6 months to raise $12M

Busch Wildlife Sanctuary seeks cash for new home

**Lianna Norman** Palm Beach Post | USA TODAY NETWORK

JUPITER — Busch Wildlife Sanctuary has outgrown its home. The sanctuary and its 200 permanent resident animals will be moving to a location about three times bigger than its current property.

For the past two decades, Busch has occupied 6 acres it leases from the Loxahatchee River District off Central Boulevard in Jupiter, where it cares for animals as diverse as bears, snakes, otters, a one-eyed owl and

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a gator. The new property in Jupiter Farms, only 5 miles west of the current one, won’t come with a lease agreement. Busch will own it. One task remains: raising $12 million in the next six months.

A tight timeline to raise millions for a new campus

What should be an exciting opportunity for the sanctuary to spread its wings and find a home of its own is bittersweet. The price of the new center has increased since the sanctuary broke ground on the new location, thanks to COVID-related delays, inflation and unforeseen changes in the project’s permitting protocols. The sanctuary’s move will cost it $18 million, up $8 million from the original cost, of which it only has $6 million.

“Our current lease agreement here expires in March of next year. 2023. So that alone is quite a time constraint,” said Amy Kight, Busch’s executive director since 2004. “And we’re doing everything that we can to make sure we meet that deadline.”

“We have secured a construction loan, which is helpful. But as with all loans, it has to be paid back. So fundraising efforts are definitely in full gear.”

The Loxahatchee River District and Busch have a strong relationship. The district already gave Busch a year-long extension last March and could potentially extend the timeline again, if the center needs it, Alabrey Arrington, its executive director, said Friday. He added that Busch has been a great tenant.

“To see their new facility come to life – it’s so exciting,” Arrington said. “We’re very proud of what the sanctuary has achieved and continue to be excited every time we drive by their new property. (We) look forward to visiting their new facilities.”

If Busch isn’t able to move on this deadline, the fate of its ambassador animals and other furry, feathered and scaled residents would hang on finding new homes.

This isn’t an easy task, and one that the sanctuary is doing everything it can to avoid. Most of the animals at Busch are there because they can’t survive in the wild. It is possible that if funding issues thwart the move to their new sanctuary, some could struggle to find safe homes.

Amy Kight has been Busch Wildlife Sanctuary’s executive director since 2004. “Our new property that we purchased; it’s a home of our own,” she says.

What’s more, injured animals seeking rehabilitation would not have the wildlife sanctuary there to provide care. Many injured animals in need of rehab would be without a close hospital to visit.

The new sanctuary will be three times bigger than its current property

The pressure is on for Busch to come up with the $12 million it has yet to find. But the spirits at the center are high, with its staff focusing on how well-fitted the new location will be to the sanctuary’s needs.

“Our new property that we purchased; it’s a home of our own. It is 19.4 acres. That will consist of 5 acres of rehabilitation area, 10 acres of education, which is all of the trails along with our education ambassador animals. And 5 acres, roughly, that we’re leaving completely natural,” Kight said.

“It’s got five native wetlands on it and over 500 trees that we are preserving. We’re building six new buildings on the site … and a new wildlife hospital, which is going to be quadruple the size of our current one.”

The current wildlife hospital at Busch sees about 6,000 patients a year, according to Kight. If the move can be funded, the sanctuary’s new hospital off West Indiantown Road will have extensive space for multiple ICUs and nurseries, a rabies ward and a quarantine ward.

“The crown jewel of the property is a new centralized animal commissary. Picture like a four-leaf clover. That is going to be shared by our bears, panthers, otters and bobcats,” Kight said.

“That building is not only important for them and their continuous care. But heaven forbid, in a hurricane, this is a great place for us to bring all the animals in and keep them safe.”

The new location will also have a small mammal house, a snake house and an educational amphitheater, roughly double the size of its current one. That will allow two times the amount of guests for its educational programs that are offered free of charge.

Why is it taking Busch so long to raise the money?

And with $12 million left to reach its goal, Busch is fervently looking for funding, not just from donors with deep pockets, but also in the donation boxes in front of every enclosure on its campus. It will even accept donations by way of trade work and plants.

“We also need volunteers and in-kind donations. We’ve already had a couple of plant nurseries donate native plants for us, so that we can build back up to what our current Busch Wildlife is,” Kight said. “If there’s anybody out there that’s in a trade: plumbers, electricians, stuff like that, that would be willing to donate some of their services to help us out … All of that is something that’s very valuable to us.”

Siri Terjesen, an associate dean at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Business, has studied philanthropy fundraising. She says that the difficulty in fundraising in 2022 is in the state of the national market: People feel like they have less money to give.

“Some people are actually more generous in downturns because they feel that even though they’re hurting, others are hurting even more. But some people are less generous. The nice thing is that (Busch is) actually potentially collecting donations in both 2022 and 2023,” Terjesen said.

Donations can also be made to Busch in the form of naming opportunities. Donors can have just about anything at the sanctuary named for a loved one; including the sanctuary itself, if the donation is that large. But regardless of where the funding comes from, Kight just wants the people of Jupiter to know one thing: Busch is a part of the community.

“We’ve been around since 1983. We’re here for our community. We’re staying in our community,” Kight said. “We’re just expanding to better offer the services that we’ve already been doing for so many decades. And that’s what we really want people to know. It’s still going to be the same Busch Wildlife, it’s just bigger and better and really more for them.”

Amy Kight
Busch’s executive director

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