

# Herald-Tribune

**OLD FLORIDA.**

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**DADE COUNTY PINE.**

**NO CARS.**

**RICH VEGETATION.**

**THAT'S**

**USEPPA**

**ISLAND!**



SCAN FOR  
THE LATEST  
LOCAL NEWS



USEPPA  
ISLAND

## 'REBUILD AND



New owners spending \$35 million on repairs, improvements

J. Kyle Foster Fort Myers News-Press & Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

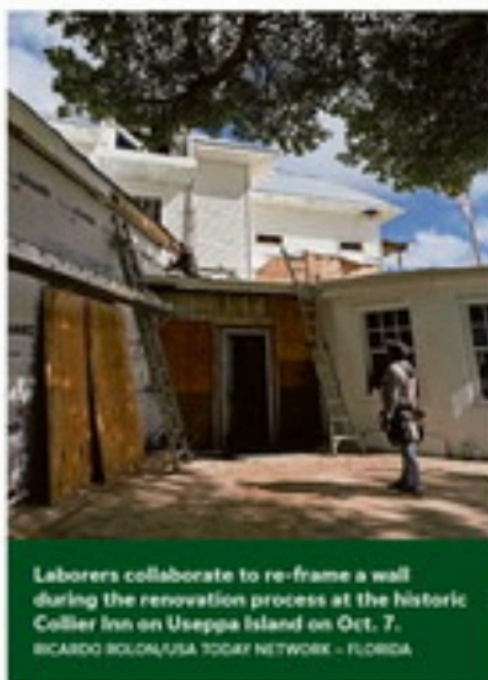
Old Florida. Dade County pine. Quiet and peaceful. Old oaks and rich vegetation. No roads. No cars. That's Useppa Island.

Useppa Island also is multi-million-dollar homes – all white with tin roofs; an exclusive society of members; a 100-acre playground for the wealthy who want their privacy.

And Useppa Island is rich in history – from the Calusa Indians to pirates and explorers, fishermen looking for – and finding – giant tarpon – to visits from captains of industry – the Vanderbilts, the Rothchilds, the Rockefellers, John Roach and Barron Collier, both of whom once owned the island at one point. Useppa also was where CIA agents took over in the spring of 1960, and used it as secret training camp for the invasion of Fidel Castro's Cuba – the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Located in the northern end of Pine Island Sound between Fort Myers in Lee County and Sarasota in Sarasota County, Useppa is special, its homeowners say, and they want to preserve it.

The News-Press/Naples Daily



Laborers collaborate to re-frame a wall during the renovation process at the historic Collier Inn on Useppa Island on Oct. 7.  
RICARDO RODRIGUEZ/USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

News took a tour Oct. 7 with Useppa Island Partners LLC Chief Executive Officer Steve Mezynieski and Chairman Simon Bound. The company, made up of a group of 10 homeowners, bought the island in September for \$16 million. Now, they say, they'll invest \$35 million to restore the infrastructure and make upgrades.

#### A barrier island's battle and beauty: Useppa's new owners rebuild with reverence

"It's really a unique and a very beautiful island. There are not very many places like this left," said Mezynieski.

At 53, Mezynieski not only owns a home on Useppa and is head of the group that bought the island, he also is overseeing the construction on the island. It's his career; Mezynieski owns Southampton Excavation, a site development company based in Southampton, N.Y. – a prominent part of The Hamptons, which is another popular destination for the wealthy and elite.



# RECOVERY MODE'

**"The true island life isn't for everybody, but the novelty appeals to everyone."**

**Rogan White**  
Membership director and only the second broker of record for Useppa



Scan to see aerial video of Useppa Island

"It really fits in with that," said Merzynski.

Merzynski and wife Gretchen bought a 1987-built home on Useppa in 2015, for them and their three children. It faces the beach and has an extended dock and boat lift. As Merzynski drove a golf cart around, massive oak trees and thick flowering vegetation were in view, despite the destruction from two hurricanes just a year ago. Homes range from new-construction mansions to 100-plus-year-old refurbished fishing cottages that were never shacks by any means.

Bound, 63, and his wife, Maggie, bought one of those original cottages about 12 years ago, though Bound had been visiting the island for decades. The home is mostly original, though it did have to be reconstructed after the two hurricanes — Helene and Milton — that hit in 2024 and pushed in 8 feet of water from a storm surge.

