

Memorandum



Date: December 28, 2020

To: Honorable Acting Chairwoman Rebeca Sosa
and Members, Board of County Commissioners

From: Daniella Levine Cava
Mayor

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Daniella Levine Cava".

Subject: Report to the Board on the Accessibility of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens – Directive 201340 (Revised)

Agenda Item No. 2(B)(1)
February 2, 2021

On August 31, 2020, the Board of County Commissioners (Board) approved Resolution No. R-873-20 directing the County Mayor or County Mayor's designee to assess the accessibility of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens (Vizcaya) for individuals with disabilities, to meet and confer with Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Trust, Inc. to determine those improvements and accommodations that are necessary and desirable, and to report said findings to the Board. This report was prepared by the Department of Cultural Affairs in close consultation with Vizcaya's leadership and reviewed by the County's ADA Office.

Vizcaya was built in the 1910s as a private home—long before the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act and without the intent that it would function as a public museum. In 1994, Vizcaya was named a National Historic Landmark—the highest designation bestowed on historic properties by the United States government—in recognition of the site's extraordinary design. Part of what distinguishes Vizcaya from other historic sites is the extent to which the facilities have not been altered and the collections remain intact. The County should feel proud that, under its stewardship, the estate has so substantially maintained its historic integrity.

Over the years, Vizcaya's physical facility has evolved to accommodate visitors in a number of ways, and all recent rehabilitation projects have been performed in accordance with government regulations, including accessibility for people with disabilities. While Vizcaya's leadership has undertaken a variety of accessibility initiatives, this report focuses on the status of the physical site, describing what is working and opportunities for improvement.

It should be noted that Vizcaya's web site contains a visitor section, entitled "Accessibility and Inclusion at Vizcaya," with information for people with disabilities (<https://vizcaya.org/visit-2/planning-your-visit/>). In addition, a map of Vizcaya is attached to this report to facilitate the review of the work being described.

Despite its origins as a historic private home, rather than a purpose-built museum or botanical garden, Vizcaya is generally accessible. This is because most cost-effective opportunities to enhance accessibility have been pursued over the years. Several potential alterations to the site would require significant financial investment; consequently, this report prioritizes those improvements that would have the greatest beneficial public impact for accessibility relative to cost. Among these, reconfiguring entry into the main house—which is currently provided by a stair lift—is considered to be the highest priority. Other proposed improvements revolve around replacement of narrow and irregular paths through the Rockland Hammock and in the gardens.

Visitor Approach to the Main House

Completed Projects:

- **Accessible Parking Spaces:** Vizcaya has four accessible parking spaces in its main parking lot, one in the Oval Plaza near the Mound and two accessible parking spaces in the Service Area, near the wheelchair lift and restrooms. This has proven to be adequate to meet demand.
- **Accessible Admissions Booth:** The recently acquired admissions booth has an accessible station for visitors using wheelchairs.
- **Accessible Restroom Facilities:** Vizcaya has accessible public restrooms in the service area near the main house, in the Café & Shop in the main house, in the Oval Plaza adjacent to the rear of the gardens, in the Garage, and in recently renovated office areas in the Vizcaya Village. It is anticipated that the public restrooms in the service area will be refreshed in the next eighteen months, with an opportunity to ensure optimal accessibility, and Vizcaya has budgeted remaining GOB funds for this purpose.
- **Wheelchairs for Loan:** Vizcaya makes wheelchairs available for visitors to use in the house and gardens on a first-come, first-served basis.

Opportunities to Expand Access:

- **Nature Paths from Parking Lot and East Gate Lodge to Admissions:** These asphalt-paved paths have existed for decades. They were not built to ADA standards and show cracks from tree roots below. These paths should be repaved or replaced with better surfaces for general visitor safety and for better accessibility. ADA-compliant walkways would likely require minor removal of native trees from the Rockland Hammock. In addition, lighting upgrades along the paths are necessary for nighttime safety.
- **Paved Walk from Admissions to the Forecourt in Front of the Main House:** The path from the admissions booth down to the house follows the natural ridge and is too steep for visitors with disabilities, including those using wheelchairs. As such, these visitors are asked to park or be dropped off in the service area immediately adjacent to the main house. This creates infrequent issues when visitors are dropped off near the admissions booth unaware that the accessible entrance is elsewhere. It is possible that the right side of this path, which is separated by a handrail, could be regraded to provide a gentler slope; this option can be assessed through an architectural analysis.

