

Myakka River Management Coordinating Council
Nokomis Community Park, 234 Nippino Trail, Nokomis, FL 34275
March 15, 2024
9:30 A. M. – 12:34 P.M.

MINUTES

The meeting began at 9:30 A. M. with Jono Miller presiding. This meeting was advertised in the Herald Tribune on March 1, 2024.

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Jono Miller – Sierra Club	Glenn Compton- Manasota 88
Steve Giguere- FDEP/MRSP	Robin San Vicente- NPFOWL
Rob Wright- Sarasota Audubon	Ryan Pieper- Charlotte County
Stefan Kalev- City of North Port	Ryan Ellis- FDOT
Sarina Weiss- CHNEP	Bruno Kapacinskas- SWFWMD
Randall Shotto- City of Sarasota	Ann Hardy- SCLWV
Steven Schaefer- Friends of Myakka River	Hugh Havlik- GCHSC
Jamie Richardson- FWC	Michael Choinard- Homeowner
Victor Dobrin- Homeowner	Charlie Hunsicker- Manatee County
Christina Rimes- City of Venice	Linda Wilson- ECOSWF
Juliette Jones- Friends of WMS	Chuck Johnston-O Bar O Ranch
Barbara Lockhart- ECNP	

INTERESTED PARTIES

Chris Oliver – FDEP/FPS	Nadine Hallenbeck – FDEP/FPS
Ray Westbrook-Homeowner	Debbie Musallam-Resident
Michelle Keirsey-FDEP	Linda Carroll-Homeowner
Tom Keith-Homeowner	Stacy Mazza-Gilkison-Friends of Myakka River
Miri Hardy-Friends of Myakka River	

- **Call to Order and Role Call.**
- **Approval of the Meeting Minutes from December 1, 2023.** Glenn Compton moved to approve the minutes and Rob Wright seconded. The spelling of Vern Buchanan’s name was corrected, and Miri Hardy was added to the interested parties section of the minutes.

Jono asked any non-Council members to introduce themselves.

Public Comments:

Ray Westbrook stated that, “SWFWMD sent another memo to FDOT regarding documentation of the water use permit for the dewatering of the massive borrow pit at River Road and East Venice Avenue. This has been going on for over two years. The number of dead trees has not grown as of late, possibly because of recent rains. There are over 300 dead trees in a horseshoe shape surrounding the pit. Water is being pumped out to the south; the water is seeping back in because it is all sand and those trees are green. There has been a significant death of very tall, mature trees in the area. They are working toward a resolution, but it is slow.”

Elections and New Membership

Victor Dobrin nominated Jono Miller to serve as Chair. Steve Giguere seconded. No other candidates were offered for Chair. Jono was voted Chair for another year.

Victor was asked if he was willing to serve again. He responded that he would. No other candidates for Vice Chair were made. Victor was voted Vice Chair for another year.

Chris gave an overview of the process for nominations for membership on the Council.

Juliette Jones nominated Debbie Musallam for membership. Debbie is a homeowner along the Myakka River. Robin San Vicente seconded. Jono also added that Debbie would be the first member of the Council who was a relative of a former member, Marlene Guffey. Debbie was voted in as a potential new member.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

Glenn moved adoption of the December Minutes with corrections. Rob seconded. Minutes were adopted.

Old Business

Jono updated the Council on the status of the motion to join the National Wild and Scenic River Partnership. At the last meeting, the Council voted to reach out to the representative, Greg Steube, who would be involved in any bill related to the partnership.

Jono presented slides of the history of the preservation of the river area noting that for a century and a half people have recognized the importance and uniqueness of the Myakka River. The first slide contained an engraving titled "Camp in Miakka Swamp from "Wild Life in Florida" by Trench Townshend, published in 1875. Jono gave additional history and highlighted that Myakka River State Park (MRSP) was created in 1934. And overtime grew to over 37,000 acres or about 58 square miles.

Jono continued that on December 16, 1975, the Sarasota County Commission recommended that Representative "Skip" Bafalis introduce legislation to add the Myakka River into the National Wild and Scenic River System. He did that in 1978. Reports were due in 1981. The National Park Service (NPS) produced a draft study, and that final study was published in July 1984. In that study the NPS determined that 37 miles of the Myakka River were eligible, and it was based on the unique, outstanding, remarkable characteristics of the river. The study recommended designation of the 12 miles within MRSP, but they suggested that eligible segments could be added as local and state initiatives provided more protection. It recommended that a commission, which is roughly equivalent to the Council, be created. The recommendation for only 12 miles was out of concern most the 37 eligible miles were not yet protected. There was no federally owned land, and the only public land was owned by the State which made up only 37% of the length of the study area.

In 1985, Senator Bob Johnson introduced legislation at the state level to make a state Wild and Scenic River, and he used some of the similar language, outstanding and remarkable ecological fish and wildlife, and recreational values. He wanted to include both Manatee and Charlotte County but ended up just covering the 34 miles in Sarasota. That legislation also created this Council, which has been meeting continuously for 39 years now.

Jono continued showing a slide of the Myakka Basin showing 52% of the land area within the watershed under protection. This is one of the highest figures in the state. It is a significant amount of protection far beyond what was protected in 1985.

Jono noted another concern in order to be wild and scenic, it should have been free flowing. Jono showed images of Upper Myakka Lake Weir and Downs' Dam, noting they were concerns. The weir was removed in 2022 but the Downs' Dam remains. This is less of a concern since the river now goes around the dam.

The federal ownership and management are not authorized, it is going to be locally managed and controlled by a local Council with broad representation. It would be some iteration or version of this Council. No federal

control, it is just local ordinances and the state, no authority for federal land use control. Jamie Doubek-Racine spoke at the last meeting about national recognition and prestige, but also up to about \$220,000 a year would become available to help manage the river. That could be used on staffing, outreach, stewardship, exotic control, maintenance, and monitoring. This would be a good infusion of money.

Jono made contact with Representative Steube's office. Hopefully Representative Steube would consider introducing legislation to make the river an active part of this partnership program.

Victor asked if sending a letter of support from the Council to Representative Steube's office would be helpful.

Jono suggested waiting to hear from the representative first to see if he was interested in doing this. He added that the county commission and municipalities would all have to be on board.

Rob Wright asked if there is any idea of how supportive he would be.

Jono replied no, we do not know. His senior aide has the information and will get back to the Council with any questions he has and then discuss it with Representative Steube.

Sarina added that the CHNEP brought this to their policy committee in January and they discussed it as well as the designation for the Peace River. They decided to continue the discussion at their meeting in April to allow more time to review the materials. Their concerns were mostly about the regulatory implications.

Jono added that there are two rivers that are being moved forward for consideration. One is the Myakka, and one is the Peace. The Myakka designation is entirely within one county, but the Peace would probably involve Charlotte, DeSoto, Hardee, and Polk. It is much more complicated. The Peace River is a major water supply river so that needs to be taken into consideration. The Myakka is not a potable water supply river.

