

# PASSAGE TO

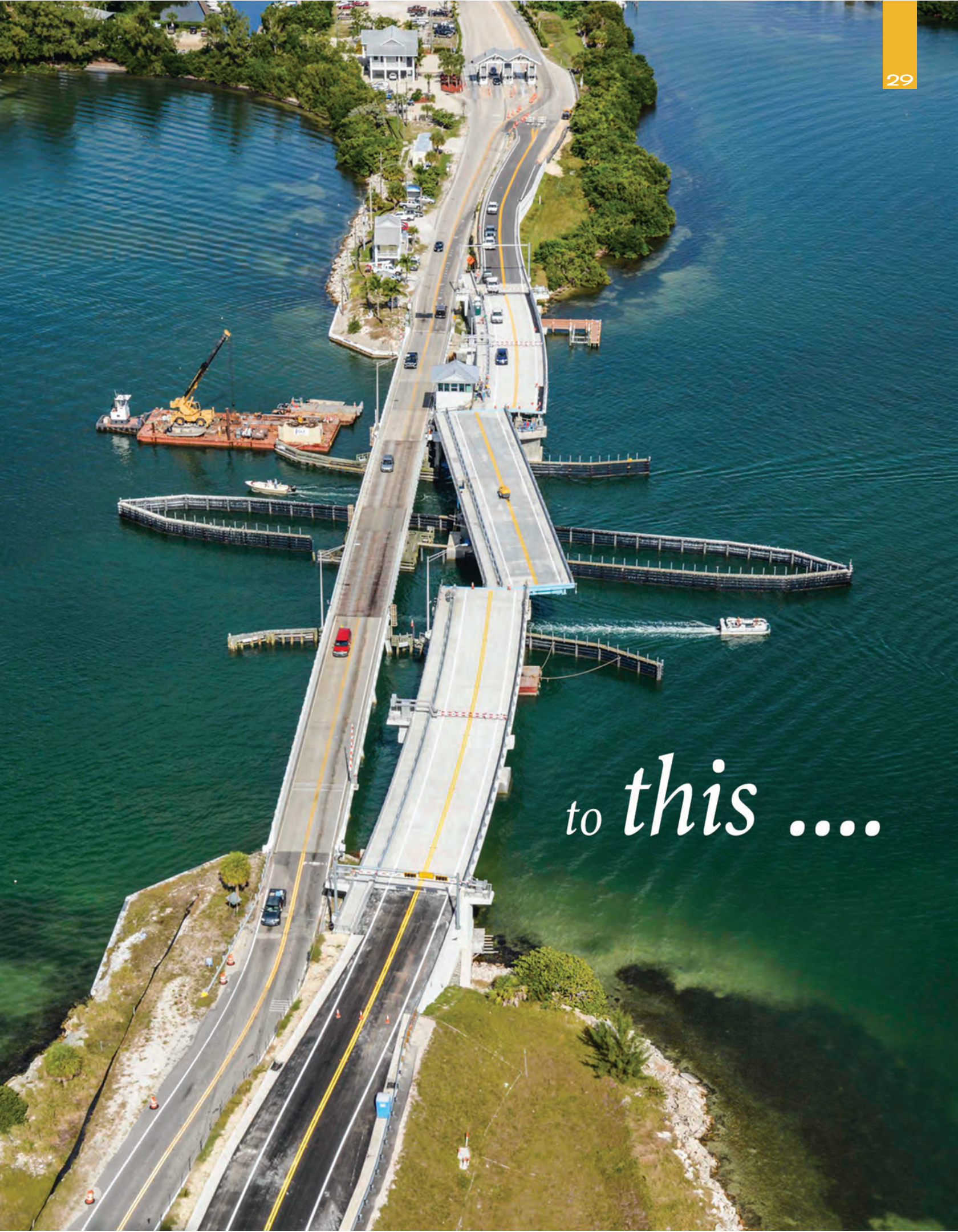
# *Paradise:*

*How did we go from this ....*

By Marcy Shortuse & Sue Erwin

Photographs by Sue Erwin, Caroline Clabaugh, Aerial, Boca Beacon archives and staff





*to this ....*

Happy VanBeuren and her dog, Penny, cruised down the Boca Grande Causeway on Tuesday, Jan. 5 on a bright, sunny afternoon. It was only fitting that an island resident of long standing should be the first to cross the brand-new Boca Grande Swing Bridge. It was quite an historic moment in the history of our island, considering how far we've come.

