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August 1, 2023

## Potential new funding source emerges as panel addresses ongoing Midnight Pass debate

Author: **Jane Barnett**

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**By Jane Barnett**

The fate of Midnight Pass, the once natural passageway that allowed water to flow into Little Sarasota Bay from the Gulf of Mexico before it was filled with sand some 40 years ago, continues to be one of Siesta Key's most prominent topics.

In April, Sarasota County commissioners heard a presentation on restoring the pass to its original state. On July 20, a packed house of members and guests of the Sarasota Tiger Bay Club heard a panel of environmental experts and Siesta Key advocates speak on the topic. The luncheon presentation, held in the ballroom of Michael's on East, was filled with local business and civic leaders along with concerned Sarasota and Siesta Key residents. The panel included Siesta Key resident Mike Evanoff, president of the Midnight Pass Society II; Mike Holderness, coastal activist and Siesta Key business owner; Glenn Compton, chairman of ManaSota-88 and a former supervisor of the Sarasota Soil & Water Conservation District; Jono Miller, former director of the New College Environmental Studies Program and a member of the Midnight Pass Blue Ribbon Task Force; and David Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

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Siesta Key businessman Mike Holderness speaks at the Tiger Bay Club event. Siesta Key resident Mike Evanoff is to his left. (photo by Jane Barnett)

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is the importance of money.

Thaxton reported that one possible source of funding may be available through a new federal grant. Later this year, Sarasota County will be the recipient of \$201.535 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The funds will be awarded as part of its Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery Program to assist with Hurricane Ian recovery and mitigation efforts.

Sarasota County is one of only four in Florida to directly receive these funds.

The award, Thaxton said, led to Sarasota County's creation of the Resilient SRQ program. Restoration of infrastructure and mitigation are among the categories included in the projects that fall under the guidelines.

"If the county could make the case that opening a pass would improve the community's resilience, rather than increase its vulnerability, to future storm events it could qualify for the minimum 15% mitigation allocation," Thaxton said.

In June, Sarasota County invited community members to participate in the Resilient SRQ survey. It was open to the public from June 2 through June 28. The county also held three public meetings held during this time.

Another public comment period that began July 26 will run through Aug. 25. Comments can be made by emailing ResilientSRQComments@scgov.net.

On Aug. 9, an opportunity for in-person feedback is planned at the Robert L. Anderson Administration Center, 4000 S. Tamiami Trail in Venice.

During the next several months, the county will review information gathered from surveys, public meetings as well as data from federal, state, and local sources and then develop an action plan outlining the use of CDBG-DR funds. It will detail projects and programs to best meet the county's identified unmet needs. Prior to taking receipt of the funds, the county's plan will require approval from the Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Evanoff has high hopes for these federal funds. "We were denied \$1 million in state funds," he said, referring to Gov. Ron DeSantis' decision in June to cut the money previously allocated by the Florida Legislature. "Now we are working with county commissioners on issues related to Hurricane Ian to put money into restoring Midnight Pass. Our goal is to restore the pass to its original state."

Should funding become available, Evanoff said his group would wait for the scientists to determine the best course of action regarding Midnight Pass. If restoring it is indeed the plan, among the ideas for doing so include dredging, creation of a culvert, or installation of a pipe.

Holderness, a vocal supporter of restoration efforts, urged action. "Let the engineers look at it," he said. "We need restoration and money shouldn't be an issue. If we put money into restoring Midnight Pass,

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Tomasko, an expert in water quality assessment and the development of science-based natural resource plans in the Gulf of Mexico and international locations, spoke about Hurricane Ian's impact on Midnight Pass and Little Sarasota's Bay.

"The water quality was improving in Little Sarasota Bay until Hurricane Ian," he said. "The lack of a tidal connection created a situation where rainwater sat on top of the salt water. The big fish were able to swim away but the lack of oxygen killed small fish, including starfish and other small creatures."

But Tomasko urged caution in moving ahead with opening the pass.

"There are pluses and minuses involved, including an increase in red tide if the pass is opened," he said.

"Decisions made today will impact the region for decades to come."

He urged the audience to look beyond the region and Florida, explaining that there are many places around the world that have faced similar issues.

As the election season looms ahead, the conversation on what to do about Midnight Pass and how to fund the studies, plans and actions that will determine its fate show no sign of fading away. Strong interest among residents of Siesta Key, the environmental community, those in the legislature and all of Florida indicate that the future of Midnight Pass will be a vital issue for years to come.

Several elected officials have voiced support, including U.S. Rep. Greg Steube and state Sen. Joe Gruters, who was in attendance at the Tiger Bay event. Sarasota County commissioners have also gone on the record in favor of improving water quality in Little Sarasota Bay, with Midnight Pass a focal point.

"It's worth a shot," said Mark Smith, District 2 commissioner, regarding the potential of asking for Resilient SRQ funds.



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How Midnight Pass looks today. (submitted photo)



Author: [Jane Barnett](#)

Tags: **David Tomasko, Jon Thaxton, Midnight Pass Society II, Mike Evanoff, Mike Holderness, Resilient SRQ, Tiger Bay Club**

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**Incorporation on hold**



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Super sunset



## eNews Weekly

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July 29, 2023

**Comments on Resilient SRQ program being sought**

July 29, 2023

**Walkway, sidewalk at bridge over Midnight Pass Road to be closed for repairs**

July 26, 2023

**Fire reported on Sandy Cove Road**

July 18, 2023

**HGTV features Siesta Key houses in contest**

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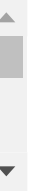
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By John Martin

Siesta Sand August 2023

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## Trending



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172 views | by [John Morton](#) | posted on August 1, 2023



### Smoking ban to begin Oct. 1

131 views | by [ChrisAnn Allen](#) | posted on August 1, 2023



### Bobby Schneck Promo



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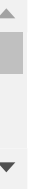
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