Chris added that on the Peace there are some recreational activities that may not be compatible, like the fossiling activity and some other tour operators. There is not a huge amount of state ownership.

Jono mentioned that the Myakka is already a designated state Wild and Scenic River, unlike the Peace. The Council is hoping that the CHNEP can consider them separately.

Michelle Keirse added that she is assuming that there has been no study done for the Peace River.

Jono confirmed that there has not been a study.

Chair's Report (link to [chair's presentation](#))

Jono began the report with Sarasota County's Resilient SRQ Program which received \$201 million related to Hurricane Ian. Resilient SRQ had a draft report that did not really address some of the river issues. The county said they did not understand there was a levy at Vanderipe Slough, etc. Jono corresponded with them and tried to emphasize that there was real potential to help resolve issues such as the Hidden River subdivision.

Recently there was a meeting with USDA, FDEP, SWFWMD and Sarasota County about exploring a willing seller buyout program that would first involve a study. The idea is the dike would be removed and the homes closest to the river would be purchased from willing sellers. It could restore somewhere around 225 acres of floodplain, and then the land would be managed by MRSP. Hidden River is a unique community because there is more topography in this area than you are going to see elsewhere. They have a longleaf pine area, and it goes down into the historic floodplain.

This program from the NRCS, called the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP). This is not Sarasota County Resilient SRQ money. It is also referred to as the EWP Buyout option. It deals with the watershed emergency caused by a natural disaster. The request for assistance must be made within 60 days, but there are exceptions. It can be utilized to purchase floodplain residences because it would be the most cost-effective, environmentally preferable recovery measure. Consider the Tampa Bypass Canal. This was constructed to alleviate flooding in this section of Tampa, but when they went back and looked, it would have been cheaper to buy every home that had been flooded and create a park than to build this bypass canal.

The EWP requires a sponsor that is a unit of state or local government. The sponsor would purchase the property including homes and buildings. Restrictions would be placed to prevent future development, but it could be used for parks, wetland management, flood prevention, etc. The property would have to be from a voluntary seller. NRCS would reimburse up to 75% of the property purchased. The local government or whoever would have to fill in the rest. It would include demolishing buildings and relocating them, could also include structural and non-structural conservation practices.

Jono projected a map showing Triangle Ranch and nearby large wetland. The river's flow is confined through the bridge opening and then comes down and this is where the dike failed previously. What is going on is, if you think of this as the space from one dike to the other dike, we will call that one dike unit. By the time you get down here, it is twice as wide, and by the time you get down here, it is three and a half times as wide. When water comes under that bridge, this is where it is constrained, it is going to have the highest velocity and the most erosive power. Down here, the water can spread out through the floodplain. This illustrates the intensity that is dissipated as it would come further south.

Jono discussed the other issue in this general area is the Myakka Road closure after a failed culvert. He projected the location of the culvert and projected a 1940s aerial of Triangle Ranch. Clay Gully had been created, but there was another tributary here, which is referred to as the Dead River. Jono projected a LiDAR image noting the historic water flow noting a delta that formed by water flowing down what is now called the Dead River. There was a proposal to make a connection from Clay Gully over to the Dead River to rehydrate it, have a culvert and then a device so that water could leave the property and go under the road, but water was not going to come back across. Jono contacted Sarasota County recently because now manatees have been seen feeding in this area of the river. They are even getting up into Manatee County and Triangle Ranch. Historically, if you go to the FWC website, they have a whole section dealing with problems with manatees and culverts and manatees will get stuck in these culverts and drown. Whatever culvert replacement the county does, either needs to have flapped valves that would allow water to go out but not come back in to keep the manatees out.

Jono projected a map of county protection efforts including parcels at Dear Prairie Slough, Snook Haven and Sleeping Turtles South. Part of the reason the county's interested in these parcels is that the widening of River Road has eliminated a lot of the parking and support areas for Sleeping Turtles South. The county has tried to acquire Camp Venice but has been unsuccessful. The county is now trying to acquire this peninsula so that if they were able to get part of this parcel, it would be able to go from the Jelks property across this maybe across the bridge and then up to Snook Haven and then further up.

Ray added that the two parcels between Sleeping Turtles South and Snook Haven, those are what Sarasota County is attempting to acquire.

Jono projected an image of the Englewood Youth Foundation parcels. They are interested in selling it to the county to continue being used for youth recreation. The county is interested. One of the things discussed is Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts could put in at Laurel Road at the Venice Myakka Park and canoe down and camp here overnight. If there were any issues and you needed EMTs or someone, there is road access. Then in the

morning after breakfast, they could canoe down to Snook Haven or even to Bob Johnson's Landing. They would have the experience of camping out, but in a safe area that would be accessible. The problem is that access issue because to access this property, they must cross the Diocese of Venice. There is currently an easement that allows access for the youth camp, but it is not clear what would need to change for it to create public access. The county is researching what would be involved in making that connection more feasible.

There are some proposals for the river area. Jono showed images of 1700 North Jackson Road. This is what it looked like in 2021, this is what it looked like in 2022. A shoreline structure was installed without permits. The new owner probably did not understand several permits were required. At the last Council meeting in December, Sarasota County stated they were working on a planting plan. Once they finalize it, they will remove the concrete bags and re-vegetate. They are going to monitor it for three years.

Chris added that the bank looks in bad shape, but five or 10 years before that, the bank looked good, and it had vegetation. What is happening is that some homeowners think they are doing themselves a favor by mowing and weed whacking along the bank. Starting around 2021, there is a jon boat, canoe, three or four kayaks on the bank at this site. Going up and down the bank causes erosion problems. It is not just this house but many locations along the river. Then the resident realizes and says, "I have a shoreline problem."

Jono talked about the history of the Cope shoreline application. Mr. Cope wants a permit to stabilize the bank there. The application claimed that it was on Curry Creek. The consultant did not provide a mean high-water line; they were trying to use the safe upland line and they wanted a time extension. Jono wrote that he supported his goal to stop riverbank erosion, but he was hoping when people propose solutions, they are going to meet all the requirements for all the agencies.

Jono noted that consultants were completely unfamiliar with the requirements of the legislation and 62D-15.

Discussion on permit issues continued.

Jono talked about the Waterfalls at Venice. There is a lot of public land around it. The Carlton Preserve, Sleeping Turtles, and Deer Prairie Creek. He showed what it looked like during Hurricane Ian. There were a few small areas out of the water but everything else was submerged. Now there is a proposal to put in an RV park there. The proposal ignores that there was supposed to be a 220-foot setback. Jono's understanding is that this proposal has fallen through, that if there was a contract to buy that does not exist right now.

Ray mentioned that it is still pending with the original buyer. They are working directly with Sarasota County to meet all the county requirements. He expects to see an update coming out from the developer.

Debbie Musallam added that the real estate sign says active where before it said pending.