The transition was nearly flawless. The project that began in 2008 had finally come to fruition, aside from the fact they were still taking the old swing bridge down. The bridge spans two 80 foot-wide channels on the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway in Placida. It is 22 feet tall, with 15 higher clearance than the old swing bridge. Plans for the new bridge were created in August, 2012. Construction started in January 2014.

The Boca Grande Causeway is the only land link from Charlotte County to three barrier islands known as North, Cole and Gasparilla Island. The Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority is in charge of taking care of the series of bridge, and is a State of Florida Independent Special District.

There are three bridges that complete the Causeway – two fixed bridges, called the Center and South Bridges – and the Swing Bridge. But would you believe there was almost no bridge at all?



Happy VanBeuren and Penny in the first car over the new bridge.

## THE HISTORY ...

Prior to the 1950s you could still get on the island, but it had to be by ferry or by train. When the topic of building a bridge came up in conversation at cocktail parties at least one person in the crowd would always say, "Oh, but that would RUIN our island." As time passed, though, and it became common for every family to have at least one vehicle, the topic of bridge building became more and more popular. Eventually it became a necessity.

The first owner of an automobile on Gasparilla Island, according to the Boca Grande Historical Society, was Capt. Kingsmore Johnson Sr. He brought it home to Gasparilla Island by way of a fishing boat. By the early 1920s there were approximately 20 cars on the island.



Right about that time Capt. William Sprott owned a hotel on the island and wanted a way for his guests to come back and forth from the mainland to the island. He decided he was going to start a ferry service, and set up the Boca Grande Ferry Company. By the time the barges stopped running in 1958 there were two: The Saugerties and the Catherine. Sprott sold the business in 1952, and the new owner ran it until the bridge was built in 1958. The ferry went back and forth from the grounds of The Fishery to a landing around 35th Street. There is a placque there now, if you're interested in more of the history.

The original series of bridges were built by the Florida Bridge Company of St. Petersburg. They started construction in 1952 and finished in 1958. While Cole Island – the land mass between the Center and South Bridge – is a natural island, the island after the swing bridge is a “spoil” island that was created with material excavated from the dredging of the Intracoastal Waterway.



In 1983 they sold it to Gaspar Associates of Pinellas County, and in May of 1996 the state created the Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority. Gaspar sold the bridge to GIBA in 1998 for \$7.9 million.

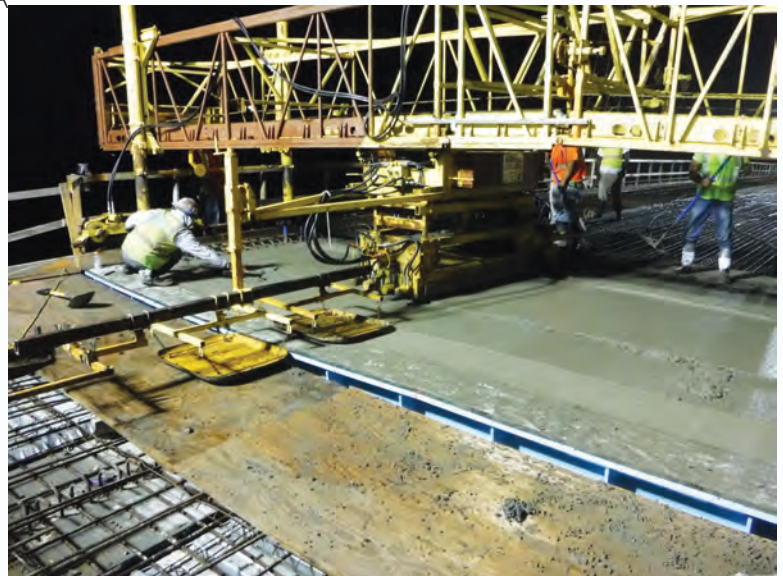
The Boca Grande Causeway Swing Bridge is one of the largest operational swing bridges in the State of Florida and the U.S. It was the only privately-owned toll bridge in the state, until it was purchased on January 5, 1998 by the Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority (GIBA). It is presently the only toll swing bridge in Florida.

## A BETTER BRIDGE?

In 2008 a roadway alignment study was done to determine what it would take to create a new bridge system. The South Bridge, in particular, was “scour critical,” meaning erosion had whittled away the sand around the pilings, leaving only a few feet left in the ground under the water. The Swing Bridge was experiencing minor mechanical failures, and GIBA knew it was past its original life expectancy.

The new bridge was designed Hardesty and Hanover and constructed by GLF Construction. Construction Engineering and Inspection Services were provided by Kisinger Campo and Associates. The costs paid to date associated with the new Swing Bridge are \$22.9 million, which is approximately 65 percent of the swing bridge project total cost. “The costs have been paid from loan instruments and toll revenue. This total includes all studies undertaken through current construction costs,” Banson-Verrico said.

