

Myakka River Management Coordinating Council
Twin Lakes Park, 6700 Clark Road, Sarasota, FL 34241
August 8, 2025
9:30 A. M. – 12:30 P.M.

MINUTES

The meeting began at 9:30 A.M. with Jono Miller presiding. This meeting was advertised in the Herald Tribune on July 25, 2025.

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Jono Miller – Sierra Club
Steve Giguere-MRSP
Stefan Kalev-City of North Port
Ann Hardy-SCLWV
Caroline Ritchey-FFS
Becky Ayech-ECOSWF
Katie Cassell-Sarasota County
Esmeralda Figueras-BWLT
Hugh Havlik-GCHSC
Andrew Black-FWC
Sarina Barnard-CHNEP

Glenn Compton-Manasota 88
Rob Wright-Sarasota Audubon
Emily Barnett-FDOT
Stacey Mazza-Gilkison-Friends of Myakka
Bruno Kapacinskas-SWFWMD
Debra Woihe-Manatee County
Jean Pichler-Venice Audubon
Cristina Rimes-City of Venice
Jim Keltner-Charlotte County
Jennifer Krajcir-NPFOWL
Debbie Musallam-Homeowner

INTERESTED PARTIES

Chris Oliver – FDEP/FPS
Natalie Bergeron-FDEP/FPS
Ray Westbrook-Homeowner
Linda Wilson-ECOSWF
Chris Becker-FDEP/FPS
Kristen Nowak-FL Wildlife Corridor Foundation
Michael D'Imperio-UF/IFAS
Susan Schoettle-Manasota 88

Nadine Hallenbeck – FDEP/FPS
Ezell Givens-FDEP/FPS
Michelle Keirse-FDEP
Miri Hardy
Richard Larson-FFS
Mike Jones-Sarasota County
Tori Hordeman-FDOT

- **Call to Order and Role Call.**
- **Approval of the Meeting Minutes from May 9, 2025.** Glenn Compton moved to approve the minutes and Caroline Ritchey seconded.

Public Comments: None

OLD BUSINESS

Jono Miller-Chair's Report

Jono projected [slides related to old business](#), advising the Council on actions he had taken as the Chair since the last meeting, starting with a letter he was directed to write to the city of North Port and tell them about extending Price Boulevard and Toledo Blade. Jono projected part of the letter that he sent to the City of North Port. He was reminding them that he spoke at North Port as an individual citizen on the 14th of January, alerting them to the issue. He played a recording of his testimony.

Jono thanked the City of North Port for Elizabeth Wong's service. She was with the Council for a long time. Jono continued noting at the last meeting, Becky made a motion to resend a letter concerning the wall on the north side of the bridge crossing Myakka north of the park. Jono projected an image of an excerpt from that. He checked off all the things he was supposed to do.

Jono gave an update on the National Wild and Scenic Partnership and projected a copy of House Resolution 642 that Representative Steube introduced. Then, subsequently, Rick Scott got on board with a Senate companion bill, so now they have both the House and the Senate bills. He noted that the next step is the House Committee on Natural Resources and that they have been working on this for a while, but of course, anyone serving on the Council cannot meet to talk about this unless there was a subcommittee meeting, and advertised it, and kept minutes, and it gets elaborate. So, a team came together to work on the partnership river, including Dr. Hardy, Jono, Chris Oliver, Jamie Doubek-Racine, and Jon Thaxton. Miri has been really leading this effort, so I turn it over to her now.

Miri thanked Jono and noted that for the past four years, she has been working with Friends of Myakka River as an independent contractor, and she recently amicably parted ways with the Friends and has been focusing on this work. She mentioned how important the partnership aspect of the program is, and partnership, to a large extent, is about relationships. Building the relationships locally with the representatives in Congress and with the various other organizations that are part of this program has been critical.

Miri was invited to participate in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Coalition, which is a national organization. She participated in their bi-monthly Zoom meeting, and they asked her to give a brief presentation about the work that they have been doing in Sarasota County. In June, they had a visit in the park by David Halbstein, who is Congressman Steube's field representative, that was extremely important, not only in helping the congressman's office understand how important the river is, how important the work that is ongoing with habitat restoration is, to restore the free-flowing nature of the river and to focus on water quality, but also to help the congressman's office understand the boots on the ground challenges that the department faces, that the community faces, and why this designation would empower our community to support our river moving forward. She is thankful to Steve and everyone else who has been participating in these efforts.