Ray added that is correct and all that means is that they are accepting backup offers. There is still work going on in the background and do not be surprised to see something there.

Chris stated that he tried to call both the realtor and John Cervini of Grace Construction. He left them voice messages to come back and give an update. Chris did not hear back from either one of them. He also reached out to Howard Berna for an update. Hopefully when the county receives updated plans or any formal request for moving this forward, the Council will get notice. New documents typically appear with only 7 to 10 days of notice. That is not enough time to schedule a meeting of the Council by the bylaws. While written as "14 days" minimum notice, to get an announcement in the paper to have a meeting about a week more is required to get it in the paper, so it is effectively 21 days. If they do not voluntarily come back to the Council,

by the time the Council becomes aware of new plans – there may not be enough time for this body to make a formal comment as intended by the Act.

Victor added that they will need a variance from the county because of the flood zoning. He is not sure the county will allow it. There will be a public hearing though.

Rob asked if this land could be purchased as part of Resilient SRQ.

Jono replied he did not believe so. He noted the applicant plans to purchase another nearby parcel of land to move RVs to if a big storm was coming.

Someone asked if the Council could notify members if something happens? There needs to be a lot of notice for a meeting, but a notification could still be sent out.

Chris replied that the Council could direct him to send out information if he gets it. The last time there was a variance hearing, he did not get notice until another member forwarded it to him, and it was 10 days before the hearing. That does not give people a lot of time to review plans and comment. There is also the issue of if the Council does not meet, the Council cannot offer a formal non-binding opinion. You can reach out to anyone as an individual or a citizen, but you are not acting as the Council.

Motion:

Glenn Compton motioned that if Chris Oliver becomes aware of a variance hearing through any channel, he notifies Council members. If there are more than 21 days, an emergency meeting could be called. If there is less than 21 days, he would email the Council members letting them know about the variance hearing. Rob Wright seconded. Motion passed.

Rob asked about being put on an email list with the planning department to be notified of variance hearings.

Victor replied that you can do that. He just did it for another organization he is a part of. You must have the case or filing number.

Discussion continued about how members and the public can stay informed about hearings and zoning changes.

Jono continued his report with an overview of the issues related to shoreline structure proposed by the Diocese of Venice. It is closing in on four years that he has been involved in this issue. The county oversees the Myakka River Protection Zone (MRPZ), which is basically the 220 feet closest to the river. New development is not allowed within a 50-foot buffer area, but the county's protection code recognizes that it may be circumstances where literal interpretation deprives landowners of reasonable use, so they have a variance process.

Jono discussed the concerns about the flooding that took place in Irma at the entrance to the Diocese property. It was completely flowing over just like Ian. In 2017, hurricane Irma was scary, flooding all the buildings there. There was a lot of velocity. When the waters receded, they were concerned another Irma would cut their sewer line and erode the bank. They even thought it might be cut off entirely. Apparently, they never formally surveyed where the bank of the river was. What they are going on is people's recollection and memory of how much there was or was not. That complicates things because there is a lot of discrepancy in what people think is going on there. The retreat center managers were worried that another Irma would lead to devastating erosion. They asked DEP for an emergency permit; DEP did not give them one. In the meantime, Ian happened with more rain and deeper flooding than was in Irma, it was far worse than Irma.

They had predicted that this was going to cut off the retreat center's sewer and raw sewage was going to flow into the river. None of that happened. There was some damage, but considering the magnitude of Ian, it was relatively little damage.

According to Jono's research, there has not been significant erosion in this area. That is based both on his experience canoeing and interpreting aerial photography. The county agrees with him. County staff said, "Historic aerial maps do not demonstrate significant erosion, do not show significant erosion, no significant changes, do not demonstrate significant erosion." This is all in the county's report. The Diocese is very concerned about erosion, but when the county looks at it, they are not seeing the threat in the same magnitude.

In 2023, the Florida Wildlife Commission published a report called Peace River Stream Bank Restoration and Myakka River Watershed Threats Assessment and Fish-Assemblage Monitoring. They looked at this stretch of the Myakka River. They went way up into Manatee County. They were looking at active stream bank erosions, stream bank mass wasting, sediment deposition, repair end zone degradation, channel alteration, potential areas of non-point pollution. They found 27 areas in Sarasota County where this occurred but none of the sites on this Diocese property were identified. Jono showed two images, one from 1948 and one from present times to show that there is no discernible difference of the shoreline.

Jono presented their new proposal. They have come away from putting a wall in the river. The original wall when it was going to be in the water, was going to be 83 feet long. This new wall is moved back here and is going to be 107 feet long. This is the current driveway; they were going to build a new driveway that was wider because they are concerned about emergency vehicles getting in. And then they were going to build a swale over here for drainage to please SWFWMD because of all this new paving. The wall is going to be buried. It is going to be driven into the ground. There is the wall, that is the 25-foot line. This red line is the 50-foot line. There is going to be a dramatic increase in this impervious surface area within the buffer zone. Then there are going to be new impacts that occur when they have to dig this swale. There is a section in the county code that says you cannot build in this 50-foot area unless you get a variance. The next section says, "For all properties, the area setback may be reduced to no less than 25 feet." The way Jono reads that is you can do something in that 25-to-50-foot area, but even a variance is not supposed to be closer than that.

Then at the south end, they had proposed a 135-foot wall in the river, and now They are proposing a 272-foot wall driven in the land. You can see it is quite far away from the road. Jono's question is how did they determine how long this wall's supposed to be? Did they decide to just double it? Jono does not know if that is what happened but would love to understand what their criteria are. Ideally, you would minimize impacts in the river area, but still ensure safe access to the property. The river is close to their driveway at the entrance. That is a legitimate concern, and something needs to be done. What if this was an eight-foot-high sheet wall that is going to be driven into the bank near that large oak tree? What's going to happen to the tree? The wall will sever a lot of the tree's roots. It is both bad for tree health, but it also makes it unstable because it does not have any roots on the water side. It increases the likelihood that this is going to fail and fall into the river.

Jono showed a video of a 20-foot sheet pile section that is being driven in, but you can imagine even if it was an eight-foot section, that is just going to go down and slice through anything in its way including tree roots. The county held a hearing on this variance that Jono attended. They had an arborist who said that if you cut through the roots of a tree, it is bad for the health and increases the likelihood it is going to fall in. The commissioners could understand that. They suggested a continuance to the applicant. The applicant accepted the continuance. He has been trying to work with them since to come up with another plan that would meet their needs but would not jeopardize the river much.

To grant the variance, the applicant must meet five conditions. There must be special conditions. They would have to say a literal interpretation would deny reasonable use, that is possible. They find that it would not confer a special privilege and it would not create the need for additional capital facilities. They must conclude that the circumstances they are trying to address are not the result of the applicant. It is Jono's opinion that what is going on is the result of the applicant. Is the Diocese the victim of natural phenomena that no one could have recently anticipated or not? Virtually all the perceived erosion challenges could be attributed to the decisions they made.

