

A long way from a trailer

At left, visitors peruse brochures and other information in the new visitor center.

Below, Chamber Executive Director Ginna Thomas Drake is all smiles at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.



Chamber visitor center opens

Florida Keys News Service

KEY LARGO — More than 12 years ago Key Largo Chamber of Commerce President Ginna Thomas Drake promoted her Florida Keys region and 69 members from a 126-square-foot trailer with the aid of a manual typewriter, quirky copy machine and a broken air conditioner.

Although the chamber had relocated and upgraded its office quarters several times since the mid 1980s, Sunday, Dec. 8, marked a milestone for Drake and more than 400 members with the grand opening of the 4,000-square-foot, \$500,000 Key Largo Chamber of Commerce Florida Keys Visitor Center at mile marker 106 bayside.

Designed with a Victorian-like motif and set along U.S. Highway 1, the two-story pale yellow wooden structure with cupola and front porch offers display space, brochures and personnel ready to serve visitors daily 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.. Information at the Visitor Center is available on accommodations, attractions, restaurants and excursions from Key

Largo to Key West and the Florida Everglades. For last-minute arrangements, hotel and activity reservations may be accomplished from the center.

Native landscaping, with placards identifying trees and plants, grace the grounds of the center with a special "restroom" area for pets. Drake says the center even provides water for its four-legged guests and biscuits for dogs.

"We've come a long way since the days when I was lucky to have even a brochure for a visitor," Drake recalled. "We have a very active business community that cares about Key Largo and has put much value and emphasis on what the chamber can do."

The 18,000-square-foot property for the center was donated by Key Largo hotelier Stuart Marr. Design was accomplished by local architect Robert Barnes and the structure was built by Cary Construction.

The chamber may be contacted by dialing toll-free in the United States, 1-800-822-1088 or check out their web page at <http://www.floridokeys.org/>.