Simon was a Clearance Diving Officer in the Royal Navy and specialized in deactivating underwater mines and conducting high-risk salvage operations. He later served in British Intelligence before transitioning to the private sector, where he later retired as Morgan Stanley's global director of research. Simon and Maggie Bound have seven children and call Greenwich, Conn., home.

Their Useppa home sits on the island's famous "pink path" and overlooks the beach with unobstructed views of the sound. Named Mondongo after a nearby island, the house looks handy and cozy. About 40% of the homes on Useppa got water in them during last year's storms.

**See USEPPA, Page 12A**



▲ This aerial view of Useppa Island was captured Oct. 7.



▲ Laborers collaborate to build a new dock and marina area.

◀ Steven Merzynski, right, chief executive of Useppa Island Partners Inc., and Simon Bound, chairman, pose for a portrait in front of the historic Collier Inn. PHOTOS BY RICARDO BOLON/ USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA



## "THERE ARE NOT VERY MANY PLACES LIKE THIS LEFT."

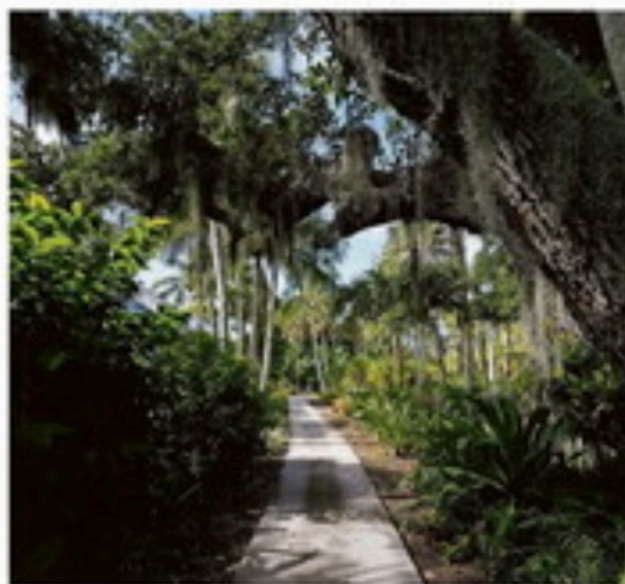
**Steve Mezynieski**  
Useppa Island Partners LLC  
Chief Executive Officer



Steven Mezynieski, left, chief executive of Useppa Island Partners Inc., and Simon Bound, chairman.

A view of one of the community paths.

PHOTOS BY RICARDO ROLON/USA TODAY NETWORK-FLORIDA



## Useppa

Continued from Page 11A

"It's love of the island," Bound said of deciding to rebuild and save the house. "If you're going to live on a barrier island, you're going to pay the price."

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a barrier island is "constantly changing deposit of sand that forms parallel to the coast."

Florida has 4,510 islands that are ten acres or larger, which is the second-highest number of islands of any U.S. state. This does not include the smaller islands and keys that make up the state's many coastal and inland areas.

See USEPPA, Page 14A

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Laborers build a new dock and marina area.

## Useppa

Continued from Page 12A

### Useppa's modern history

"We're still in rebuild and recovery mode," Mezynieski said as he drives by the graveyard of golf carts, the marina being completely rebuilt and the Collier Inn that has been gutted.

Useppa has suffered from the strong hurricanes that hit Southwest Florida, including a direct hit from Hurricane Charley in 2004, and more recently, damage from Hurricane Ian in 2022 and Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024.

For the first time in almost 50 years, the island has a new owner and a new vision.

"The last major repairs were in 1976, except after Charley," Mezynieski said.



**Aerial views of construction on Useppa Island.** PHOTOS BY RICARDO ROLON/USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA





Laborers re-frame a wall during the renovation process at the historic Collier Inn on Useppa Island on Oct. 7. RICARDO ROLON/USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

# Useppa

Continued from Page 14A

In 1976, Gar Beckstead bought the island, paying \$2.2 million for it. In about 2025, he transferred ownership to a trust. Beckstead died Feb. 16, 2021, at the age of 82. His son, Donald, was managing the island and sold it to the homeowners group this year.

Garfield "Gar" Beckstead transformed Useppa Island into both a modern resort and a haven for preserving its history as a long-ago enclave for Native Americans, who lived there going back 10,000 years. He reopened the private club, renovated the historic buildings, established the strict architectural standards for new homes that are still in place today and supported archaeological research on the island.

