

County tackles Midnight Pass again

A coastal engineer says it will take two years and nearly \$4 million to open.

SARASOTA – Putting past failures aside, the County Commission voted Tuesday to move ahead with an ambitious plan to reopen Midnight Pass.

“The time is now to move forward with this,” Commissioner David Mills said. “It’s an issue that needs to be dealt with. It has to be done.”

In a 4-1 vote, the commission directed its staff to prepare the paperwork needed to win approval from state and federal environmental agencies.

The vote was greeted with wild cheers from supporters, some of whom have worked for two decades to reopen the inlet that once separated Casey and Siesta keys.

The \$3.8 million plan by coastal engineer Karyn Erickson calls for a 500-foot-wide channel that would be 400 feet long, up to 14 feet deep, and cut through the southern end of the Jim Neville Marine Preserve.

Erickson said if the plan is successful it would take about two years to acquire the permits, then up to two months to dig the new pass.

Commissioners plan to hire Erickson to oversee and implement the plan if it makes it through permitting.

“I don’t want to fail this time,” Commissioner Paul Mercier said. “We’ve failed before.”

Midnight Pass has been closed since 1983 when two south Siesta Key property owners were given permission to close the inlet, which was migrating underneath their homes, provided they reopen it 1,000 yards to the south.

They tried to reopen it five times, but gave up after it kept filling back in with sand. The pass has remained closed since, and whether – and how – to reopen it has been the catalyst for four studies, dozens of meetings and thousands of petition signatures.

Over the years, open-the-pass advocates, who packed the County Commission meeting room Tuesday, have said the Little Sarasota Bay ecosystem has suffered because of a lack of flushing action by Gulf waters.

Those opposed to reopening the pass have said the ecosystem in the bay is doing just fine as a fish nursery. They said the real goal of the open-the-pass advocates is to create a way to more quickly get their boats into the Gulf.

Erickson told commissioners how they could avoid a repeat of the board’s failed 1991 attempt to reopen the pass, when the Florida Department of Environmental Protection denied the county’s request because of environmental concerns.

She said it would take a strong plan with a unified voice from the community, assurance that Little Sarasota Bay would be a healthier environment for turtles, and sea grasses, and that water quality would improve.

What Erickson couldn’t nail down was who would pay \$3.8 million for the initial permitting and construction of the pass, then the up to \$11.3 million more to maintain it for the next 30 years.

Her best estimate was that Sarasota County taxpayers would be responsible for anywhere between 25 percent and 75 percent of the total costs depending on how much state and federal agencies offer to pay.

Permits and initial studies will cost about \$300,000. The commission said that money could come from a county fund with nearly \$1 million dedicated to helping pay for a new Midnight Pass.

Erickson said it was important to prove to regulators that Sarasota County has the money and know-how to keep the inlet in place for the next 30 years, which she said could be accomplished not with rocks along it’s edges but with regular dredging.

The fact that a new Midnight Pass would be kept in place by artificial means is what caused Commissioner Jon Thaxton to vote against the plan.

Thaxton cited a 1997 report that said any new inlet must be allowed to operate naturally, moving to the north or south as nature would have it, or shoaling in places.

Erickson is the successful architect of a similar pass reopening at Mason Inlet, N.C., where the waterway was migrating underneath a resort hotel and condominium complex.



County moves to reopen pass

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Bob Waechter, president of the Midnight Pass Society, a group formed in 1983 to reopen the pass, was all smiles Tuesday.

“I’m happy,” he said. “They did the right thing.”