

## ‘Rebirth’ of Williford Spring begins



State Rep. Jimmy Patronis speaks to the group.

*CAROL KENT | The News*

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SAND HILLS — Groundbreaking ceremonies were held Thursday for the \$1.5 million restoration project at Williford Spring in southern Washington County .

The spring, one of several found in the Econfinia Creek Water Management Area, was closed in April so the Northwest Florida Water Management District (NFWFMD) could prepare for the project, which will address shoreline erosion and improve recreation access to the area. Recreational improvements will include spring entry steps, a patio terrace, spring view deck, canoe dock, boardwalks, picnic pavilions, parking area, a connector trail to Pitt and Sylvan springs, as well as interpretive trails and native landscaping.

NFWFMD Governing Board Member Gary Clark said the enhancements will improve public access to the spring in a way that protects the health of the spring and surrounding habitats.

“Through this restoration project, the district will improve water quality and clarity by removing sediment from the pool, restoring native vegetation along the spring bank that helps catch runoff and sediment, and by constructing areas to capture and treat stormwater to improve water quality before it enters the spring,” Clark said.

“This will help protect one of Washington County’s beautiful natural attractions long into the future. Not only is it a perfect spot for Washington County residents to spend time outdoors, it also attracts visitors to the area who rent canoes and kayaks, shop in our stores, and eat in our restaurants.”

Funding for the project includes more than \$377,000 from the nearly \$37 million in springs funding proposed by Gov. Rick Scott and appropriated by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The project also includes nearly \$70,000 in funding from a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission grant.

DEP Secretary Herschel Vinyard called the project the “rebirth of a spring,” saying it was a result of local leadership and support.

“Nothing gets done without leadership,” Vinyard said. “There was record funding for the springs last year, and that funding was tripled this year. There’s a great passion for our springs right now, and the challenge has just begun. There will be other projects.”

Joe Petrich, the project’s landscape architect, said restoration should be complete in a year, but there may be a period when the spring remains closed as the natural vegetation becomes re-established.

Nearby Pitt and Sylvan springs remain open to the public.