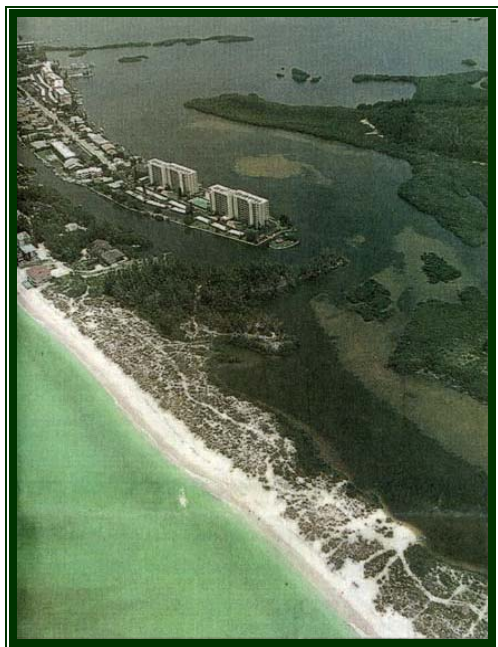


Watershed Moment

A coastal engineer who successfully relocated an inlet in North Carolina readies her proposal to restore the much-contested passage to Little Sarasota Bay.

WRIGHTVILLE BEACH, NC – To look at Mason Inlet is to look at the possible future of Midnight Pass in Sarasota. Like Midnight Pass, Mason Inlet began migrating in the late 1970's and eventually started to undermine a building, the 169-unit Shell Island Resort. And as with Midnight Pass, there were concerns about the environmental implications of relocating the Inlet, Marshes and intertidal habitat would be destroyed. Bird nesting areas would be disrupted.

But there were two choices; Move the inlet or lose the building. Mason Inlet had migrated next to the condo, and water ripped out of the Intracoastal Waterway into the Atlantic Ocean through a channel 17 feet deep. A corner of the building began to crumble.



“At one point, we were living from hour to hour”, said Carol D. Glachetti, manager of the homeowners association. “It was pretty scary.”

In 1998, a divided New Hanover County Commission decided on an ambitious plan to move the inlet 3,500 feet north. Coastal engineer Karyn Erickson of Gainesville was hired to design the project.

Three years and \$8.2 million later, a new Mason Inlet opened and the old one was closed.

Today the inlet is stable despite a lack of hardening along the sides, and has survived severe weather, including hurricanes.

Erickson's work at Mason Inlet caught the attention of Sarasota County commissioners, who for decades have debated that once cut between Siesta and Casey Keys.

Not surprisingly, she has proposed a similar plan for Midnight Pass. She estimated it would cost \$3.8 million to dredge a new Midnight Pass, and up to \$11.3 million more to maintain it for 30 years.

The Mason Inlet project came in nearly \$3 million over budget and took years instead of the promised months. But those involved in the relocation speak highly of Erickson's work.

“We couldn't have asked for a better design,” said Dave Weaver, New Hanover County assistant manager. “For a project of this magnitude it went without a hitch. It's just beautiful.”

Sarasota County Commissioner Jon Thaxton said Erickson's study may be the catalyst for Midnight Pass to be reopened – or for the idea to be abandoned forever.

“I don't think that is going to languish,” Thaxton said.

“Things that have been lingering for a decade or better have come to closure with this particular board.”

More than 20 years have passed since Sarasota's county commissioners allowed two Siesta Key homeowners to fill in Midnight Pass after it migrated north and threatened their homes. Now, four studies, dozens of meetings and thousands of petition signatures later, the issue of whether to reopen Midnight Pass finally may be decided.



A 20-year debate

Inlets, whether in North Carolina or in Southwest Florida, are by nature unstable. They open and close, deepen and widen, and move.

Between 1948 and 1957, Midnight Pass moved about 1,000 feet to the south, and from 1957 to 1971 edged northward about 520 feet.

In 1983, the silted-in inlet lapped at the foundations of Gulf-front homes owned by Siesta Key residents Syd Solomon and Pasco Carter Jr.

The men pleaded with local, state and federal officials to relocate the pass 1,000 feet to the south. The toughest hurdle proved to be the Sarasota County Commission. In October 1983, the commissioners allowed the homeowners to sandbag and fill in the inlet, and divert the water's flow, if the two homeowners pledged to keep a new inlet open for at least two years.

Closing the silted-in pass was easy. Relocating it, and keeping it open, was not.

After four tries – the new pass kept filling in with sand – the homeowners gave up.