Most people have some rudimentary understanding of how rivers meander. That the outside of the curve is where it is eroding, and the inside of the curve is where it is building up. The professionals that helped the Diocese design this retreat center probably were aware of this at some basic level. If you look at the 1974 imagery, this is where there was a primitive road probably that the Blackburn's had built, I think the Blackburn's probably dredged this canal. The Diocese bought the property in 1984. They were not obligated to use this dirt road for the driveway. They could have put the driveway wherever they wanted. They could have come along this canal and hooked back and kept everything away from the river, but they did not choose to do that. Then the second thing they did is they put their water and sewer on the river side of the road. There is probably an explanation, but logic would suggest you try to keep your infrastructure as far away from the river as possible. Next is the way the road is pitched. There is at least one place where water cascades down off the road, washing off their property and eroding the bank into the river.

Now they've conceded that the tree's root system acts as a support for much of the bank. When they located their decks for people to contemplate the river, they put them in locations where there were no big trees nearby. They could have put them right under a tree, but they put them out in the open areas. If you canoe down the river, you will see that wherever there is a bench, there tends to be erosion. Even if one person in 50 wants to go down to the water, then that person breaks the bank going down and they break the bank going back up. The presence of benches is a formula for bank erosion. By ignoring human nature, they are creating conditions that would encourage people to go down to the water in those locations. There are also some occasions where people have been throwing debris off the banks into the river. Which is not good, it keeps the vegetation from growing. Somebody took palm fronds and threw it off the bank to get rid of it.

In summary, they should have known that locating an entry drive close to the outside of the bend of the river, bearing infrastructure on the riverside, pitching the road to go down the bank, encouraging people to gather where the banks were not likely to be stabilized, creating conditions to encourage people to go down the banks and throwing debris off the banks was going to aggravate their erosion concerns. Put another way, if the drive was far from the river, the bearing infrastructure was far from the river, the road did not discharge down the bank, people were not encouraged to go where there was fewer stabilizing roots where no one is going down the bank and they did not throw debris over the bank, they probably would not have a problem at this point. They failed to document where the shoreline was, so you do not know how bad the erosion situation has been.

Jono feels that a lot of their own actions have contributed to the erosion, but he has been trying to work with them. He continues to work toward solution that would give them safe access to the property, be permissible and not violate the conditions of either the Myakka Rule or the county's Myakka Protection Zone. Jono gives them credit for wanting to move the road. By moving the road back, it buys time to figure out what the rest of the solution would be.

Robin asked if the Council has a working relationship with the counties, with the municipalities where they would have to get the Council's input first.

Jono replied that the Council is empowered pursuant to the legislation to offer non-binding advisory opinions.

Chris mentioned that they have a 1997 formal agreement between DEP, Sarasota County and the Department of Consumer Affairs. The agreement between the county and DEP still holds, and that basically says if there is a rezoning, if there is a major activity on the river, that they are supposed to bring it for DEP review, for someone in Chris' office to review it. He thinks it was envisioned to come to the Council after the review. Now, there is a gray area. He does not think they ever envisioned an individual's dock to come before the Council, but there is a gray area between a dock, a rezoning or another major activity. The 135-foot shoreline protection structure might fall into the "major activity" group, while shoreline structures are not specifically called out in the agreement.

Robin asked if there is any continued review of these documents for updating?

Chris advised that no one has asked to revisit the 1997 agreement.

Robin continued. What she is seeing nowadays is the municipalities and the counties seem to be pushing developments through that intrude on the wetlands, the flood plain, and that will eventually affect the Myakka. Changes to Unified Land Development Codes (ULDC) allow things to be closer and they shorten the setbacks on the river. Robin asked if this would be aided by uplift with Wild and Scenic Partnership?

Chris replied that the Wild and Scenic designation into the national partnership system would not change protection or rule. It is like overlaying on the state system. The state rules, the state management would stay the same whether it is DEP or other state entities. River rule, 62D-15, has specific rules about activities within the river area. The county is solely over the MRPZ. When the Diocese pulled their wall out of the water and put it on the land, that went into the MRPZ. Those are the major frameworks that limit activities. Normally, Sarasota County lets the Council know when things are happening. However, there are a lot of different things happening on the river, and sometimes things might fall through, but it is supposed to be a process for major activities that the Council is noticed on.

Robin asked what it would take to revisit the 1997 agreement.

Chris was not sure.

Break 10:53-11:00

Charlie Hunsicker-Manatee County

The Manatee County Environmental Lands Referendum was passed, and they are making some successful acquisitions of properties. For the Myakka River area, there is a long-term, well drilling company called the Cannon Well Drilling Company, and they have opened six of their properties in Manatee County for sale. One of them is next to their famous Crane Park on the Myakka River in Myakka City. It always floods. There is about a 35-to-40-acre parcel that is adjacent to it that they are probably going to be pursuing for acquisition.

Dakin dairy is being sold. They tried to approach them to buy the land, but the owner wants to keep it for agricultural use. They offered to work with the farm through the Family Farms program and get an easement over that property so they could continue to farm but that is yet to happen.

There are two championship golf courses coming in that area. They will probably be like the Founder's Club. It is going to change the complexion of that area completely. Manatee County continues to work with other area farmers. They are working with the Conservation Foundation, Jim Strickland, Julie Morris, and other

organizations to continue to assert their interest in conservation easements for the Peace River tributaries, the Myakka River and Manatee County.

Steven Schaefer asked if the golf courses will be paying the same tax per acre that he pays on his property.

Charlie was not sure.

Charlie continued that they would do their best to preserve as many acres as they can, but he noted the county has agricultural developers. These large landowners are not agricultural so much as they are agricultural developers. Holding properties large enough to create their own new towns with enough water that they can build their own water plant, wastewater and all the services. That is also going to be happening in and around the Flatford Swamp area.

Charlie added that Congressman Buchanan was successfully able to get the House of Representatives to pass a Wild and Scenic designation for the Little Manatee River. It is now over to the Senate for discussion. There cannot be an opposition to that because the hardest part was the House. It is just a matter of time there. You will have a corollary and partnership relationship with the Little Manatee River, maybe the second or third designated river in Florida for that protection status. About 40% of this watershed is in Manatee County and no one is objecting from their side at all.

Ryan Pieper-Charlotte County

The project manager for their Myakka Park project indicated that they are in fact moving forward with obtaining the SWFWMD permits and still awaiting the FDEP permit for that park. The Manchester Water Project does not have any new updates.

Stefan Kalev asked if Charlotte County has any plans to adopt an ordinance to form a MRPZ or add any additional Myakka River protections in the future?

Ryan believes it would be warranted and noted there is interest in updating the ULDC and that would be a wonderful time to do so.

