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April 28, 2023

County leaders receive the Little Sarasota Bay lowdown

Author: **John Morton**

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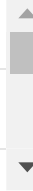
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By John Morton

Some perspective, some advice, some optimism, some words of both wisdom and warning. The presentation delivered by David Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, to the Sarasota Board of County Commissioners on April 11 ran the gamut. That makes sense, considering the prospect of restoring Midnight Pass has many moving parts and is as complex as it is controversial. While Tomasko emphasized that he would not be telling the board what to do – “We don’t have a dog in this fight,” he said of his program – he was indeed invited to speak in hopes of being a resource for the county as it works toward a decision on whether to open the pass. A group called Midnight Pass Society II has emerged, lawmakers in the area have pledged their support, and the Florida Legislature has been asked to contribute \$1 million toward design and permitting for whatever method, if any, is chosen. Midnight Pass is the natural waterway that connected the Gulf of Mexico to Little Sarasota Bay, running between Siesta Key and Casey Key, was closed about 40 years ago by bulldozers – with county approval — when two homeowners feared their houses were in danger due to the shifting pass. Their subsequent

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However, he shared some history of how passes naturally move, and how there even used to be one to the north near the Point of Rocks.

“A wild pass is not going to necessarily stay the way you dug it. It will move,” Tomasko said, noting that several of which he knows have required additional dredging. “Look at the history.”

He also warned against using a jetty on each side of the pass, similar of what was done at the Venice Inlet, showing aerial pictures of how the beach thins out to the south of the jetty because southbound sand flow is blocked.

As for the use of a pipe or pipes, which has been under consideration by the commissioners, Tomasko agreed that maintenance issues would be likely.

What he did recommend was the creation of a culvert – a permanent reinforced tunnel often seen under roadways. He said they are commonly used in the Florida Keys for similar circumstances and one project he worked on personally that involved a culvert to create water flow at Fort De Soto Park in Pinellas

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boaters in the Intracoastal Waterway must travel to either Big Pass to the north or the Venice Inlet to the south to reach the Gulf. About 14 miles separate the two.

Siesta Key CONDO Monthly Update 1/15 to 2/15

Summary: we are in season and people are going to contract. **Pendings** doubled from 19 to 43 but actives decreased by 1 to 95 so if more actives don't come on, the supply will get tight quickly. Speaking of supply, one fifth of actives have 1 bedroom and one fifth have 3 or more, both numbers higher than the actual market. Price drops are inching up slowly from 40% to 45% of listings, no surprise there. Sales were 24, 2 more than the previous month but 11 were in the new **TEN35** complex on the gulf where **Crescent Towers** once stood. The decrease is most likely a result of the limited activity during the holidays. Here are the numbers:

ACTIVE LISTINGS: 95 actives vs 96 last month. 31 are new listings. 44 are priced under 800k, 19 from 800 to 1.2mil and 32 over 1.2 mil. 17 have 1 bdrm, 59 have 2 bdrms and 19 have 3+.

DAYS ON MARKET: 50% have been on for less than 2 months, while 20% more than 5.

PRICE DROPS: increased to 43 from 40 the month before accounting for just over 45% of all actives. 10 have had 2 drops and 13 three or more.

PENDINGS: 43 vs 19 the previous month. 11 went pending within a week of being listed, that's one out of 10, down from a year ago but still respectable.

SOLDS: 24 vs 22 in the previous month but 11 of those were in TEN35. 18 were in 2 wk or less rental complexes. 7 sold for under 800k, 2 for 800 to 1.2k and 15 over 1.2m of which 11 were in TEN35.

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"The bay is not dead."

Tomasko emphasized those words several times during his presentation.

"Don't say it, because it's not true. The most important thing you have is your credibility," he said.

Tomasko noted that an abundance of mangroves and seagrass remains present. He said the bay also holds one of the area's largest juvenile fish populations, serving as a nursery.

"If you talk about the bay as some toilet needing to be flushed, you'll lose a lot of friends," Tomasko said, stressing that the current habitat will have people looking to protect it. "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."

In fact, opening the pass would likely increase the bay's chances of being impacted by the red tide living in the Gulf, Tomasko said. "Little Sarasota Bay had a lower level than most in 2018," he added.

The biggest culprit today that is hurting the bay, Tomasko continued, is the influx of nitrogen – a common result of wastewater overflows and stormwater runoff. He said the water quality in Little Sarasota Bay was much worse five years ago, but improvements in water treatment infrastructure went a long way.

"You've spent millions on this, and it's working," he told the commissioners.

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from the problem, but the small ones can't. "If you live on the bottom, you're going to die," he said. He added that complaints by fishermen that the bay no longer has large fish is misleading. "If people want to catch big fish, they need to care about little fish, first," he said.

Tomasko also told commissioners that the pursuit of permits is tricky, with many agencies often involved. He also reminded the board that an attempt for a permit to open the pass 15 years ago was denied by the state's Department of Environmental Protection.

He encouraged the board to not fall for contractors who claim they will have no trouble getting a permit. "I spent half my career in the private sector," he said. "Someone who says it's easy, or 'I'm confident I can get permits' – you might want to run away."

Instead, Tomasko encouraged the board to rely on experts and research. Then, meet with permitting people up front before money is spent.

"Let the science tell you the problem that needs to be fixed," he said. Then, a case can better be made to proceed.

In closing, board chairman Ron Cutsinger asked Tomasko if there's a chance that too much time had passed in this case.

"If a pass has been closed that long, does it matter? Does it take it out of its historical designation?" he asked.

Tomasko said the unique circumstances surrounding the pass – specifically that its closing was the result of mankind – should help.

"It's not a dealbreaker. It was an artificial impediment, it was closed with a bulldozer, I've seen the pictures. That's an important point – there was never a permit granted to close it, just to move it. They did not meet their permit obligation."

Said Cutsinger, "If we've learned anything today, it's that we've got a long road ahead of us."

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Author: [John Morton](#)

Tags: **Dr. David Tomasko, Little Sarasota Bay, Midnight Pass, Ron Cutsinger, Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, Sarasota Board of County Commissioners**

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By John Morton

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