, Friends of Silver Springs State Park, and Cape Leisure.

"Generous donors to the Florida State Parks Foundation are funding important projects and programs and making a difference in many Florida State Parks," Draper added. "We are so very grateful."

The Florida State Parks Foundation, founded in 1993 as Friends of Florida State Parks and renamed in 2018, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation whose mission is to support and help sustain the Florida Park Service, its 175 award-winning parks and trails, local Friends groups and more than 11,000 park volunteers.

It does this through programs that preserve and protect state parks, educate visitors about the value of state parks, encourage community engagement and active use of state parks, and advocacy.

The volunteer Board of Directors represents private and public sectors as well as local and statewide interests.

Reaction from Florida legislators in attendance:

Sen. Dennis Baxley: "It is very exciting to see this finally come to fruition and ensure that all of our residents, no matter their physical limitations, are able to enjoy glass-bottom boat tours at Silver Springs State Park."

Sen. Stan McClain: "It is a wonderful day. The new all-accessible glass-bottom boat takes a huge step in opening up the beautiful Silver Springs for everyone to enjoy!"

Sen. Keith Perry: "As a Senator whose district includes the Ocala National Forest, we are lucky that there are more than 600 lakes, rivers, and springs to explore in our area. You can swim, canoe or kayak to enjoy the springs. It is the perfect place for people to enjoy nature and see some of old Central Florida."

Rep. Allison Tant: "I am thrilled to see our Florida State Parks focus on inclusivity for individuals with disabilities. I salute the Florida State Parks Foundation for ensuring that all our beautiful parks are accessible for everyone to enjoy."

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