Stefan Kalev-City of North Port

Stefan introduced himself. He is the Natural Resources Manager with the City of North Port. They have recently established their Natural Resources Division under their Development Services departments. They have some exciting initiatives that are more on the permitting level, process level. They are planning to be involved with the ULDC changes and potentially the Comp Plan. They are looking forward to familiarizing themselves better with the current issues on the Myakka.

Juliette added that she believes the people who had the PP3 on the Warm Mineral Springs property dropped it recently, that was all in the paper and justified in the paper, but she thinks it would behoove the Council to be able to get a copy of the Geotech report, which is going to be finished in May.

Stefan replied that he can investigate that and share it with the Council.

Chris added that it should be sent to him, and he will make it available for Council members to stay in compliance with Sunshine Laws.

Robin commented regarding the ULDC rewrite that they are tentatively rewriting. They had a lot of input with the staff years ago on protections for the scrub-jay and all the sensitive zones and the Constitution Drive area that is now getting paved. She asked if they are going to reach out to the Council for their input on some of the language for the Manatee Protection Zone areas?

Stefan added that any input from educated individuals who are familiar with the subject is welcome.

Robin would like to see more coordination of this Council with the different counties and municipalities to get their input on what is going on with the rewrites of the ULDC and with approvals of some of these developments that are intruding and possibly affecting what's going on in the river.

Stefan also mentioned that they have their Environmental Advisory Board meetings that are on the first Monday of each month. They are at the North Port City Hall building and he is the liaison there. These are open to the community and they welcome feedback.

Jono asked about a property in the middle of the Myakka River where U.S. 41 is crossing, is that in the city or just in the unincorporated county?

Stefan was not sure.

Barbara Lockhart added that for anyone who does not know, until right now, the City of North Port never had a Natural Resources Department. There were no staff in City Hall who were speaking for the environment, working on environmental procedures, practices, et cetera. Stefan being here along with the rest of the staff that all came on board is a major milestone for the City of North Port.

Christina Rimes-City of Venice

Christina is the Community Rating System (CRS) coordinator for the City of Venice. She also does floodplain management. She met with Jono, Chris, DEP Regulatory and Sarasota County at the Venice Myakka River Park. They investigated options where there is some shoreline erosion and they talked about doing a demonstration project, but they realized that it is not feasible due to cost. Instead of shoreline stabilization, they plan to take out the portion the eastern terminus of that walkway and basically do a cut over so that they can still get to the pavilion. After this work, they won't have to worry about the erosion as much.

Jono projected an aerial view, and noted the location of the pavilion pointing to the eroding area and how the current footpath is very close. He highlighted that rather than doing an expensive project in here, the idea would be to redirect this and come up with an alternative route to the pavilion, which is basically what they are going to be suggesting at the Diocese property. Rather than spending a lot of money out in the river area, if you have the space, redirect your roads.

Christina Rimes continued. Their arborist has already been out there to look to see what kind of native species that he can replace back so that they deter people from walking along that shoreline.

Sarina Weiss-CHNEP

Sarina noted the CHNEP recently completed their Myakka Headwaters Habitat Restoration Project in partnership with Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. This project was designed to restore natural resources in the headwaters of the Myakka River Basin near Flatford Swamp that was degraded by hydrologic alterations and cattle grazing. The [final report](#) includes region specific recommendations and risk management strategies for land managers regarding ecosystems, hydrologic conditions, and species. That is available on their website under publications and reports.

Ryan Ellis-FDOT

Ryan introduced himself as the new FDOT representative for the Council. Ryan did not have any updates but was open to questions.

Jono noted that in the past, the Council has been interested in a couple of FDOT issues including the borrow pit at the extension of Venice Avenue and River Road related to dewatering and the pine tree mortality. Another is the former I-75 rest stop area on River Road. FDOT uses that as a staging area for improvements to the interstate. Jono highlighted how this FDOT property connected to existing conservation areas.

Chris added it is a great connectivity opportunity and that property looks great noting there are a lot of good native species on it, but he is starting to see a lot of non-native lygodium, some cogon grass. FDOT's main priority is not land management, but if the county or another entity got it that has land management as one of their priority roles, it could help manage the property in perpetuity.

Chuck brought up that even though it has been posted "no parking", every time he passes there are people parking on the S.R. 72 Bridge and then walking on the bridge.

Chris added that there are some new reports of people feeding gators from the bridge again. Jonathan Bennett (former FDOT representative) did have those "no parking" signs put up there. He added that there are a bunch of white stripes on the bridge which are supposed to indicate you cannot park there. They are wide enough apart that to some people it might look like a parking space. Chris asked Ryan to investigate any options to improve the situation.

Steve Giguere stated that over the course of several years, there has been a dramatic increase in traffic on S.R. 72. GPS navigation is routing people to bypass I-75 through North Port, Venice via S.R. 72, the amount of traffic is exponential.

Ryan replied that they have a couple of current studies on S.R. 72 to see what can be done for traffic to help alleviate that issue because it is a very busy road now.

Steve mentioned that in conjunction with the increase in traffic there has been an increase in fatal crashes and crashes in general. Part of his concern is such a long strip of S.R. 72 goes through MRSP and the wildlife that is crossing the road is causing these bad accidents, particularly at night. He does not know if anyone has considered reducing the speed limit at nighttime to maybe prevent some wildlife impacts.

Ryan answered that whenever they are doing a study on a Project Development and Environmental Assessment, they get with the resource agencies. They send out a Natural Resource Evaluation. They talk them through what they are doing to reduce the impact on species, wetlands, all the above. That is something that he coordinates for a lot of the projects in District One. Once it gets through him, it also goes to the permitting agency office that coordinates with agencies, such as FWC. They do look a lot at wildlife crossings and speed reductions in wildlife areas. It is something that they are really trying to pride themselves on. During a PD&E they really want you to show up and make those sorts of comments.

Steve has seen reduced speeds in the county on roads like this to minimize impacts. The park keeps track of roadkill data and Steve offered that data to Ryan.

Discussion continued on efforts to improve safety for drivers and methods to reduce impacts to wildlife.

Jamie Richardson-FWC

FWC fishery staff completed a spring largemouth bass targeted sampling on the Upper Myakka Lake. There were not many fish found, but they think that improved habitat will improve the quality of the fishery. They teamed up with their Aquatic Habitat Restoration Enhancement Section (AHRES) to complete a short form application that includes potential improvement with re-vegetation work. Their Invasive Plant Management

section will resume floating plant treatment when the park bridge boat ramp is accessible. Additionally, their Myakka River Threat Assessment Report is available.

Jono asked Jamie what steps would be involved if the Council wanted to petition the Wildlife Commission to prohibit the recreational take of alligators on the Wild and Scenic stretch of the river.

Jamie contacted Dwayne Carbonneau, who is the manager for their alligator harvest program, and there is not a direct route to take. He said if you want to submit a motion, it would go to him first and then he would pass it up the chain to their commissioners.

