Monroe County BOCC Invests $2 Million For New Discovery Center & Aquarium at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park

~Transformational allocation will support state-of-the-art visitor experience at America's First Undersea Park~

KEY LARGO, FL, UNITED STATES, September 15, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- The Monroe County Board of County Commissioners on Monday made a transformational investment in Florida's state parks, coral reef and natural ecosystems by officially voting to allocate $2 million toward the new Discovery Center & Aquarium at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in Key Largo.



The Monroe County Board of County Commissioners on Monday made a major investment in Florida's state parks, coral reef and natural ecosystems by officially voting to allocate $2 million toward the new Discovery Center & Aquarium at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park



A rendering of the new Discovery Center & Aquarium at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in Key Largo, Florida.

The allocation, the largest single contribution to a capital project in the Florida State Parks Foundation's 33-year history, will help fund state-of-the-art, immersive educational experiences that create meaningful connections between Florida's Coral Reef and park visitors from around the world.

Construction on the $52 million facility is underway following a groundbreaking ceremony earlier this year. The Foundation and the park's official citizen support organization, the Friends of John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, have teamed up on a capital campaign to fund new interpretive and educational

elements.

The Discovery Center & Aquarium is expected to open in 2028.

“This is a monumental day for the Foundation, for John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park and the Friends, and for every park visitor who will enjoy this incredible new Discovery Center and Aquarium for years and years to come,” said Julia Gill Woodward, CEO of the Florida State Parks Foundation. “This $2 million allocation is beyond generous — it is a truly extraordinary contribution that will have a tremendous impact on this project.”

Monroe County Commissioner Holly Raschein, who in 2020 was named the Florida State Parks Foundation’s Legislative Champion of the Year, is among the project’s supporters.

At the groundbreaking ceremony in April, Raschein, who represented Monroe County in the Florida House from 2012-20, shared personal memories of her visits to John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, including several with her young son, which helped create an enduring love for the outdoors.

“This is not just an investment in a beautiful, state-of-the-art new facility,” Raschein said. “It’s an investment for future generations to visit Monroe County, connect with our precious natural and cultural resources, and continue our legacy of conservation and environmental stewardship.”

In addition to more than 23,000 gallons of aquarium space devoted to native marine wildlife and ecosystems, the Discovery Center & Aquarium will feature several interactive experiences, exhibits and displays designed to foster a sense of stewardship for Florida’s Coral Reef — the only living reef formation on the coast of North America.

The facility will also further the work conducted by the Mote Marine Laboratory, whose scientists have restored more than 200,000 corals to Florida’s reef and will continue their efforts in and around the park.

“We are so thankful to the Monroe County Board of County Commissioners, the Monroe County Tourism Development Council and everyone who had a hand in making this a reality,” Florida State Parks Director Chuck Hatcher said. “John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park is the gateway to the Florida Keys, and the new Discovery Center & Aquarium will serve as an amazing centerpiece for millions of visitors who come to explore our state parks and natural resources in the area.”

Originally created in the 1950s, approximately 400,000 people visit John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park each year. Beyond its vital role in coral reef conservation and restoration, the park is also a world-renowned destination for scuba diving, saltwater fishing, snorkeling, swimming and paddling.

“People come to the Florida Keys from all over the world to experience one-of-a-kind places like John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park,” said Kara Franker, President and CEO of the Monroe County Tourism Development Council. “The park is an incredible economic driver for our region, and our hotels, restaurants and local businesses will all benefit from this new facility. We are proud to support the new Discovery Center & Aquarium and cannot wait to see it come to fruition.”

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