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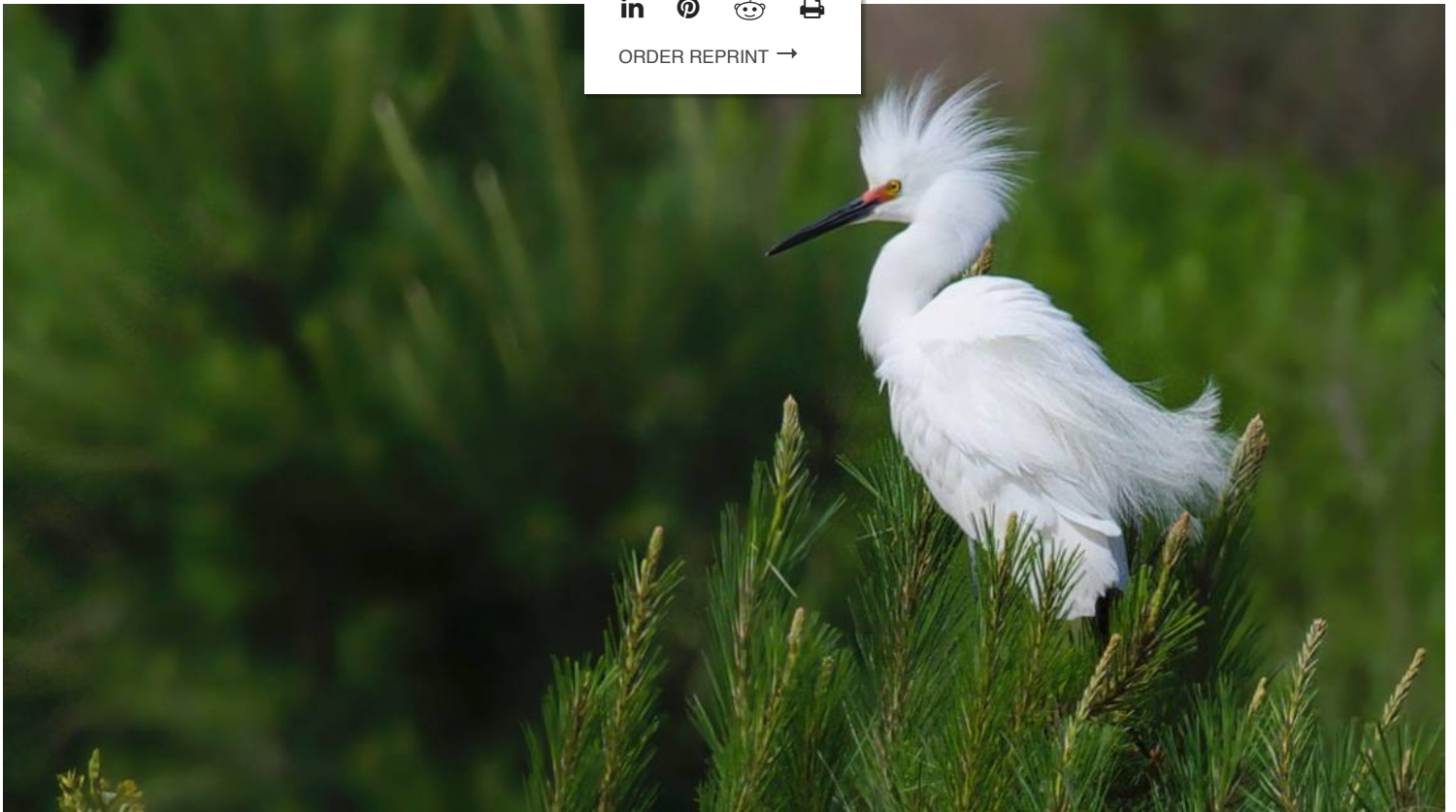
Let nature take its course in Hilton Head, South Carolina

BY THE ISLAND PACKET EDITORIAL BOARD

UPDATED DECEMBER 03, 2021 12:23 PM



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Submitted photo of snowy egret in Mid-Island Tract on Hilton Head Island. JOHN BLOOMFIELD

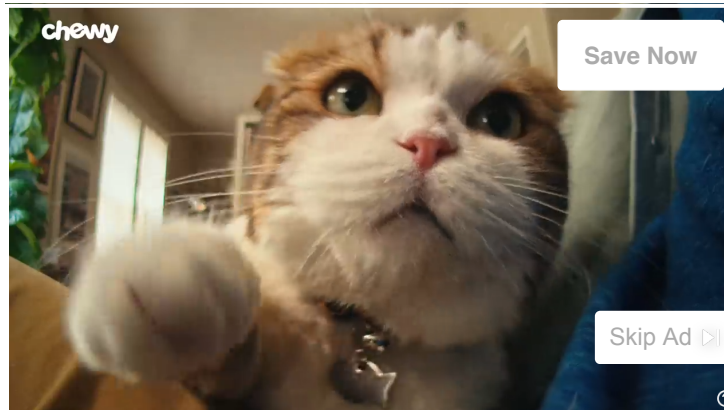
The Mid-Island Tract sounds quite ordinary on the surface, not the sort of name that inspires enthusiasm. What it represents, however, is somewhat extraordinary.