Various developers purchased Useppa Island after Barron Collier from 1911 to his death in 1939, though the island was closed during World War II. Collier, for whom Collier County is named, developed the county and helped build Tamiami Trail between Miami and Tampa. He turned Useppa "into a classic turn-of-the-century getaway for many industry giants, political bigwigs, and even Hollywood celebrities who escaped to Useppa for tranquility, elegant accommodations, first-class cuisine, and unsurpassed tropical beauty" — that's how Useppa Island describes itself.

After Collier, William Snow bought Useppa in 1962; Jimmy Turner in 1968; Mariner Properties in 1973; and then Beckstead in 1976.

Electricity came to the island in 1981. Today, Useppa also has a sewer treatment plant, a water treatment plant and a Lee County fire department.

"So, we have our own little municipality," Mezynieski said.

Off the grid, but not without all the amenities. There's a fitness center, a pool with its own fun story — built in Georgia and brought to Useppa by barge, the barge sunk in the sound, Mezynieski said. It took millions of dollars and some hefty fines to pull the barge and the pool from the sound. There's a helicopter pad and a welcoming marina with a bar and 50 boat slips. The bar is being rebuilt. Destroyed by last year's hurricanes, it's under construction.

Everything from the marina to the pool to the Inn to the pink path is getting an upgrade to return the island to its former splendor.

## What's next?

Rebranded with the addition of marina to the name, the Useppa Club & Marina plans to make the island even more exclusive with its pricing.

"The real estate market has been fairly dead, but the island was totally falling apart," Bound said. There also was a class action lawsuit that was filed by the HOA in 2013. It was dismissed as part of Useppa Island Partners' purchase.

An empty lot on Useppa currently is priced at \$450,000. "Give it a year, it will double," Mezynieski said.

Useppa will continue to be a "quaint little fishing village," the men say. It's part of why the homeowners got serious

See USEPPA, Page 16A



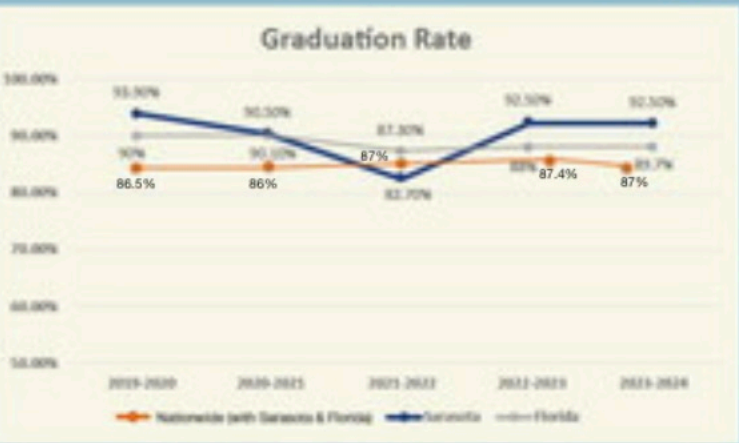
Useppa Island Partners LLC paid \$16 million for assets of the barrier island, which include the Collier Inn, the marinas, the utilities and all common land. This home, one of the original cottages on Useppa, is owned by Chairman Simon Bound and wife, Maggie. J. KYLE FOSTER/FORT MYERS NEWS-PRESS AND NAPLES DAILY NEWS

# RISE ABOVE!

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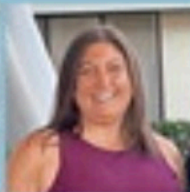
\*Source: Niche (Ranking Florida's 67 Public School Districts)



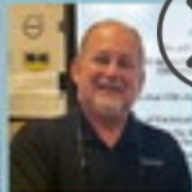
Ronique Majors, Emma E. Booker Elementary School 2024 Sarasota County Elementary School Teacher of the Year



Andy Harshman, Sarasota High School 2025 Sarasota County High School Teacher of the Year



Kelly Rozelle, Venice High School 2023 Sarasota County High School Teacher of the Year 2023 Florida Teacher of the Year Finalist



Mark Mullen, Suncoast Technical College 2024 Sarasota County Schools Innovation Teacher of the Year





# Useppa

Continued from Page 15A

about buying the island, because last year there was a deal that fell through for someone to buy the island who wanted to turn it into a spa.

