



LONGBOAT KEY

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Bay Program takes on comprehensive review of Sarasota Bay health

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Projects for restoration include local and federally funded projects with the expectation of lessening future water pollution.

by: **Lauren Tronstad** | Staff Writer

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to the region and the value of keeping it clean and healthy.

- There are nearly 8,000 registered boats in Manatee and Sarasota counties
- More than 20,000 jobs are directly connected to bay-related activities;





- In 2021, over just over 3 million people [visited Sarasota County](#) with about \$3.6 billion estimated for total economic impact. Manatee County recorded just under 1 million visitors in 2021 and estimated the economic impact at about \$1.3 billion for the year.

With an eye toward protecting one of the region's most valuable resources, the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program is embarking on a yearslong project to help coordinate local, state and federal efforts to measure pollution and its effects on the bay, define goals and advocate for improvement in the quality of the water.

It's a role the state or federal government could have undertaken, but the Estuary Program recently received permission from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to undertake it instead.

[PREV ARTICLE](#) : got decades of smart people with lots of experience here,” organization president Dave Tomasko said of the decision. “Let’s let them guide the ship.”

The overall health of the bay, including water quality and loss of seagrass meadows, have made restoration efforts necessary in hopes of preventing conditions from worsening. Close to \$1 billion in projects paid for by local, state and federal sources is expected to be spent by the time the Sarasota Bay restoration process is complete, though the exact timeline of the work is harder to pin down, authorities say.

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a “reasonable assurance plan” that aims to set a baseline on what pollutants exist in the bay waters now, their effects on water quality and what might be needed to return water quality to a level seen around 2006-2012, when seagrasses last flourished.





and Longboat Key. The total expenditure is expected to reach about \$900 million.

Among the projects that would be considered to be improvements to Sarasota Bay waters and added to the total:

- By 2024, Longboat Key is expected to launch a project that will culminate with a second, parallel sewer line from the island to a mainland treatment plant. That's expected to cost about \$24 million.
- In Sarasota County, the Bee Ridge Wastewater Treatment Plan is getting an upgrade. In October, [county leaders approved a budget amendment](#) for the project bringing its total to over \$280 million. The United States Environmental Protection Agency awarded an additional \$105 million, bringing the total to over \$385 million.

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Red tide

“Humans don’t cause red tide, but we can cause them to be worse,” Tomasko said.

The existence of red tides is never going to end as red tides are known to have existed before the presence of humans in the area.

The plans for bay restoration, specifically reducing nitrogen loads in the water, are expected to not only benefit the health of the bay when red tide is not present, but also when it is present as it will keep it from worsening.

Recently, multiple red tide advisories have gone into effect for southern Sarasota beaches. Reports of red tide began Oct. 19.

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Why restore the bay





management priority water body” per the state of Florida. Both designations require the estuary program to maintain records of water quality and health of the system, including plans for restoration if one or both need improvement.

The approved approach presented to FDEP is as follows:

- A report card of the bay’s ecosystem health will be used to set targets;
- A reference period of 2006 to 2012 can be used as the goal based on findings. Seagrass coverage increased by 28% during the period.

The reference period of 2006 to 2012 was selected based on items included in the bay’s report card, which include water chemistry, seagrass and macroalgae.

The timeline for the goals to be reached is unknown and dependent on a



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of factors. The water quality could recover quickly due to the bay being categorized as a well-flushed system since water is exchanged by 80% in as little as 10 days.

However, seagrass meadows are one of the goals that will likely take a longer time to be reached. About 2,000 acres of seagrass have been lost largely in part to the 2018 red tide, so getting the water quality back to improved levels is crucial in the meadow-restoration process.

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and shrimp spend up to 70% of their life cycle in a seagrass meadow. The meadows also help stabilize sediment, aid in water quality and act as a food source for manatees and sea turtles.





consultants have developed an excellent pollutant loading model for our bay,” he wrote.

The program is what Tomasko said is moving from good intentions to actual steps toward restoration.

“This will be helpful for the vast majority of days during the majority of years,” he wrote. “Very importantly, it will be helpful when we have red tide brought onto our shores, and if we are so unfortunate as to have a more direct impact from a tropical storm or hurricane.”

Data shows that despite population growth and impacts from Piney Point, 2021 had the best water quality across the bay in the last five to 15 years.



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l, Sarasota County had [an estimated population](#) of 447,057 people, which equals a 17.7% growth from the estimated population in 2010 of 379,942. In Manatee County, [the population in 2010](#) was about 323,442 and grew about 27.6% to 412,703 people in 2021.

The improvement in water quality amidst the change in population illustrates that changes are already being made in terms of the care and protection of Sarasota Bay, which makes Tomasko and the program hopeful that in time the area can begin to serve others as a role model for caring for and protecting

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Funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law signed into law by President Joe Biden on Nov. 15, 2021 will provide the program and projects outside of the RAP \$900,000 per year over five years, totaling about \$4.5 million.





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Lauren Tronstad is the Longboat Key news reporter for the Observer. She graduated from the University of Missouri in 2021. Before moving to Florida, she worked for the Columbia Daily Tribune.



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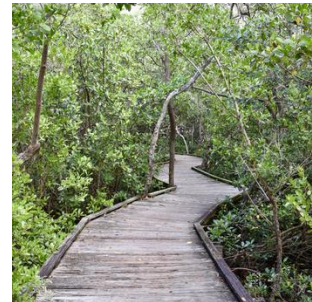


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When bacteria levels reach unsafe levels, beach advisories go up. But that bacteria can be indicative of several situations.





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