



Burning Question

Should We Restore Midnight Pass?

Dr. Dave Tomasko of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program highlighted the pros and cons of restoring Midnight Pass to the Sarasota County commission this week.

By [Isaac Eger](#) April 12, 2023

Not for the first time, Sarasota County is considering a plan to reopen Midnight Pass, thanks to a push from a new group called the [Midnight Pass Society II](#). The closure of the pass, which was bulldozed in 1984, prevents tidal flows between the Gulf of Mexico and Little Sarasota Bay. Some want the pass reopened to its “natural” state, while others believe reopening it would be an unnecessary waste of time and money.

But it isn't as simple as a yes-or-no vote. Reestablishing the pass into Little Sarasota Bay will require significant planning—not to mention convincing regulatory agencies and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to hand over both permits and an enormous amount of money.

On Tuesday, Sarasota County commissioners listened to a presentation by Dr. Dave Tomasko, executive director of the [Sarasota Bay Estuary Program](#), which strives to improve the health of Sarasota Bay, regarding the pros and cons of reopening Midnight Pass.

Tomasko began his presentation by clarifying his organization's role regarding the Midnight Pass question. “We are not a regulatory agency,” he said. “We're not going to sign or deny a permit.” The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program is also not a significant funding source, he said.

“Whoever signs this permit is going to have to be responsible for the design, the permitting, the construction and all the permit obligations, which are going to be decades into the future,” Tomasko said.

He continued that he was there to be an “honest broker of information.” “This presentation is going to have parts that are going to irritate one half of the audience,” Tomasko said. “And then it's going to shift and irritate the other half of the audience because that's just the way it is.”



Sarasota Bay Estuary Program director Dave Tomasko began his presentation by showing an open and closed Midnight Pass.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF SUNCOAST AERIALS

The Cons of Reopening Midnight Pass

The presentation began with the information that might irritate those who are in favor of reopening Midnight Pass, which was closed by bulldozers in 1984 to protect private property from erosion. Tomasko showed two contrasting aerial photos of the pass from 1970 and 2022.

“The 2022 photo been interpreted by some as the ‘murky waters of Little Sarasota Bay,’ but as a marine biologist who used to be a commercial fisherman, what I see there is a lot of mangroves and a lot of seagrass,” Tomasko said.

Little Sarasota Bay is healthier than it was five years ago—with the exception of [the effects of Hurricane Ian](#)—but not than it was 15 years ago, Tomasko says. However, it's a system that has healthy habitats in it. There are [mangrove forests](#) and hundreds of acres of seagrass, for example, that have to be considered should the board decide to move forward with the project. Seagrass provides essential food, shelter and nursery areas to countless species of marine life, including [manatees](#).

“If you decide you're just going to put a channel right through the middle and not care about seagrass and mangroves, there's going to be a lot of pushback from a lot of people,” Tomasko said.

Then there's the fish. Little Sarasota Bay is second only to Palma Sola Bay in regards to the number of fish living in the water. “There's probably more than 10 million fish in Little Sarasota Bay,” Tomasko said. “But they're small.” Little Sarasota Bay is an important nursery, and without the little fish, there won't be big ones.

Passes naturally open, close and migrate over time. One hundred years ago, there were two passes into Little Sarasota Bay. Most passes are closed by storms, but because Midnight Pass was closed by human hands, it makes the situation a little different.

The Pros of Reopening Midnight Pass

The case for reopening Midnight Pass focuses on the issue of water quality. According to studies done by the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, Little Sarasota Bay suffers from salinity stratification and bottom water hypoxia. That is the result of large amounts of fresh water making its way into the bay and sitting on top of the denser salt water. The tannin-colored freshwater then blocks the sun from reaching the bottom of the bay and less oxygen is produced, creating hypoxic conditions that kill bottom-dwelling marine life.

“If you’re a starfish, if you’re a clam, if you’re a worm and you don’t have oxygen for two weeks, you’re not going to make it. This happens only in Little Sarasota Bay,” Tomasko said.

And those problems aren’t things we can fix with wastewater or stormwater upgrades. Only tidal restoration will do. Tomasko believes that could be a strong case to obtain the permits to reopen the pass.

If the board chooses to move forward, Tomasko said, it will have to decide between a handful of different options. The first is a wild pass. That means digging out a channel in the barrier. However, the thing about a wild pass is that it will naturally move—Midnight Pass, for example, used to be as far north as Point of Rocks. Clam Pass, in Collier County, created a wild pass that has to be dredged more than once a year to maintain it. “It’s not going to stay the way you dug it,” Tomasko said.

A jetty is another option, but that can significantly impact the shoreline by affecting sea turtle nesting and making permitting more difficult. A culvert—that is, a large concrete structure—is another option that can move tidal water from one side to the other.

And while Tomasko abstained from recommending whether or not to open the pass, he was clear in his opinion on consultants. “It is not going to be easy to get these permits,” he warned. “I spent half my career in the private sector. Someone who says it’s easy, or ‘I’m confident I can get permits’—you might want to run away.”

“We definitely need to follow the science and rely on the experts,” Commissioner Joe Neunder said after Tomasko’s presentation ended. “It needs to be slow and thought-out. Measure twice and cut once.”

Commissioner Mark Smith said if the board decides to restore the pass, he would like to see it done as sustainably as possible, with little maintenance required from the county.

The most interesting question asked by the board was from Commissioner Ron Cutsinger. “If a pass has been closed that long, does it matter? Do 40 years take it out of its historical designation?” he said.

Tomasko replied that because the closure of Midnight Pass is an artificial impediment and was done using bulldozers, there’s a chance Sarasota County could get a permit to reopen it. (If the pass was closed “naturally,” by a storm, that would be an entirely different conversation.)

But he also confirmed that if the board opts to reopen the pass, there will be consequences. “If you have a red tide out in the Gulf of Mexico, you are more likely to get red tide in Little Sarasota Bay,” he said. The barrier and low salinity of Little Sarasota Bay has protected it from harmful red tide blooms compared to surrounding bodies of water.

“Reopening that pass will get us better water quality,” Tomasko said. “But you’re going to get more red tide than you’re used to.”

“If we learned anything today,” Cutsinger concluded, “it’s that we’ve got a long road ahead of us.”

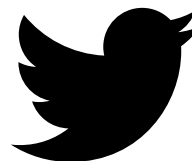
Filed under

[Sarasota County Commission](#), [Sarasota Bay](#), [Environment](#), [Dredge](#)

Share



Share on Facebook



Share on Twitter



Share on LinkedIn



Share on Pinterest



Share via Email



Share on Reddit

Show Comments

Sarasota

1255 N. Gulfstream Avenue, Suite 101, Sarasota, FL 34236

Phone: (941) 487-1100



CHANNELS | [Eat & Drink](#) [Entertainment](#) [Fashion & Shopping](#) [Home & Real Estate](#) [News & Profiles](#) [News & City Life](#) [Health & Fitness](#) [Best of Sarasota](#)

ABOUT US | [Masthead](#) [Advertise](#) [Jobs](#) [Internships](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Contact Us](#)

SUBSCRIPTIONS | [Subscribe](#) [Renew Subscription](#) [Change Address](#) [Subscriber FAQ](#) [Purchase Back Issues](#) [Newsletters](#)

OTHER SAGACITY MEDIA | [Portland Monthly](#) [Seattle Met](#) [Houstonia](#) [Aspen Sojourner](#) [Vail-Beaver Creek Magazine](#) [Park City Magazine](#)

SAGACITY MEDIA

© 2023 SagaCity Media