

ENVIRONMENT

Sarasota County again considers opening Midnight Pass amid new local push



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For over two decades, the Sarasota community wrestled with the idea of re-opening Midnight Pass, a channel that once separated Casey Key from Siesta Key.

The pass was closed by two homeowners in 1983, and a group of fisherman and boaters called the Midnight Pass Society spent years advocating for it to be restored.

The issue was seemingly put to rest in 2008 and '09, when the Florida Department of Environmental Protection denied the county's application to re-open the pass and the county withdrew its application.

But it's back.

A new organization, called the Midnight Pass Society II, is pushing for the pass to be restored. Sarasota County's commissioners and state legislators have supported the idea, and the county is looking into how it could be implemented.

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County staff estimate that it would cost about \$84 million to open the pass, according to an October 2022 report. That includes the costs of construction, environmental protection measures and keeping the pass clear over nine years.

Members of the Midnight Pass Society II say the plan would improve the water quality of Little Sarasota Bay, where some have observed mats of blue-green algae floating in the water.

But some local residents and environmentalists oppose the idea, arguing that state regulators won't permit the plan and that it would be a waste of taxpayers' money.

History repeats itself

In 1983, the County Commission allowed two Siesta Key residents – famed artist Syd Solomon and his neighbor, Pasco Carter Jr. – to fill in Midnight Pass and build a new inlet farther south. The pass had moved over time and was threatening to pull Solomon's and Carter's homes into the gulf.

The new pass they built to the south quickly filled in, and several attempts to dredge a replacement failed. Carter soon died, and his widow and Solomon settled for \$15,000 each to relieve themselves of the commitment to keep the pass open.

In the early 1980's, the Midnight Pass Society formed to advocate for the reopening of the inlet. The group and their supporters brought attention to the cause through a variety of techniques, distributing bumper stickers and having a flotilla of nearly 150 boats sail from the Midnight Pass location to downtown Sarasota.

In 1991, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection rejected Sarasota County's pass reopening plan. The agency did so again in 2008.

New pass reopening effort

The nonprofit Midnight Pass Society II, which was incorporated in 2021 but has roots in a Facebook group dating back to 2013, is leading a renewed push to restore the pass. The society's board includes longtime Sarasota County residents, Realtors and business owners. Michael Evanoff, the nonprofit's president, runs the Evie's restaurant group, which has two locations on Little Sarasota Bay.

The Facebook group founded in 2013 now has over 5,400 members, and many have expressed support for the plan.

Scott Lewis, one of the founders of the Midnight Pass Society II, grew up on Little Sarasota Bay in the '60's and '70's. He said the water was “as clear as a bell” during an incoming tide,

and crustaceans like fiddler crabs and shrimp were plentiful in the bay.

While Little Sarasota Bay had more gamefish before the pass closed, it's now a nursery for juvenile fish.

The Midnight Pass Society II hired a consultant to create a conceptual drawing of a new pass. The society's idea is to create channels north and south of Midnight Pass that would feed into the inlet.

Examining the science

Dave Tomasko, the director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary program, said there are benefits to reestablishing a lost tidal connection, which is when two bodies of water that are influenced by the tides are able to interact directly.

It would help with an issue known as salinity stratification, according to Tomasko. Sometimes when the Sarasota area experiences heavy rain, a layer of freshwater forms on top of the saltwater of Little Sarasota Bay. The water on the bottom of the bay is deprived of enough oxygen from the atmosphere – a phenomenon called bottom-water hypoxia, which can kill small creatures including worms and starfish.

Tomasko said this problem can't be solved through wastewater and stormwater upgrades. A connection between the bay and the gulf, however, could allow the freshwater to mix more thoroughly with the saltwater.

Red tide in Sarasota: Buchanan leads roundtable on red tide to address water quality concerns

More on the environment: Sarasota Bay has been losing seagrass. What are local governments and citizens doing about it?

Reestablishing a tidal connection would make it easier for red tide to enter Little Sarasota Bay, though, Tomasko said. He noted that the area had less red tide during the outbreak of 2018 than other parts of Sarasota Bay.

Tomasko said Sarasota County has several options. One would be to do nothing. Another would be to create a wild pass, which is what the county pursued in the 2000's. A third

option would be to put in a jetty, but that would affect the distribution of sand in the surrounding areas.

A fourth option would be to install culverts, large concrete pipes that would allow water to circulate between the bay and the gulf. Tomasko noted that culverts been used for similar purposes in the Florida Keys.

Jamie Miller, the Midnight Pass Society II's registered lobbyist, said engineering studies will show what needs to be done to keep the tidal connection stable in the long term. He said the society feels the scenario mostly likely to be successful would be to open the pass and have two channels flow into it.

Lawmakers are onboard

Spencer Anderson, the county's public works director, said the County Commission has asked his department to look into what could be done to create a new tidal connection between the gulf and bay. The county has submitted a \$1 million appropriations request to the state, which, if it makes it into the state budget, would pay for some of the design and permitting of this connection.

Anderson asked the commissioners at a meeting last month if they wanted the connection to be a navigable inlet or a culvert system, but they decided to hold off on making that decision until after they hear a presentation from Tomasko in April.

"The issue here is clearly the health and water quality of Little Sarasota Bay – whether that means it's navigable for boat traffic or not," Commissioner Joe Neunder said. "I think a tidal flush is a much more palatable and perhaps easier route to be permitted through our state processes."

Commissioner Mark Smith said that "if we can get that area of the bay healthy through piping," he'd entertain that idea.

"My gut feeling is it's going to take more than some pipes in the ground that are going to have to be maintained," he said. "If we could find a way to get a balanced pass that was stable, that wouldn't need constant maintenance or dredging, that would be my ideal situation."

Opposition to the plan

The local environmental group ManaSota-88 opposes re-opening Midnight Pass, as it did during previous attempts to do so.

“It would be a complete waste of time and taxpayer money for Sarasota County to try to obtain permits that are not obtainable,” said Glenn Compton, the chairman of ManaSota-88. “Sarasota County has a 0% chance of getting the permits that are needed to dredge open Midnight Pass.”

He noted that the DEP has twice denied the county’s application to dredge the pass. Asked about putting culverts in Midnight Pass, he said it could lead to erosion in the area south of the pipes. He also wonders if the culvert system would stay open without continuous maintenance.

Henry Grant, a retired resident who lives near Little Sarasota Bay, noted that barrier islands provide the mainland with protection during storms. He wonders how opening the pass would affect the amount of water that inundates his neighborhood during a storm surge.

Grant would rather have Sarasota County spend the money on efforts that he says would serve more people, like affordable housing. He contends that the pass would only benefit the boaters who use it.

Ryan Christine, a member of the Midnight Pass Society II’s board, said it hasn’t been determined yet whether the channel will be navigable by boat. He considers navigability a “byproduct” of restoring the pass and says it isn’t one of the main reasons the society is pushing this cause.

“We’d be completely happy if we could just walk through it or swim through it, let alone navigate something through it,” he said.

His fellow board member, Lewis, called this effort “a legacy project.”

“It’s not actually for us,” he said. “It’s for the children. It’s for the kids of everybody here ... and for their children. If we can get that pass open, at least they’ll know what clean water is.”