Jono summarized alligator takes, noting three types. There are illegal takes, there are nuisance alligators that are approaching people or otherwise deemed a hazard and there is the recreational alligator harvest. In this later method, you can apply for a permit from FWC. Hunters have been taking gators in the Myakka River, both illegally within the park, but also legally outside of the park. His thinking has been one of the things that the Myakka is known for is alligators. If people come on the river tour boat out of Snook Haven or they have their own boat, they are hoping to see alligators. When you allow a recreational take, you remove that one gator and that can be mounted on someone's wall, but you just deprived a thousand other people from seeing that same gator. It does not make sense on a Wild and Scenic River if one of the river resources is its alligator population that you would allow people to go shoot them. What I am hearing from Jamie is that if the Council wanted to investigate what it would take to have the Wildlife Commission change the rules in Sarasota County, the Council would need to have a motion.

Chris added that there is an alligator hunting season, starting in late Summer. The county is under a countywide permit, which means if someone can access a water body, they are able to basically hunt at their own discretion as long as they are not in a prohibited area. MRSP has long been a prohibited area where they do not allow hunting. Unfortunately, there has been some confusion because in 2019 and in 2022 hunters filled out the back of their permit stating they took alligators from Lower Myakka Lake, which is in MRSP. So, some people are using a recreational permit to harvest from a wilderness preserve, a prohibited area.

A second more complex issue is that there are areas within MRSP where they historically had more alligators, like Deep Hole where the congregation and the recreational experience is less than it used to be and is suboptimal. One of those drivers is potentially because people who hunt alligators often do it at night. They might be on an air boat, which is also not allowed, but people might be coming up into the park causing a big disruptive event. That might be one of the negative drivers, decreasing the recreational experience.

Chris continued to note a third emerging issue with sea level rise, warmer temperatures in general and the lack of frost events American crocodiles are now being seen on the Myakka River further up, more often. His office recently got a credible report of a crocodile at Border Road. Now at U.S. 41 there have been many reports. Maybe every year, every other year they would get a crocodile report. Border Road is much further upriver and closer to MRSP. The countywide permit is for anywhere that is not prohibited, if someone launches at Snook Haven, they could get up to MRSP if they wanted to in September, water levels are usually high, but with this crocodile issue now they have another component. A hunter at night, maybe someone from out of state, might take the crocodile by accident and it might be the only crocodile in this river.

Jono asked Chuck if he had any way of knowing whether people are coming up the river at night?

Chuck responded no, other than an air boat in the distance, there is hardly anybody ever out there near the river on the ranch at that time of night.

Stefan asked if they are monitoring the population of alligators on the river? Do they know how many they have and how that fluctuates over time?

Chris stated that FWC has staff that do the alligator harvest calculations. Back in the day, FWC allowed zero permits, then two permits for Sarasota County and now it is up to six or eight, but that is based on their reconnaissance. His understanding is that every year or two someone comes out from FWC to do sampling including mercury tissue sampling because a lot of people who take alligators eat the meat.

Bruno Kapacinskas-SWFWMD

Bruno introduced himself as the new representative. SWFWMD covers a 16-county area with 6 million people. On the Flatford Swamp Aquifer Recharge Project, they had a recent lightning strike out there on their pump. That well will be back up functioning probably in the next month.

Steven asked what are they recharging?

Bruno replied they are re-injecting water back into the aquifer.

Steven asked where are you getting the water?

Bruno replied it is the water that has been flowing into the swamp.

Bruno continued, District management activities for Flatford Swamp over the past 12 months include implementing planned burns and removal of exotic plants. Two prescribed burns for a total of 244 acres. They have recently or are in the process of disc perimeter and internal fire lanes for wildfire protection. They have surveyed exotic plant species and treated multiple species and coordinated with the USDA to release lygodium bio-control agents. Over 800,000 mites and moths with more planned to be released later this month.

Robin asked about two deep injection wells by Warm Mineral Springs. She is interested in any reports or monitoring data related to those deep injection wells in conjunction with the Environmental Protection Agency and DEP. She would like an update on what those readings are because the last time she heard, one of them was not functioning properly.

Bruno stated he can find out.

Jono asked about the four goals the district is supposed to be working on.

Bruno stated the goal of the district is to meet the water needs of the current and future water users while protecting and preserving their water resources within their boundaries.

Jono mentioned that it seemed like this project at Hidden River is looking for an entity to sponsor and take the lead on doing it, and is the district able to be the lead on that?

Bruno replied the District is always interested in issues like that and he will ask their Land Management staff and give them an update of what is going on here, and then can report back to the Council.

Jono stated it deals with the flooding issue, which is a concern, and it has the potential for restoration.

Chris added that there is also a huge water quality benefit. There is not only the stuff that would be flooded in people's homes, but if they restored the marsh, it would create a filter marsh for river and MRSP.

Jono stated that compared to the other agencies like FWC or Sarasota County, it seems like this has been the center line of SWFWMD's mission and he hopes that SWFWMD could provide leadership on it.

Bruno will find out and let Chris know.

Linda Wilson-ECOSWF

Motion:

Linda Wilson motioned that the Council have meetings alternating between a north and south location, so it is easier for more people to attend. Steven Schaefer seconded. Motion carried.

Chuck Johnston-O Bar O Ranch

Chuck stated that the ranch looks similar to the Hidden River area with a large floodplain along the river. The ranch has 165 acres of conservation easement area along the river. (A map was projected of the general area.) Chuck pointed out features including the easement along the river. He talked about the continued recovery since Hurricane Ian and restoration work on the impacted rangeland.

Chuck advised the group that the ranch is getting trespassers that are coming through from Downs Road off S.R. 72, coming over the gate there and being discovered out a mile or so south of there. One of their ranch hands came up at about 4:30 in the afternoon. This was before daylight savings time and it was going to get cold and wet that night, and there was a woman with a couple of kids, she had her GPS, and they were looking for Deep Hole. Other incidents have occurred with vehicles that had been coming up to the gate looking for Deep Hole. He saw a website that did a series about Deep Hole which might be misdirecting people. He has concerns about people getting lost and needing to be rescued.

Tom Keith advised that a while back, there was a program on the Discovery Channel called Sinkholes. There were two-hour programs. There was about a 15-minute portion on the sinkhole and MRSP.

Steven Schaefer-Friends of Myakka River (FOMR)

Steven noted a section of road between the entrance to Hi Hat and Cow Pen Slough where he has seen seven or eight dead otters in that area, and he is not sure why. He asked about Sunshine Laws and wanted to know if he could talk to Ryan Ellis from FDOT about this topic after the meeting.

Chris and Jono agreed that Steven should be okay. Chris added that if Steven or anyone has questions about the Sunshine Laws, reach out to him.

