

Opinion

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CORRECTIONS

Canal restoration time has come

Monroe County will soon be ready to embark on the next phase of a long-awaited canal restoration project that has been as long in coming as it is sorely needed. Residential canal water quality has been the subject of local, state and federal concern for more than two decades.

The reasons for that are many. When many of the residential canals were cut 40 or 50 years ago, the dredge from those canals was used to fill and create more land in many cases. But the state and feds put a stop to that.

When those same canals were dredged, many of them were cut to a depth several feet below the depth of the receiving waters. That caused flushing issues as the tides didn't adequately carry away the water in the canal and replace it with water from the receiving body.

When the feds put a stop to the dredging, many of the canals were left closed to open water with no flushing at all.

What most of those canals had in common was that residential units began to build up on their shores, with on-site wastewater systems, some of which were substandard after a decade or so, some of which were cesspits, and many of which were drained into pipes that ran waterside.

Because these islands were built up on porous rock, the wastewater eventually leached into the canals, causing a near-shore water quality problem.

County officials have tried a couple of times to get canal restoration projects off the ground, but the biggest stumbling block has always been the probable cost.

And although officials are still unsure how much this is going to cost, although most estimate it to be in the triple million digits, recent pressures from the state and feds have more or less forced the restoration project to get started.

Thus far, we have completed preliminary studies on how much residential canal exists in the Keys. And that number is extensive.

We have also completed a random sampling of residential canals to determine how widespread the problem may be here. Now, we will be undertaking studies to determine the breadth of the problem with water quality in residential canals.

And with that result, begin to formulate plans to mitigate water quality issues in residential canals.

How to attack those issues hasn't yet been determined, and how to pay for that mitigation is still a long way from decided. But at least we are started.

Some of the ways we may mitigate dirty canals is to install culverts to enhance water flow and open dead-end canals to join with adjoining canals that will theoretically enhance the tidal flushing action.

There are also suggestions to install weed gates and possibly aerators, the one to keep floatsam out of the canals where it eats oxygen, and the other to add oxygen to the canals where the extra oxygen will help clear the water.

Some of the mitigation may be as simple as dredging the canal to remove the junk that builds up on the bottom over time and robs the canal of oxygen, while some canals will have to be backfilled to decrease the depth and enhance tidal flow.

It won't be cheap, but the rewards will be immense. The first reward will be better near-shore water quality, a boon to the environment that is the primary reason many of us live here and a primary reason why many of our visitors come to spend time with us.

The second reward will be increased property values as potential buyers can look out over a blue canal in the back yard instead of a brackish, green or brown ugly looking surface.

The third reward we can think of is an immediate boost to the recreational opportunities of the local folks who live along the canals.

For far too long those who live along residential canals have avoided jumping into the canals behind their homes because the water is, quite frankly, scary.

Paying for the project will be a burden to someone, but we have seen that state and federal grant money is available, and we have hopes that BP oil spill money will be coming our way for just such types of projects, and we have 15 extra years of infrastructure sales tax money at a time when the economy is recovering. We can do this. Because we must.


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All Keys canals being surveyed for water quality

By KEVIN WADLOW

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By July, survey crews working for Monroe County will know something about every one of nearly 500 canals in the Florida Keys.

The third phase of an ongoing \$300,000 project calls for contractors to run bathymetric surveys -- measuring the depths of canal bottoms -- as part of a countywide canal restoration program to improve water quality.

"These waters have been identified as impaired waters that have to be cleaned up," Mayor George Neugent said at the Jan. 16 County Commission meeting.

As proposed, information gained from canal inspections could lead to five demonstration projects that test each of five systems to improve water quality in canals that feed into nearshore waters.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Protection funded the study phase, but the county may have to pay at least part of the cost of the demonstration projects, estimated at \$2.5 million to \$5 million.

"There are different types of fixes for different canals," said Rhonda Haag, county sustainability program manager.