The [103-acre parcel in the center of Hilton Head Island](#) sits inside the Mid-Island Initiative Area, another not too terribly thrilling moniker.

But while the names - placeholders until something better comes along - are on the dry side, they represent a chance for the island to truly determine what its future identity will be.

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The town acquired the land in 2013 and for a time leased it to a private company, which in turn operated it as the Planters Row Golf Course.

The golf course has since closed, though its fairways, lagoons and pathways remain, and the town's Master Plan recommended it be turned into a park. The popularity of [turning old golf courses into new parks](#) is a trend seen in other communities, according to the American Society of Landscape Architects.

The question is what kind of park will it be.

A team of consultants is working on plans for the park and Jennifer B. Ray, capital program manager, said she expects they will be sharing the initial concept for the park with the Town Council in December or January.

While planning is underway, the consultants from MKSK are [also gathering community input](#) on what will happen around the park, the area better known as

that Mid-Island Initiative Area.

Here is the extraordinary part.

Hilton Head Island, struggling to balance the needs of its roughly 40,000 year-round residents with the people who work here and the millions of tourists who come each year, has a chance to reverse course and resist the urge of development.

The Mid-Island Tract could be reclaimed for nature.

It's a course supporters like Kay Grinnell, president of the Hilton Head Audubon Society, are hoping and campaigning for across the island.

"I think this is a once in a lifetime opportunity," Grinnell said.

Grinnell and her team envision what planners call passive recreation as opposed to the active type.

That means turning the Mid-Island Tract into a nature preserve with trails and little else except a restroom and parking for visitors. The rest, Grinnell hopes, would be "repurposed and turned back to nature."

She suggests active recreation such as tennis courts and playing fields could remain at other island parks where some of those amenities already exist and reconditioned in the locations where they aren't often used.

"Birding and ecotourism are growing and this would put that trend on steroids here," she said.

Birding is, by all accounts, big business.

According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, a 2016 report found there were about 45 million birders responsible for “trip-related and equipment-related expenditures” of nearly \$96 billion in total industry output. The industry accounted for 782,000 jobs, and \$16 billion in local, state, and federal tax revenue.

Like many island residents, Grinnell isn't native to the island. She moved here like so many others because she found something she loved. “I fell in love with the nature,” she said.

She's also one of those 45 million birders who travels for the hobby, staying in hotels, eating in restaurants, hiring guides, renting cars and buying equipment along the way.

Her group notes that some 300 species of birds regularly inhabit or visit the island, which sits directly on the Atlantic Flyway, the largest of the four principal migratory routes through the United States. The tract, for instance, contains the only known nesting colony of Red-headed Woodpeckers on the island.

The town's online survey asks residents to share their thoughts about the possible uses of the Mid-Island Initiative Area, which includes a mix of old and new commercial developments, industrial uses, residential neighborhoods, the Hilton Head Island airport, town-owned parklands and conservation areas, and significant cultural resources including Union Cemetery and St. James Baptist Church.

Survey respondents are asked what they do when they visit the area and what's missing.

The number one item missing, according to the survey so far, is a park.

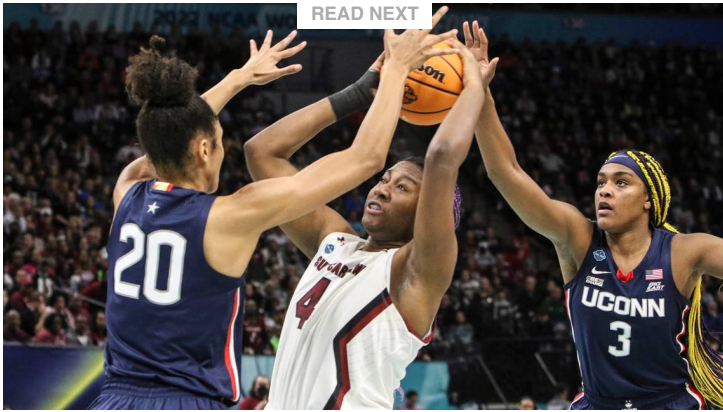
[That survey closes this Friday, Nov. 12](#), though Ray added that community input regarding the initiative area will also be gathered at an Open Park Day on Nov. 20.

Hilton Head officials have made a concerted effort to gather public input and we are optimistic that there has also been an effort to consider the opportunity that has presented itself.

It's rare for 103 acres of land to sit idle in any resort town and yet here they are.

We urge the town to let nature take its (golf) course.

This story was originally published November 10, 2021 11:10 AM.



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