In five years, "it will be one of the most desirable places for people to come in Southwest Florida," Bound said, but "the place can never be overdeveloped."

It can, however, be redeveloped, which is what is happening.

The Collier Inn with its seven rooms will keep its Dade Pine floors and whatever antiques can be salvaged. It again will have two restaurants and two bars and plans are for a world-class chef. The croquet lawn is getting new sod and so is the giant chess lawn. With its incredible views of palm trees, crashing waves and the sound, Useppa has the first wedding under new ownership booked for April, Mezynieski said.

Homeowners have agreed to a doubling of their fees – currently \$200 a month – and assessments, which are \$800 a month. Social members also will see their monthly \$200 fees at least doubled, Bound said. Social members need references from two existing members to be considered.

A house will cost more too – likely with a rising real estate market – but also with higher initiation fees. Now \$10,000, those are likely to at least double, Bound said.

That's pretty good news for Rogan White, who is charged with selling Useppa. He is the membership director and only the second broker of record for the island.

Since taking on the tasks in 2016, White has sold the same properties up to three times and has sold "hundreds of millions of dollars" worth of properties on Useppa, he said.

White has his own history with Useppa, going there regularly with his now famous father, Randy Wayne White, former newsman and best-selling author of the Doc Ford book series. He also would go alone when he was old enough to take the family boat or buy one of his own.

"I spent a lot of time spearfishing those docks," he said while driving two journalists through Pine Island Sound in his 1989 Mako, a classic fishing boat with



Laborers re-frame a wall during the renovation process at the historic Collier Inn on Useppa Island on Oct. 7.

beautifully kept teak throughout.

White remembers one of the homeowners, Jenny, plays prominently in his childhood adventures. "When I was about 8 years old, she would let us borrow her golf cart" and drive around the island. It was a thrill, he said.

He talks about sharing his experiences and the joy of this special environment with his two sons, with whom he lives with his wife on Pine Island, in a home his parents used to rent and later purchased. Talking about the people who visit Useppa, he said, "they are down here for a reason and it's to experience this."

But, he said, "the true island life isn't for everybody, but the novelty appeals to everyone."

The logistics of getting to the island, of having to take a boat and then drive to get to a grocery store. Useppa is for people who really want that privacy and off-the-grid kind of lifestyle that also is exclusive and with million-dollar views.

Getting to Useppa only happens by boat – whether private or the ferry located at the Bocilla Marina owned by Useppa Island Properties – or by helicopter.

Elite Jets, which resides at Naples Airport, has a web page dedicated to getting people to Useppa via its luxury Bell 407 helicopter. Elite Jets is a member of Useppa Island Club & Marina. "You can take advantage of our membership. Charter our helicopter for a quiet, romantic dinner, a relaxing holiday, or a fun-filled weekend getaway for yourself, or your loved ones."

How much does it cost? That depends. The company says they don't advertise a set price but customize experiences depending on what the client wants.

There are 110 homes on the island with room for 160 "homes and kitchens," Mezynieski said. About half of the homes are duplexes and the other half are single-family homes.

Though about 100 or so people visit Useppa during tourist season (November to April/May), Useppa also offers social memberships for non-owners. There are about 600 social members, Bound said. A social membership allows boaters to visit, have lunch, enjoy the is-



Laborers build a new dock and marina area on Useppa Island on Oct. 7.

PHOTOS BY RICARDO ROLON/USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

land, rent a room at the inn. Social members need references to be considered.

An exclusive island such as Useppa is sure to attract stars. And so Useppa has. One noteworthy person was Martha Stewart, who built a lifestyle empire as an expert of domestic life and whose net worth is estimated to be \$400 million. She once filmed an episode of Martha Stewart Living on Useppa.

"It looks like a sleepy New England village that grew tired of gloomy skies and relocated to the tropics," she wrote in her magazine, "Martha Stewart Living."

Talking about her television show in a 2009 blog post, Useppa was worth mentioning as "the time we had decided to shoot a segment on a beautiful island off the coast of Florida, called Useppa. We FedExed more than 100 giant boxes full of props for the shoot. What we didn't realize is that there were no cars on Useppa. Nearly everything had to be carried by hand. By the time we were done, all of us were referring to Useppa as Uschleppa."

That of course is not the name Bound and Mezynieski hope sticks. Few people are schlepping except those who want to. With money, there is always someone to pay to help.

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