The county will target canals that could be restored by projects testing:

- Using a weed-rack barrier to block floating seaweed.
- Installing an air-bubble curtain that would have a similar effect.
- Removing harmful sediment from a canal bottom.
- Pumping to improve water flow into and from canals.
- Backfilling canals that were dredged too deeply, often as a source for building fill.

"An awful lot were dug way too deep," Haag said, leading to the death of grasses and other desirable bottom-dwelling ecosystems.

"Up until this point, we have not gone out to stick things on the [canal] bottom and find out what's there," Haag said.

Since the "vast majority" of Keys canals are privately owned by landowners along the banks, County Commissioner Danny Kolhage wondered if that could slow the program. Neugent said even where the canal bottom is privately held, owners usually cannot prevent boats from navigating on state waters in canals.

If property owners along a canal with poor water quality want to help fund a pilot project to help qualify for matching funds, Haag said, "That could probably bump them to the top of the list."

Neighborhood or community associations interested in contributing toward pilot programs can send an e-mail to Haag-Rhonda@monroecounty-fl.gov.

Dredge proposal

The issue of dredging privately owned canals may reach the County Commission in a separate matter sometime this year.

An amendment to the county's land-use plan that would allow limited canal dredging under specific circumstances was endorsed by the Monroe County Planning Commission in November.

Owners of property on Walker's Island, east of Duck Key near mile marker 63, have submitted a plan to dredge an existing channel so it can accommodate larger boats at an eight-unit development project.

Existing local, state and federal laws effectively ban dredging, even for maintenance, in most Keys canals.

Backers of the proposal are working on a presentation to the County Commission but no date for the item has been scheduled, said Mayte Santamaria, assistant planning director.

Monroe County officials begin major canal cleanup in Florida Keys

By DAN MILLOTT

It will take millions of dollars and lots of time, but the initial phases of a program to cleanup canals in the Florida Keys has begun.

After years of development and human activity, 503 canals from Key West to Key Largo now suffer from varying degrees of pollution and require restoration.

Rhonda Haag, sustainability manager for Monroe County, said the county—now armed with a \$100,000 grant from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and a second \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency—has put the cleanup program in motion.

In Phase One, the county filtered through volumes of information on canal conditions along the 100-mile-plus chain of islands, prioritizing the canal work. They plan to tackle the worst sites first.

In September, the Monroe County Commission approved a contract with AMBC to begin Phase Two. The second grant will fund their work.

The two grants for the canal cleanup project represent only a small portion of the money that will eventually be needed for the cleanup. Haag said that it will ultimately require millions of dollars.

She said that additional DEP and EPA grants would likely be the main source of funding but property owners residing along canals may be asked to help financially.

During the September Monroe County Commission meeting, Commissioner Danny Kolhage suggested that people who caused the condition of the canals should help pay for their cleanup.

But newly elected Monroe County Mayor George Neugeant said most of the people who caused the problem are probably dead and gone by now.

Haag said the plan is to start with several demonstration projects in selected canals.

“There are several different methods for restoring canals, (including) removing muck from the bottom of the canal, employing an air bubbler system or using a weed gate method.”

The Phase Two contract runs until Sept. 30, 2013. County staff began meeting with AMBC in mid-December. Haag said that over the next few months they will nail down their ranking system for the canals.

Once that canal list is pared down, one canal will be selected as a demonstration project for each of three methods of cleanup.

“We will approach homeowners on the selected canals to see if we can get a cost match from them,” said Haag. “That would give the grant more bang for the buck and would provide for more restoration work than could be achieved by the grant alone.”

Haag indicated the September deadline is only a timeline for completion of the master plan for the canal cleanup program.

“We can look for canal cleanup projects before that if we see grant opportunities,” she said.

At this point, Monroe County has not made a decision on how much funding they will provide. Haag pointed out that canal cleanup will ultimately improve the water throughout the Keys so it is something that county leaders will have to consider.

The ranking of the canals will determine where the cleanup will begin. “Canals in the worst condition will go to the top of the list for restoration, then we’ll work our way down,” Haag said. “Cost matches and other factors, including grants, will determine which projects get funded first.”