Miri continued highlighting the close communication with the congressman's office, Ronnie Carabbia, who is the legislative aide working on this bill, put together a one-pager. He has been working DC to share information about this process. They are still in the early stages of the designation. The allocations were made for rivers that are already designated. What was exciting was that they got a shout-out from the Appropriations Committee, saying that they heard about the Myakka River and are keeping an eye out. They are excited to see it move forward. Steube's office was very excited to see that. She noted they are working against the clock because there were reductions in force that they knew were coming. They had to update their river study, which was conducted in 1984. A lot has happened since, and much of the work that has happened makes their designation a no-brainer. Getting that study update completed, and most importantly, getting the stamp of approval from someone senior in the National Park Service, was critical.

Miri noted Jamie Fosburgh, who was the branch chief of the Partnership Wild and Scenic River and father of this program, was going to be retiring at the end of May. Those with eagle eyes will

notice that the letter being projected was dated May 28th. It is his peer review letter in support of their study, and it is considered a concurrence letter, which is that critical stamp of approval. Miri read three excerpts from the Fosburgh letter starting with, "It is clear that resource protection and enhancement between the mid-1980s and the present has been greatly advanced through the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council. As a state authorized, local administration entity for potential federal Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation, this Council and its history of success create an ideal, proven foundation for successful administration and management. In this regard, the federal Partnership Wild and Scenic designation (and NPS) would be able to partner directly with this existing Council, exactly as we have with the Housatonic." Miri added that the Housatonic, just like the Myakka, had an old study and then had a Council, and they recently got designated in 2022. "The existing River Management Plan overseen by the Myakka River Council appears entirely compatible with the federal designation. As with the Housatonic, only minor administrative amendments (post designation) would be needed to update the Plan to recognize the federal designation. This has been a smooth and easy process for the Housatonic, and should be the same for the Myakka." She continued from the letter, "The pending federal legislation to designate the Myakka as a Wild and Scenic River based on the NPS Partnership model appears well drafted, and recognizes the suitability of the existing Myakka River Council and Myakka River Plan as appropriate vehicles forming the foundation of the federal PWSR designation." Miri highlighted, without concurrence on the study, we would have had to have another study, which costs half a million dollars and takes three years.

Miri projected the three critical elements of the Partnership Wild and Scenic River Program. A Council or committee, a comprehensive river management plan and an independent nonprofit which specifically exists to protect and enhance the river's outstanding values serves as the direct partner with National Park Service for the purposes of the cooperative agreement. This is a legal agreement between a nonprofit organization and the National Park Service. The Council cannot have a legal union with the government. There needs to be this third party. The cooperative agreement is a plan based on the Comprehensive River Management Plan, a stewardship plan for the next five years, which is a rigorous, binding document that details exactly where the money is going to go, and how the money is going to be used. There is annual reporting on this. Fiscal agency is another role of this nonprofit because the Council cannot accept funds. Currently, there is no such independent nonprofit. One of the next steps was forming a new nonprofit organization that is specifically dedicated to the Myakka River. They are now in the process of incorporation with an inaugural board membership that includes Miri Hardy, Steve Suau, Julie K. Morris, Jon Robinson, Chris King, Sarah Denison Williams, Cavin Brothers, and Charlie Scott. A fantastic group with a lot of experience with the river and who are representing the next generation of stewardship for the river. This organization would exist to protect and enhance the Myakka River and its watershed through education, outreach, stewardship, and coordination. Why not wait? A couple of reasons. As we know things are happening around the river and as Commissioner Smith told me "we are on the clock" and I agree. Waiting for a year or two to do the work that we have been doing this past year, protecting and enhancing water quality, or even just keeping track of what is happening with water quality, seeking dark sky protection for the park and the river corridor, a year might be too late. Regardless of what happens with the designation, this work needs to happen, and it needs to happen now.

Glenn Compton asked what prevents this Council from becoming not-for-profit?