Midnight Pass has been closed since. And whether to reopen it has become one of the most contentious and long-running issues the county has seen.

The tumult began almost immediately:

- The county filed a complaint with the State Attorney's Office to enforce civil penalties, including a \$500 per-day fine, against the homeowners for failing to keep the pass open.
- The composition of Little Sarasota Bay began to change. County scientists found a rapid decline in water quality, increased turbidity and reduced salinity.
- The county considered dredging, as well as alternatives to reopening the pass. Environmentalists and government regulators weighed in.
- Carter died in 1984. His widow and Solomon paid the county \$15,000 to relieve themselves of any responsibility for reopening the pass.
- The Midnight Pass Society, a group of fisherman and boaters who wanted the pass reopened, formed that same year. Passionate in its belief that Little Sarasota Bay would be healthier if the pass were open, the group and its supporters have resorted to all types of antics to bring attention to opening the pass.

Also in 1984, a frustrated Bob Meador took a shovel to the pass in an attempt to open it. He failed and nearly got arrested, but drew wide media attention. He became president of the Midnight Pass Society.

A year later, a flotilla of nearly 150 boats sailed from the site of Midnight Pass to the Marina Jack complex to downtown Sarasota to call for the opening of the waterway.

In 1987, "wanted" posters with mug shots of each county commissioner appeared on store windows in Siesta Key for "the murder of Sarasota Bay." Bob Waechter, current president of the Midnight Pass Society, took responsibility for the posters.

A bumper sticker still popular on cars in the county first showed up about that time: "Midnight Pass – Let It Flow."

The society filed a series of lawsuits against the county and state government but failed to get the pass opened.

One more study

Sarasota County has spent thousands on four studies about reopening the pass, including \$25,000 to Erickson for the latest one. The University of Florida graduate caught commissioners attention earlier this year when she described the Mason Inlet project at a meeting of coastal engineers.

Those studies have indicated that the modern-day tale of Midnight Pass may have begun when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged the Intracoastal Waterway in the early 1960's.

Soon afterward, the deepened parts of the bay lessened the tidal flow into the pass, and it filled with silt as it migrated north.

Erickson blames the movement of Mason Inlet and Midnight Pass on channel dredging behind the pass – Bank's Channel in North Carolina and the Intracoastal Waterway and other channels within Little Sarasota Bay.

While Mason Inlet was moved to protect a residential structure, Erickson gives two reasons for relocating the reopening Midnight Pass to restore the Little Sarasota Bay ecosystem and to prevent beach erosion along Siesta and Casey keys.

An open pass would improve flushing action in the bay, which in turn would restore seagrass beds and attract endangered species such as manatees and sea turtles, she said.

And non-hardened passes often can cause shoaling to the north and south, which would help build up neighboring beaches on Siesta and Casey keys. Both beaches have experienced increased erosion since Midnight Pass was closed.

Erickson's plan call for a 500-foot wide channel that would be 400 feet long and up to 14 feet deep. The pass would not be hardened – there would be no rocks or other shoreline stabilization along the edges.

Most of the 390,000 cubic yards of sand dredged to create the pass would be pumped onto the beaches of Siesta and Casey keys, which may mean a multimillion-dollar beach nourishment for the area could be put off.

The environmental component of the Mason Inlet was huge too.

One of the biggest concerns was on the potential loss of the intertidal habitat, or those small islands that go underwater during high tide. There, they provide a resting place for summer founder and feeding places for shorebirds.

Nearly two acres of marshes were destroyed as well, but Erickson designed a plan to rebuild them on a nearby island, similar to the mitigation planned for the loss of part of the Jim Neville preserve. Those marsh grasses now are flourishing near Mason Inlet.

There are also concerns that moving Mason Inlet to the north would mean the filled-in area would become a public playground, which would destroy potential nesting habitat.

Roughly \$6 million re-nourishment project slated for 2005, but the pass would lessen erosion along Casey Key in the future.

Federal agencies with a say in any plan to reopen Midnight Pass include the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

“Let’s find out if we can get it permitted,” he said. “If not, then we all stop. But I think we can.” Thaxton said it’s important for the public to understand that all the county can do is request a permit to do the project. The state would have to grant one this time.

Erickson said the delays and cost overruns on the Mason Inlet project mostly were because of indecision by some of the federal agencies overseeing the project, indecision created because moving an inlet is rare.

Still, Gregory R. Thompson, chief project engineer, for New Hanover County, highly recommended Erickson.

She’s a highly qualified competent engineer, who knows what she’s doing” he said. “As volatile and dynamic as this whole situation was, it’s worked out great.”