Miri Hardy, who is the executive director of the FOMR gave an update. As a citizen support organization (CSO), FOMR is the only non-profit organization that can directly support MRSP, and now more than ever, given encroaching developments and environmental changes, there is a dire need to protect this important and well-beloved natural gem. They have been supercharging their fundraising efforts as well as their programming, to help their community understand and value the park and up their financial support of the park. Quite meaningfully, they recently received a 2023 CSO of the Year award from the Florida State Park Foundation and the Florida Park Service for outstanding expansion of fundraising programs and projects benefiting the park. In 2024, they will continue to increase their efforts to help the community value and understand the park and the Wild and Scenic Myakka River.

The FOMR received funding from the Selby Foundation to purchase a trailer that they are going to be outfitting with matching funds from the Myakka River to serve as a pop-up interpretive station that the park can position in various areas where there is a need for increased environmental education. They also

launched a new program that they are calling Experiencing Myakka's Magic, which basically is a series of programming for their community to come in and learn something unique about the park and its importance. They kicked off the year with an astronomy night where people appreciated the park's dark skies, which followed up with an [article in the Observer](#) about exactly why dark skies are critical for natural places and importantly, the challenges with light pollution as development encroaches and things that they can do. Miri wonders what regulations are in place to help specifically protect the Wild and Scenic Myakka River from light pollution? The FOMR has got a couple of additional fun programs coming up. To learn more about that, follow them on social media or sign up for their email list.

Steve Giguere-MRSP

Steve started by discussing a large contractor beginning work March 18th, 2024, which should result in significant floodplain marsh restoration, specifically treating invasive grasses along the Upper Myakka Lake Area. This is expansion of a coordinated effort over the past 10 years focusing on the restoration of the floodplain. This current project is over 1,100 gross acres. The division's given \$300,000 to get this project accomplished over the next few months and into the summer.

Jono asked what species they are targeting?

Steve answered paragrass, and West Indian marsh grass but also wetland nightshade and lygodium.

Steve continued that the park is in the process of revising the Unit Management Plan (UMP) again. UMPs are typically a 10-year process. 2019 was the last revision for MRSP. The way they are going to do management at least for this next cycle, is to do a management plan for the entire district. The park also has a Land Management Review on March 18th and 19th. They will be looking at the past five years' accomplishments in terms of managing the natural resources.

The park has had initial conversations with an engineer for designing the new observation platform to replace what was the fishing platform at the former weir site at the Upper Lake. He reached out to a firm that is familiar with the river to come up with a design for a new observation platform. The thing that will benefit the public there and benefit the natural resources there, is they will be able to keep people to a designated footprint, as opposed to people right now who are going in the restoration areas. They cannot keep people out. They want to see wildlife, and there is no good direction that they are giving them right now other than signs saying not to enter and putting up some rope. People are not following that. If the structure is there, they will be able to enforce it a lot better. It will be a clear direction of where people should be going. There are multiple social trails that people are using at the current moment, which is not the best for the resource.

Stev continued; the park has already gotten some prescribed fires on the ground.

Jono asked if you go to the Visitor Center can someone find out when zones were burned? When they were out there last Friday, they thought they had been burned in the previous week, but there was no signage. He thinks people would enjoy knowing when something was burned without over-signing things.

Steve said that he had thought of that. He put a sign on the last burn. They are in growing season, and they are starting to hit it hard. El Nino has given us a good pass into a very successful burning season. Typically, they are very dry this time of year, but they are quite wet, they are not burning as much as they would like to right now because it is still too wet to get a successful prescribed burn off.

The park has been talking about the Downs Dam restoration as the next man-made structure to remove along the Myakka River. They were hoping to have this done this spring (2024), but conversations stalled with the adjacent landowner. They have been reaching out to the landowner and have not received commitment

to support the project after multiple attempts. They are hoping to do it this time next year. Staff worked with the landowner to make modifications to the restoration plans to help achieve some of their goals while still improving the conditions of the site.

Steven asked which way they were trying to get into Downs' Dam to do the construction?

Steve replied, they are looking at coming through the park.

Chris added that they are going to go through the park side because the ranch did not want impacts to their side, which is totally understandable. They were going to come in from further away because Cabin Lane is too tight and has a lot of wetlands.

Steve continued. They have a commitment from US Fish and Wildlife Service to fund the project with their staff and equipment.

Chris added that the value of that is about \$650,000, if they went out to bid, that is what they think the minimum cost would be.

Steve added that if they do not get it this next spring, who knows when they will have another opportunity.

Jono asked if the ownership of the structure itself was clear?

Chris replied it is not. There is no record of ownership. State Lands records indicate that no one owns the dam structure. No one has exerted ownership. The state owns the river bottom under the structure.

Steve was reached out to by the representative of the owner of the Sportsman's property, which is outside the north gate of the park. It is about 40 acres of primarily floodplain property. He spoke briefly with the representative, and they are willing sellers at this time.

Jono projected the area on a map.

Steve added it is within the Florida Forever Project and the optimal boundary of the park. It would be a great piece of property to own. He put the owner in touch with State Lands as the representative to discuss the acquisition of that property and he has not heard anything back. That was back in September 2023 and Steve will reach out and get an update to see if the seller has decided.

Steve advised that the park is busy right now, if you do not want to wait in line for 30 minutes to get into the park, just wait for a couple months for things to slow down. They are experiencing 2,000 to 2,500 people a day coming to the park, wildlife opportunities have been fantastic with the water levels. Birding has been outstanding, and people are coming here to experience the wildlife.

Jono mentioned that when Tyler Maldonado from the park planning office was still working, he had promised that he was going to come down and they were going to have a big meeting and invite a bunch of stakeholders and talk about different projects and issues in the park. That was 2019 and then he had a couple of things to clean up and then Covid hit so they never had that meeting.

Steve clarified that in the management plan, the 10-year objectives include writing a Comprehensive Development Plan for the park but that was shelved. Now Park Planners are coming down in a couple of weeks to discuss this and see where it goes. He was thinking that the development plan would be part of this new management plan revision. That is going to be his ask.

Jono brought up the proposed observation deck near the former weir area, noting he talked with Miri and others about locating the deck in a clump of cabbage palms. To be ADA accessible, there would have to be a "zig zaggy" ramp that came up behind it, but then the platform would be just below the canopy of the cabbage palms. It would be less visually intrusive, it might be taller than it would be out here, and it would be this tree house feeling. The canopy would shade people, instead of having to have a roof, you could just do the natural canopy. He hopes that will be considered as an option for the design.

Steve was concerned about putting it further away from the water as that would encourage people to go closer to the water and not use the structure. They will be talking as they go about the design, and they will have conversations about coming up with the best design for that because it is going to be a popular location. Since that fishing platform's gone away, the increased traffic at the Myakka River Bridge of people looking for a safe location to see alligators, that is now a main congregation point for people.

Chris added that there are 50 plus people on the bridge sometimes now.

Steve added that is something they are also looking at, putting a pedestrian walkway to make that bridge safer for both motorists and for pedestrians.

Steve talked about a recent article in the Herald Tribune about Deep Hole, noting an increase in media coverage since 2018.

Michelle found something from back in 2007, but it has gotten much more coverage in the past few years.