Jono replied that the Council is a creature of the legislature, we are not set up as an independent entity.

Glenn added that the Soil and Water Conservation District pursued non-profit status, and they were denied.

Miri clarified that if you get rid of the Council, you are going to have to form another Council. You have got the nonprofit, and now you need to form a Council, and the Council needs to be made up exactly like this Council is. Right now, this Council does not have an operations arm, someone who can go out there, do the work, steward the river, and come back to report.

Glenn asked if the group that she mentioned earlier is pursuing a nonprofit organization?

Miri replied they are filing for incorporation.

Miri then gave an update on Miakka Golf Club/Terranova Preserves. On August 18th, 2024, Jono sent Chris Oliver and Miri an email last year, sharing pictures of a fish kill that was happening north of the park. It has almost been a year. This led to trying to figure out what was going on and realizing there are two golf courses that were going in on the river north of the park. She has given several presentations about those developments and about water quality issues, specifically turbidity issues that were reported and later fined by DEP compliance inspectors due to those turbidity issues. A couple of weeks ago, she got notice from folks in the community that there was a hearing about further development on that site. Miri, Becky Ayech and Jono all participated in the neighborhood meeting. The purpose of this presentation is to share with the Council information that she thinks the Council should be made aware of in the very early stages of something happening on the river in the context of being an advisory board with stake in the river. This is also the point where the Council could potentially have proactive input into this process.

Miri continued projecting a map showing the Myakka River noting MJ Road and other features. A 1,391-acre parcel. The rezone request was to change the existing zoning, which is agricultural, to planned development, residential. Future land use is agricultural/rural. She highlighted elements from slides sourced from the applicant's public hearing presentation. The applicant's slide included the adjacent P-DR that is Soleta Golf Course that recently got approved. It also shows the Miakka Golf Course and where they want to put the residences. For purposes of the rezone application, they are electing to include the golf course and another undeveloped parcel to allow for transfer of density, for more units on the residential piece. The applicant is saying they are going to leave the wetlands, but 130 houses are going to go on one-acre lots with 30 feet average, I am emphasizing average, wetland buffers. Miri showed a slide showing the Miakka Golf Club plan, noting the applicant included the golf course because this is considered open space. Let that sink in. In the picture you can see what the average 30-foot buffers on the Myakka River has allowed them to do. Moreover, with the use of mitigation banks, in some areas they do not have these 30-foot buffers. We will get to more of that later. She showed where the applicant wants to put in a helistop. This brings in issues of noise and light pollution.

Miri showed the applicant's map of the project from their GDP that shows the floodplain; she noted that it was from FEMA's 2014 Map.

Jono showed aerials of the site in April 2022 and in April 2025. He pointed out both golf courses, noted how torn up the site was in the process of developing the golf course. He showed their consultant's flood line and wetland boundary, and he compared that line with an aerial photograph taken during Ian, showing where the water came to. He pointed out the area where they may sell lots to people that were underwater, inundated during Ian, which is not a good idea, or it seems cruel. We are back to selling swamp land.

Miri replied that to sell those lots they will have to raise that area.

Debra Woithe asked what was proposed on the upland side of the stripe shown in the slide.

Miri replied there is no actual plan. Right now, they are asking to rezone the entire area. They are saying that there are going to be 130 houses. There is going to be this focal point, which they still are not clear on, maybe like a community center? There is not an actual plan that they are sharing with anyone, which is part of the concern. They are asking if they can rezone it before doing the plan.

Miri returned to the topic of flooding, showing a slide from a [February 2025 Manatee County Stormwater Work Session](#), where according to FEMA's 2014 map, that this project area should not flood, yet it does. In Sarasota County, they are starting to work with more recent flood maps. It is concerning that on the Myakka River, a river that is about to get federal designation because of its outstanding values, outdated maps are being used. Looking at where they are going to build, they are going to need a lot of fill. Even if you bring in a lot of fill, maybe you are solving the problem for those houses, but you are not solving the problem for people downstream, and you are creating issues for the flow of the Myakka River. Altering the flow of the river.