Visitor Access Within and Around the Main House

Projects Completed or Underway:

- **Access Around the First Floor of the Main House:** Years ago, steps on the north and south sides of the central Courtyard were replaced with ramps to enhance access throughout the first floor. Of the approximately seventeen public spaces on the first floor, sixteen are accessible to visitors with disabilities, including those using wheelchairs. The Entrance Loggia at the front of the house is separated by steps on either side, but is visible from either of the adjoining rooms (the East Loggia is accessible from the exterior). Recently purchased interpretive signs and barriers in the house are at an accessible height and double-belted.
- **Access to the South and East Terraces:** These exterior areas overlooking the gardens and Biscayne Bay may be accessed by the wheelchair lift at the staff entrance.

Opportunities to Expand Access:

- **Access to the Main House:** Visitors with disabilities, including those using wheelchairs, may access the house using the wheelchair lift at the southwest tower service entrance. Given elevation changes within and around the house, this remains the most practical location for such access;

however, it is possible that visitors could be routed into the East Loggia (on the water side) with additional ramps within. The existing stairlift wraps around and climbs several stairs to connect the exterior ground level to the first floor of the house and the large outer terraces that surround it. This lift has been rebuilt and replaced in recent years, but it is prone to outages. A ramp or a platform lift that only travels vertically between the ground level and the main house and terraces would be more durable. While either of these would require significant reconfiguration of historic fabric, we consider this to be the highest priority, requiring architectural work and a cost estimate.

- **Access to the Second Floor of the Main House:** Vizcaya was built with two elevators, neither of which is ADA-compliant, and so the second floor of the house (composed mostly of bedrooms) is not accessible to visitors using wheelchairs. The two existing elevator shafts are too small to accommodate ADA-compliant elevators, and the reconstruction of these shafts, if possible, would be very destructive to the historic building. Vizcaya offers visitors an accessible virtual tour of the second floor.

Visitor Access to the Gardens and Grounds

Projects Completed or Underway:

- **Access to the Central Gardens:** Visitors using wheelchairs may enter the central gardens by passing through an arch in the service area and traveling down a small stone ramp. The central gardens are mostly flat and many of its paths—which are delineated by historic architectural and horticultural features—provide ample space for visitors using wheelchairs. Vizcaya is in the process of performing some small projects to improve the transitions between soft and concrete surfaces at the base of the South Terrace near the entrance to the gardens. The paths in the central gardens are lined with “chirt,” a compactable material composed of three parts sand/cement screenings and one part pea rock. The chirt material is laid over a compacted base to a depth of 6” and is moistened and compacted to provide a firm and stable surface that drains well. Chirt has been determined by the United States Department of the Interior to be an accessible surface.
- **Access to the Café and Shop:** This semi-basement space on the north side of Vizcaya’s Main House was flooded during Hurricane Irma and renovations are substantially complete. A ramp and a new wheelchair lift will provide access to the Café and Shop once it reopens in early 2021.
- **Vizcaya Village:** The County’s ADA Office worked with Vizcaya staff to review plans for the first phase of renovations and all recommendations were incorporated, including those related to parking, paving, admissions and staff areas. This site plan of the Vizcaya Village is much simpler than that of the east property, with all of the buildings at more or less the same ground level.

Opportunities to Expand Access:

- **Access to the Lateral Gardens:** Three small gardens are located between the central gardens and the mangroves. The Fountain Garden, which is the most significant of these, is at the same level as and accessible from the central gardens. An old, but mostly non-historic concrete walkway connects it to the Theater Garden and Maze Garden. This walkway is uneven and does not provide adequate turning radius to accommodate visitors using a wheelchair. An architectural analysis is the next step to determine whether there is adequate space to create an evenly sloped, ADA-compliant path in these locations. Doing so would benefit all visitors to Vizcaya.
- **Access to the “Orchidarium:”** The orchid garden is accessible by a concrete walkway at ground level. However, the transition between this walkway and the chirt groundcover in the orchid garden is uneven. An architectural analysis is the next step to determine how much of the walkway should be replaced to improve Orchidarium access.
- **Access to the Waterfront:** There is an accessible, paved walkway leading to and running parallel with Biscayne Bay, enabling all visitors to enjoy the view of the Barge and other signature features.

