

Midnight Pass may open again

Work could begin -- if the money and permits allow it

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For 25 frustrating years, "Open Midnight Pass" has been a passionate slogan of boaters and residents and a top political issue, yet nothing happened.

On Wednesday, though, members of this patient group were pinching themselves as they realized their long effort might actually be nearing success.

In a Sarasota County Commission chamber crowded with Midnight Pass lovers, county officials said they are hoping to begin work on environmental restoration of Little Sarasota Bay next spring and the dredging of Midnight Pass that winter. The pass, closed since

December 1983, could be open to boaters in less than two years.

"This has been a long time coming," said Siesta Key resident Bob Waechter, chairman of the Midnight Pass Society.

For the first time, the county has produced a "clear blueprint" to win state and federal permits and to detail the full cost of the project, he said.

Permits and dollars are going to be big hurdles, though.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has never granted a permit under its rules to reopen a pass, said Karyn Erickson, the county's engineering consultant on the project.

"It will set precedent," Erickson said, and that is one of the reasons this final round of the permitting process has taken three years.

This time last year, county commissioners were on the verge of giving up on seeking the state permit.

While county officials still are not predicting success, they see a path to it.

"It's just that we know a lot better how it could happen," County Commissioner Nora Patterson said.

If the state permit is granted, the county's schedule calls for getting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit next spring. Construction would be determined by turtle nesting season, which would limit work along the Gulf of Mexico to November through May, said Spencer Anderson, the county's manager of the Midnight Pass project.

To avoid nesting season, the work in Little Sarasota Bay on the environmental mitigation projects would start next spring and then work on the dredging would start on the Gulf the following winter.

Except for areas in the bay with restoration projects, the channel and much of the bay would be immediately open to boaters.

Another big expense is ensuring that beaches to the south and north of the re-cut channel are not harmed. Sand from the dredging operation will be used to replenish those beaches, or stored along Jim Neville Marine Preserve for future projects.

Even if approved, county officials are not sure where they will find the \$14.7 million to pay for the project in what they say will be a cash-strapped budget next year.

That is about \$4 million higher than last year's estimate, mainly because the state is asking for a much bigger environmental mitigation plan than the county had proposed.

The biggest change was that the state rejected the county's mitigation plan, which involved restoring mangroves and seagrass elsewhere to make up for vegetation that will be destroyed if the 3,000-foot-long channel is dredged.

The county had argued that opening the channel would clear up Little Sarasota Bay's murky water, enabling sunlight to get to more than 500 acres of underwater sand and spur the growth of seagrass.

While that likely will happen, the state wanted a more concrete plan, Anderson said. The new mitigation plan calls for creating lagoons on the Neville preserve, planting mangroves, filling in seven acres of the old Gulf Intracoastal Waterway to restore seagrass and turning the old Mote Marine site into a tidal flat and mangrove habitat.

The pass, which had once divided Siesta and Casey keys, was bulldozed closed in December 1983, spurring a 25-year-old effort by supporters to reopen it.

Another open-the-pass advocate, Tom Nay, says he used to fish, boat and swim in the pass before it closed and considered it one of the most beautiful places anywhere.

"It's a great day," Nay said. "I'm just thrilled to see that the pass is looking very positive for an opening.

"We've all been waiting very long for this to occur."