Miri showed a site photo showing fill and silt-fence at the top bank of the river adding that is what an average 30-foot buffer looks like. It is worrisome, we are not just talking about any wetland, all wetlands are important but at least for me the Myakka River needs to get a little more clout. Referring to the photo, this lack of buffer is allowed through mitigation banks. Miakka Golf Club went back to SWFWMD with a request for a revision of their ERP because they could not do what they thought they could do. They asked for further mitigation for wetland impacts and they got it. Miri recapped with a slide highlighting her top concerns so far: Increased density in a highly sensitive floodplain, use of outdated floodplain maps, threats to water quality and river ecosystem, increased noise and light pollution.

Miri added that this Council was not in the loop when the first (Golf Club) application went through. There were some massive impacts to that environment, specifically to threatened species. In an environmental report for this development, they mentioned sighting Caracaras, burrowing owls, kestrels, sandhill cranes, and bald eagles. The documents have not said exactly what they would do with them yet. With the development of the golf course, in the environmental report, they cited 27 burrowing owl burrows in 16 clusters. They got a permit from FWC for take of those burrows. They paid \$30,400 for that. Their new project will have less wetland impact based on acreage. They are saying there is going to be 1.1-acre surface water impact. Miri would like more information on that and noise from the helicopter. During the hearing, Jono specifically asked whether stormwater ponds would be considered open space, and they said yes. Miri asked if they were considering mitigating for additional light pollution using dark sky-compliant lighting. They said that it is too early, but they would consider it.

Miri projected a slide on Steve Suau's stormwater recommendations to Sarasota County Commissioners, one of his recommendations talked about the very clear nexus between flood damage and designated floodplain areas and recommended minimizing density increases in designated floodplain areas. Manatee County Commissioners, to get them credit, are aware of these issues. They recently rejected a plan for a new neighborhood because there were concerns about flooding in an area with new homes and roads being built higher than surrounding neighborhoods. To quote Commissioner Kruse, "If you are just going to raise something up, then the next person's going to raise something up, and the person after that is going to raise something up. And the next thing you know, you are building a pyramid, and everyone on the bottom who built first is just going to get flooded out every single time."

Miri addressed reverting back to 50-foot wetland buffers, Kruse recently wrote on his Substack, "Manatee County's new Board of County Commissioners promised changes in how we manage our growth and our environment during the 2024 elections. We're going to honor those promises and continue moving forward with our plans, your plans, to re-institute our wetland buffers". Both Commissioner Kruse and Commissioner Carol Ann Felts from District One have made public statements about the need to better protect the Myakka River. These are positive things and important things to consider as the Council moves forward.

Miri projected a map from the Nationwide Rivers Inventory noting the portion of the Myakka River in Manatee County is included in the Inventory. The reason why it is included there is because of that 1984 study. This does give the river status in Manatee County as one that should be protected due to its Outstandingly Remarkable Values.

Miri concluded that the Council in the past had to directed the Chair to write letters. In this case it would be to the Manatee County Planning and County Commissioners to thank them for their commitment to protecting wetlands by reverting back to 50-foot buffers and restricting density in floodplains, and reiterate the importance of Myakka's wetlands and the Myakka River to the state and nation, to express concern about potential lasting impact of developments recently permitted on the Myakka River within the floodplain on water quality and the river's outstanding values. Question the use of average buffer size, wetland mitigation banks, and outdated floodplain maps in this highly sensitive ecosystem, and request that any future applications or policies impacting the Myakka River floodplain directly solicit the input of this Council. Miri confirmed with Chris Oliver that the Council was not notified of this application.

Chris confirmed that the Council was not notified and emphasized Council's members should be proactive in their community and bring any project to the Council that might impact the river.

Becky commented that Manatee County loves golf courses. They always have. That is where they store their treated sewer water. They went through this when she helped the folks in Manatee County on the first golf course. There was a statement and documents that said that maybe they do not love them anymore, but they did at that point. Sarasota County has recently required binding concept plans when a rezone comes, but that was not always their policy. That Manatee County does not do it is not unusual. She continued, the helicopters are already flying. Every time there is a horse race, the helicopters go over. She believes that the river is a water of the United States, a WOTUS. She testified when they wanted to change how they define Waters of the United States. They wanted to say if it was not flowing on surface 12 months out of the year, it cannot be a WOTUS. Becky disagreed; the Myakka River is flowing. It is just sometimes, you cannot see it flowing. It is a flashy system. You cannot take it and have that definition because they want the WOTUS protection for the Myakka River. There was a place

called Flatford Swamp in Manatee County that died because of excess water from lateral seepage. In this instance, it was irrigation for bed prep for agriculture. But the study said that it is not volumes of excess water. It can be as much as a quarter of an inch. Now, one of the things they need to know is if these people plan on irrigating, because if they are irrigating, when are they going to irrigate the most? In the dry season. They do not want water in the wetlands in the dry season. That is very important. Becky passed out hard copies and read the following motion.