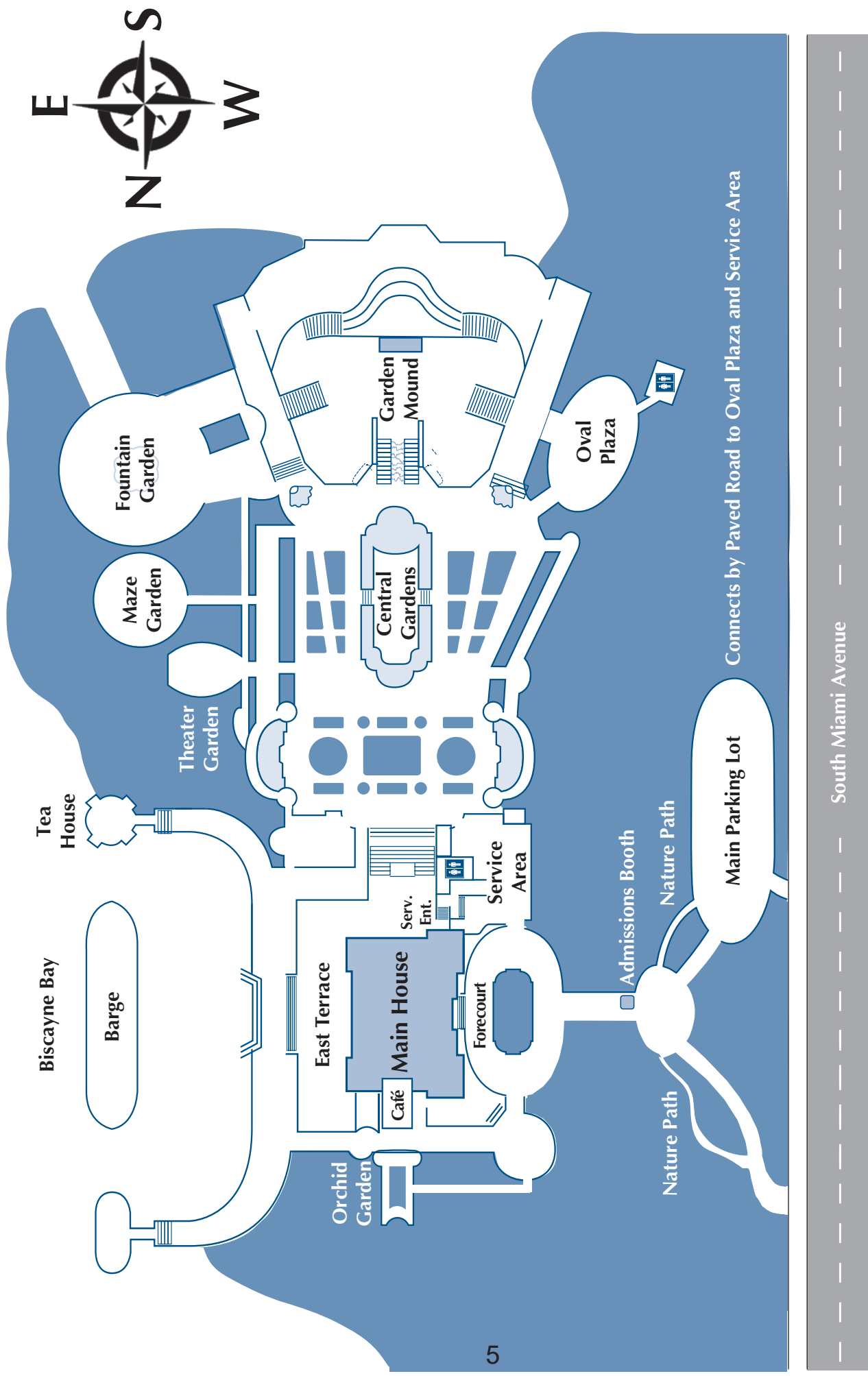
Over the years, improvements made to Vizcaya have advanced the accessibility of this historic property. The recommendations above outline additional work that can be done to continue to advance accessibility. The County and Vizcaya will work collaboratively to identify resources required for the design and implementation costs to review and update, as necessary, the assessment outlined above and to accomplish the following prioritized accessibility improvements:

1. Replacement of the main house stairlift with either a ramp or vertical platform lift.
2. Replacement of the nature trails leading to the admissions booth with elevated walkways.
3. Regrading of right side of the walkway from the admissions booth to the Forecourt.
4. Improvement of concrete paths leading to the lateral gardens and orchid garden.

In accordance with Ordinance No. 14-65, this memorandum will be placed on the next available Board meeting agenda. If additional information is needed, please contact Michael Spring, Director, Department of Cultural Affairs at 305-375-5049.

Attachment

c: Geri Bonzon-Keenan, Successor County Attorney
Michael Spring, Director, Department of Cultural Affairs
Tara Smith, Director, Internal Services Department
Heidi Johnson-Wright, ADA Coordination Director, Internal Services Department
Joel Hoffman, Executive Director, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens
Melissa Adames, Interim Director, Clerk of the Board
Adeyinka Majekodunmi, CPA, Commission Auditor
Eugene Love, Agenda Coordinator



Site Plan of Vizcaya's Main House and Gardens