

SARASOTA

Florida Legislature OKs \$1 million in funding for Sarasota County's Midnight Pass project



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A proposal to reestablish a tidal connection between Siesta Key and Casey Key made it into the state's 2023-24 budget approved by the Florida Legislature earlier this month.

The budget includes a \$1 million allocation for the project's design and permitting.

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

Sarasota County commissioners support the group's goal, and the county submitted a request for funding to the Legislature.

Previous coverage: What to know about the new effort to open Midnight Pass in Sarasota County

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

The \$1 million allocation is awaiting the approval of Gov. Ron DeSantis, as he hasn't yet signed the state's budget. DeSantis can remove local projects like the Midnight Pass one from the budget through a line-item veto.

Many local residents have expressed support for re-opening the pass. Some residents and environmentalists oppose the idea, though, arguing that state regulators won't permit the plan and that it would be a waste of taxpayers' money.

More about the funding

Sarasota County plans to use the allocation for the engineering, environmental design and permitting of a tidal connection between the Gulf of Mexico and Little Sarasota Bay, according to the request form that the county submitted to the Florida Senate. The county's public works director said in March that the \$1 million is expected to cover a large portion of the design and permitting effort.

“A new connection between the Gulf of Mexico and Little Sarasota Bay is expected to improve water quality, increase economic and tourism activity in this part of Sarasota County with increased boating, related retail/commercial activities and property values,” the funding request form reads.

Dave Tomasko, the executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, told county commissioners in April about several options for reestablishing the connection. One would be to construct a new pass. Another would be to build a jetty. And a third would be to install culverts, large concrete structures that would allow water to circulate between the two water bodies.

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

Midnight Pass proponents' reaction

“We're very happy that we have unanimous support from our legislative delegation and that both the House and Senate notices the importance of water quality in Sarasota County and how important it is to the entire state,” said Jamie Miller, the Midnight Pass Society II's lobbyist.

Miller said the group is confident that DeSantis will see this matter the same way and will follow the Legislature's wishes.

“I think it's a tremendous step forward,” said Scott Lewis, the society's co-founder, about the fact that the funding was included in the state budget.

Members of the society say that restoring a tidal connection between the gulf and Little Sarasota Bay would improve the water quality of the bay. Tomasko has said this as well, but he has also noted that it would likely lead to more red tide in the bay.

Lewis said he hopes that Sarasota County, as it works on the project, will consult with some of the people who grew up on Little Sarasota Bay when Midnight Pass was open, because they have expertise to share.