Steve added that after it went out to the public as a great place to see hundreds of alligators, it got a ton of demand for visitation. He has pushed back on the media saying, "No, this is not appropriate." That has been happening about twice a year since then, just last week an article popped up in the Herald Tribune, unbeknownst to him. The article is not terrible, but there are some misconceptions in the articles and untruths about current conditions of what people can expect. Since that story came out, they have seen an increased demand for that again, and hopefully that will subside. Fortunately, they have the cap, 30 people a day, but apparently people are hopping the gate at Downs' Road. The park has seen people parking at other locations, walking down the road to try to get there. Chris has been doing a great job documenting the alligator presence in Deep Hole over the past years.

Steve continued. It is a beautiful natural area to see a variety of wildlife, not just alligators. But this increased demand from the public who just want this alligator experience in the wilderness setting has had an impact of reduced numbers in this feature of the park. It is a wilderness preserve, there is minimal signage, they do not want to put up fences, they want people to have a wilderness experience, but at the same time there is nothing telling people to stop. People will get close enough to flush alligators into the water, which has a negative impact to the alligators. In the past, before this was popular, only people that were good naturalists typically went there, now just everybody is going. In the past, I've counted over 120 alligators, those numbers were common in the dry time of year. Now 30 is probably the average that we are seeing, there has been a dramatic decrease. This is a natural sinkhole feature in low times of water levels in the park, this is the only deep water in the Myakka River System, hence the congregation of alligators. It is a great healthy place for them to go over winter and get through the dry season. The park has tried to be proactive. Michelle has been sending volunteers down there to do crowd control and explain responsible wildlife viewing, but they cannot have somebody there seven days a week and certainly they do not have volunteers to do it in the off season as well. Since it is such a unique sensitive area, they may want to consider closures on it in the future. Jono added that it would be interesting to try a closure and see how it affected the alligator behavior. But you have got 30 people coming from this direction, all it takes is one guy on a kayak and they all go in the water anyway.

Steve mentioned that they have in the permit of how to responsibly get to that area, but people do not follow rules just like they do not follow the speed limits on the road. They have data to show that there has been an impact, if they ever went to a closure of this feature, they would need people to support it. There would be a big push back on the people that want to go there. It is something he has been considering.

Chris indicated that kind of thing would probably be discussed in the Unit Management Plan.

Rob suggested having an organized tour led by a staff member once a day, twice a day with a limited number of people.

Steve replied that he does not have enough staff to manage what he has got right now. That would be an excellent solution that he would fully support, they would just need to find the time to be able to do it. It would best be done by a ranger, but he barely has enough to manage what he has got right now.

Jono added that it could be a concession.

Chris mentioned it could be a river ambassador if they were to make it into the National System.

Steve added that the concessionaire has expressed interest in doing that, but they want to do it as a tram tour to this feature. They would want to keep it as a guided hike, a wilderness preserve experience. That is certainly an option for still allowing people there, but with responsibility.

Rob thinks you would get people who are more environmentally friendly to go on a hike.

Barbara asked if that could be done through the Friends of the Park or a Florida Master Naturalist program?

Steve said they need to find someone to volunteer to do that five-mile hike.

Barbara asked if there is any signage as you approach Deep Hole that talks about flushing and explains to people if you get too close, here is what is going to happen.

Steve said that it is included in the permit that everybody is issued, and they make sure that they read it, understand it and sign it. The only sign is to try to avoid people coming around the banks. They have a "Deep Hole this way" sign so people aren't mis-navigating to the location.

Barbara suggested adding interpretive signs explaining if you get too close, they are going to leave and why it is not good to do that.

Steve replied that the challenge is the whole area floods out, if they leave the signs there and they do not get them before floods, then it is a navigational hazard.

Chris also mentioned sign pollution.

Steve stated the goal is to minimize signage there because that is part of the appeal of the wilderness preserve. Signs could help, but generally signs do not stop people from doing what they want to do.

Chris Oliver-Myakka Wild & Scenic River (MWSR) Program

Chris noted he received an update on the District 4 wide unit management plans from the Office of Park Planning. He continued to discuss the flushing issue at Deep Hole that Steve talked about, noting that the issue is really complicated. Even if they had the best-behaved patrons all the time, visitors that did not want

to go close with their cell phone to capture these spectacular events for social media, there are also other things that are happening. People without permits are coming up from the south into the Wilderness Preserve. There are signs that say idle speed, there are signs that say you need a permit to be up here, but people are ignoring those signs. Some people who are coming up to Deep Hole engage in other behaviors that indirectly impact the area, like poaching ducks. But it is a hard area to patrol. Both range deputies and FWC have made serious attempts to curb the worst behavior. On the decrease in alligators at Deep Hole, there are other drivers besides human activity. Water level, wind, and temperature. Climate change. Less cool days means alligators benefit less from being at Deep Hole than they used to. The New College student study looked at the causes of flushing and Chris would like to see more study done there.

Chris added more of the invasive grass reduction project Steve mentioned earlier noting they are attempting to time most of work before the river floods in June or July, a lot of this will be a second kick, after the herbicide treatment. These grasses are very, very tough and they are hard to kill. Chris projected an image of the aerial treatment that AHRES helped them do. In just a couple months, you can see this is an area where they were not able to burn, but Steve was able to burn a huge chunk, about a hundred acres. You can start to see after a month a near complete re-establishment of native broad leaf species that were completely displaced by the monoculture of the introduced paragrass. He noted non-native aquatic soda apple was added to this contract in an attempt to stop the recent invasion by this species.

Chris continued stating that staff from the SWFWMD gave a high ranking for an application to study the Vanderipe Dike, this study could determine the future of the Vanderipe Dike.

Jono added that just like Hidden River, part of the dike is in the park and part of the dike is out of the park.

Steve added that he talked to the Sheps Island landowner about a year ago and he was talking about putting it into a wetland mitigation bank. He asked had Chris heard any updates on that.

Chris replied that he needed to check the status on that but the last thing he saw was a conceptual plan for a mitigation bank

Chris wrapped up his update stating he hoped that eventually we will get the support of the adjacent landowner to remove Downs' Dam. Currently we are working with our consultant to basically break the project into two pieces. The first piece, the dam itself and the park's eastern bank. This bank has been washed out because the dam is there, and we now have a 60-foot swath of land that is no longer there. The idea is to fix that part as phase one. Phase two will be ready in the plans and if the landowner wants to come on board. The US Fish and Wildlife Service will fix that bank if the owner decides to go that route. But it will be a two-phase application to the permitting agencies.

Future Items:

- Management for nesting birds on the new mangrove island near the existing CWA
- Alligator hunting/poaching issue

Next Meeting:

July 26, 2024 (**editorial note:** *next meeting tentatively scheduled for September 20th in Sarasota.*)

Steve Giguere motioned to adjourn the meeting; Rob Wright seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 12:34 p.m.