Construction of the new bridge began in 2014 when GIBA received its permits from the United States Coast Guard. This is the first swing bridge that has been built in Florida in the last 50 years.



Planning and execution of the project took a variety of team members with vast experience.

“We expect to provide the public with a full accounting of all construction related costs after the completion of the project,” Banson-Verrico said.

All long term swing bridge policy decisions will be reviewed and discussed at the time that ownership of the new bridge transfers to GIBA including all engineering certifications delivered from the designer Hardesty and Hanover, the Engineer of Record, Kisinger Campo & Associates, and the contractor, GLF Construction. The project is expected to be complete in the late spring or early summer of 2016, according to Banson-Verrico.

The old bridge weight limit was set at 40,000 pounds. The weight restrictions have not changed. There is however, a major concern that some island residents and workers have expressed in that a 40,000-pound weight restriction is a huge hassle for many people, like construction workers and shop owners who rely on deliveries. When contractors can bring more concrete or I-beams over the bridge at one time, it saves them time, saves the person paying for the project money, and the job gets done quicker. When a store can have more inventories delivered in one load, it's better for the owner and means less truck traffic on the island.

However, no decision has been made yet as to whether the weight restrictions will be lifted, even though the State of Florida has deemed it safe for an 80,000-pound load.



# FACTS ABOUT THE BOCA GRANDE CAUSEWAY

Provided By GIBA

- The mission of the Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority (GIBA) is to provide the best possible bridge opening operations and toll collection services to the community.
- All three bridges and the causeway are owned by The GIBA. The Boca Grande Swing Bridge spans two 80 foot wide channels on the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway at Placida. The bridge was built with private funds (1952- 1958) to replace a ferry service. The steel swing span is 225 feet in length. The total length is 678 feet.
- The State of Florida Independent Special Tax District, known as the Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority (GIBA) was created by Special Act 96-507 of the Florida Legislature. The GIBA is run by a Board of five elected supervisors and four appointed supervisors who meet quarterly. The Chairman is Ginger Watkins, a Boca Grande resident. Daily bridge/causeway operations are managed by Executive Director Kathy Banson-Verrico. The GIBA Special Tax District includes all voters within the geographic area from the CR 775/Causeway intersection (Charlotte County), south along the Boca Grande Causeway past North & Cole Islands to Gasparilla Island's village of Boca Grande (Lee County).
- Because the Boca Grande Swing Bridge spans the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, openings are set by U.S. Coast Guard waterway rules. Coast Guard regulations require the Boca Grande swing bridge to open for vessel traffic on the following schedule: Monday-Friday from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on the hour and half hour; Monday-Friday evenings from 6 p.m. to 7 a.m., on signal/on demand; Saturdays, Sundays, and federal holidays, every 15 minutes
- To request an opening you must contact the GIBA bridge tender via marine VHF radio on channel 9 or by telephone (941) 697-2271 ext. 5. Bridge tenders are on duty 24 hours a day. They also provide wind speed and direction, and relay vessel emergencies to the Coast Guard.
- All GIBA operating revenues are generated via user tolls. No tax dollars are used. Simply stated, if you do not use the GIBA causeway, you do not pay for it. Passenger vehicles and small trucks pay \$6 for a round trip to the island. Discount passes for 30 trips or more are available to the public. Commercial trucks, buses, and heavy equipment pay \$5.50 per axle. All large commercial vehicles must weigh.
- Currently the bridge weight limit is set at 20 Tons (40,000 pounds), with a maximum gross weight for three axles or more, and 17 Tons (34,000 pounds) max gross weight for two axles. which is strictly enforced. The Weigh Scale is open weekdays only, Monday to Friday, from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- The Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority maintains three (3) bridges: the Boca Grande swing bridge and two concrete bridges, plus 2.5 miles of single lane causeway, designated as Charlotte County/State Road 771. As one travels south on GIBA's Causeway toward Boca Grande, Charlotte County maintains the next .8 miles of CR 771. The final leg of CR 771 is another 3 miles located on Gasparilla Island, which is maintained by Lee County. All of this roadway lies within the GIBA Special District taxing and voting area. No taxpayer Federal, State or County taxes are used to pay for the GIBA roads and bridges.
- Tolls collected are the only source of revenue to maintain GIBA roads and bridges.





# UNDER CONSTRUCTION

We must admit, there was a little construction when traveling on and off the island ...





but it was quite interesting getting to see all the different phases of the construction as the new bridge progressed and grew ... *right before our eyes*

