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ENVIRONMENT

Leaders of Sarasota's Midnight Pass movement consider other options after DeSantis veto



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The leaders of the “Restore Midnight Pass” movement are continuing to pursue their goal of reestablishing a tidal connection between Little Sarasota Bay and the Gulf of Mexico after a recent setback.

Last month, Gov. Ron DeSantis vetoed a \$1 million allocation for the project’s design and permitting that lawmakers had included in the state budget.

Mike Evanoff, the president of the Midnight Pass Society II, said at Thursday’s Sarasota Tiger Bay Club meeting that the society hopes that Sarasota County will use some of its federal hurricane recovery grant to start the permitting process for the project. The county is expected to receive a \$201.5 million grant from the federal government to help with the ongoing recovery from Hurricane Ian and preparation for future storms.

The county has been developing a draft plan for the federal money, which will be released to the public on July 26. Local residents will then have until Aug. 25 to provide feedback on the plan.

Evanoff told the Herald-Tribune that the Midnight Pass Society II hasn’t yet talked with the county about the idea of using some of the resiliency grant funding on the Midnight Pass permitting process, but they plan to.

The pass, which once separated Casey Key from Siesta Key, was closed by some homeowners in 1983. The Midnight Pass Society II is advocating for it to be restored, renewing a movement that lasted for decades. Sarasota County is considering how to reestablish a tidal connection.

Dave Tomasko, the executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, has presented four options for what the county could do about Midnight Pass. One would be to do nothing. Another would be to create a wild pass, which is what existed previously. A third option would be to build a jetty. And a fourth option would be to install culverts, large concrete structures that would allow water to circulate between the two water bodies.

Tomasko, Evanoff and Michael Holderness, another member of Midnight Pass Society II, participated in a panel discussion on the issue at the Tiger Bay meeting. Glenn Compton, chairman of environmental group ManaSota-88, and Jono Miller, the former director of the New College of Florida's environmental studies program, were also part of the panel.

The Midnight Pass Society II has proposed that a new pass be made and that a north channel and a south channel flow into it, which they believe would help keep the pass open. They feel that restoring the pass would improve the water quality of Little Sarasota Bay.

Tomasko told the Tiger Bay audience that Hurricane Ian caused a layer of freshwater to form on top of saltwater in Little Sarasota Bay. This led to a lack of oxygen on the bottom of the bay – a phenomenon called bottom-water hypoxia, which can kill small fish and other creatures. Tomasko has argued that this issue can be fixed through a tidal restoration project.

However, reestablishing a tidal connection would make Little Sarasota Bay more susceptible to red tide, he said.

Miller said that one day in March, when Sarasota was experiencing elevated levels of red tide, he and his wife walked down Turtle Beach and saw “plenty of dead fish” there. They also walked over to Little Sarasota Bay, where there weren't any dead fish and some fish were jumping in the water.

Compton's organization, ManaSota-88, is opposed to the idea of dredging a new pass. He said Sarasota County's previous attempts to dredge one weren't approved by regulators, and he thinks the county won't be able to get a permit this time, either.

Tomasko has worked on tidal restoration projects in other parts of Florida and the U.S.

“Re-establishing a lost, historic tidal connection isn't that controversial,” he said. “It shouldn't be. It's how you do it.”