

# Herald-Tribune

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SARASOTA

## Sarasota County leaders learn about science of Midnight Pass as they pursue reopening it



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A local estuary expert told Sarasota County commissioners on Tuesday that restoring a tidal connection between Little Sarasota Bay and the Gulf of Mexico would improve the bay's water quality. It would, though, likely lead to more red tide in the bay, he added.

Dave Tomasko, the executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, spoke to the County Commission as it considers how to create a new connection between the gulf and the bay.

A channel called Midnight Pass once separated Siesta Key from Casey Key, but it was closed by homeowners in 1983. A new group called the Midnight Pass Society II is pushing for the pass to be restored, renewing a movement that lasted for decades.

**Previous coverage:** Sarasota County again considers opening Midnight Pass amid new local push

**Other news:** Update: police arrest 2 teens who crashed into shed after reckless driving

In his presentation, Tomasko described the pros and cons of re-creating a tidal connection and described similar projects he has worked on.

### The effect of closing Midnight Pass

In 1983, contractors working for two Siesta Key homeowners – famed artist Syd Solomon and his neighbor, Pasco Carter Jr. – filled in the pass because their homes were being

threatened by erosion. They tried several times to dredge a new pass, but it filled in each time.

Tomasko presented data from a 1992 paper showing that there was much less water circulation in Little Sarasota Bay after Midnight Pass was closed than before. However, the circulation in Roberts Bay improved after the pass closed.

Tomasko said Little Sarasota Bay experiences a phenomenon known as salinity stratification. Sometimes when the Sarasota area experiences heavy rain, a layer of freshwater forms on top of the saltwater of the bay. The water on the bottom doesn't get enough oxygen from the atmosphere – a phenomenon called bottom-water hypoxia, which can kill small creatures, including worms and starfish.

He said that this issue can be fixed through a tidal restoration project. He noted, though, that such a project would likely allow more red tide to get into Little Sarasota Bay.

“So if you reestablish that connection, be careful what you ask for, because you're more likely to get red tide advected into Little Sarasota Bay,” he said.

## **Examples of restoring a tidal connection**

Tomasko said that the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program won't tell them what to do when it comes to Midnight Pass, but it will provide the commissioners with support. He presented several options for how to reestablish a tidal connection between the gulf and bay.

One would be to create a wild pass, which is what existed previously. Another option would be to build a jetty. And a third option would be to install culverts, large concrete structures that would allow water to circulate between the two water bodies.

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

Tomasko has over 30 years of experience in water quality assessments and the development of natural resource plans in the Gulf of Mexico and internationally, according to his estuary program biography. He told the commission about tidal restoration projects he has worked on during his career.

One was reestablishing a tidal connection to a part of Old Tampa Bay that was experiencing reduced tidal flushing. Construction crews replaced a section of the Courtney Campbell Causeway with a bridge.

Another example was a project that installed culverts in Fort De Soto Park in Pinellas County.

## **Commissioners comment on the project**

After Tomasko spoke, Commissioner Joe Neunder said Sarasota County needs to “follow the science” and rely on experts to give them direction. He is hoping that the county will receive funding from the state to help with planning.

“This iteration needs to be slow, well-thought out,” he said. “I believe we should measure twice and cut once.”

Commissioner Mark Smith also noted that he is “totally on board with following the science.” He added that he’d like the connection between the gulf and the bay to be sustainable and not require a lot of maintenance.