Motion:

Becky Ayech motioned that the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council contact Manatee County Commission chair and fellow commissioners and request the commission adopt a protection zone for the Myakka River by ordinance. The boundaries of the protection zone will be determined by 50 feet beyond the ordinary high-water line, or the maximum extent of the wetland vegetation or the FEMA 100-year floodplain, whichever is the most protective of the river. No fill will be allowed 150 feet landward of the protection zone boundary. Residential structures will be set back 150 feet landward of the protection zone. Dark skies regulations will be implemented in a five-mile radius of a protection zone.

Becky continued. There is no way in the world that they are ever going to get OFW or Wild and Scenic on this river (in Manatee County). It is not going to happen because it has to be navigable, and property owners are not willing to have people go by their property and potentially jump out. She has been in a 35-year fight over Fisheating Creek, just to let them on the creek. A lot of the property owners along the river are ranchers. They do not want people jumping out of their canoes and boats and going and petting little Bessie out in the field. Manatee County, at this moment, can start implementing a protection zone around the river. There is nothing to stop them. She has talked to the people that are working on this about what they need to do, what the rules and procedures are. She told them to get a hold of their Manatee County Commissioner, be friendly to them, right away, and talk to them about doing this. She said this moving forward and requested a second for her motion.

Glenn asked before you do that, we have four good recommendations (referring to Miri's slide).

Becky responded, if someone makes that as a motion, she thinks her motion captures those recommendations.

Miri stated just to clarify I like your motion, it is important. At hand there is an application that is going through the system. It was returned to the applicant for additional information. They have not scheduled anything yet, but she thinks the time to act and to get to the commissioners with this input is now.

Becky responded that the commission at this moment is working to implement the motion she just made. We should get this to them now. There was a golf course that they wanted to do a conservation subdivision on in Sarasota County, and they came into the county, and they asked for it. They got Sarasota County to say no more conservation subdivisions. In the meantime, John Cannon is out there. Now, his application is in, but they have not changed the language yet. They just said, "No more conservation subdivisions." They have not gone through the public process. They have not amended the UDC. They have not amended the comp plan. As soon as

he heard that, he knew he was sunk. Since the commissioners have already been approached about this. This is where the commission is going. They already know they have a hard row to hoe because of previous actions, that may make them take a step back because they have to respond to their environmental questions that the staff had asked of them.

Jono stated Becky has made a motion, is there a second.

Rob Wright stated he would second the motion.

Motion Discussion.

Debbie Musallam asked what is the difference between saying nothing can be done from 50 feet and saying nothing can be done from the high water?

Chris replied that Manatee County does not have any of the same protections. This motion is about creating or having Manatee County create a similar framework.

Glenn asked if Jono would prefer two separate motions or one motion?

Jono replied that it seems like Becky's understanding is that there is a movement that includes a significant proportion of county commissioners that would embrace all the Myakka River in Manatee County and create this zone. If that goes through, his understanding is that it might affect the thinking of the Terra Nova people. He thinks it is appropriate to move forward on the Myakka River county-wide. What Miri's come up with is a concern about a specific project that is moving forward. I do not think there is a particular problem in addressing the commission with a county-wide approach to the Myakka River, and then a subsequent recommendation with specific concerns about Terra Nova Preserve. He is willing to write two emails if it comes to it. That is not an issue.

Ann Hardy asked if he is looking for a member to put this into a second motion?

Jono replied yes, eventually. Whatever happens to the first motion, the Council would look for a member to make a motion that reflects Miri's thinking. None of this mentions Terra Nova. This is genericized. I think we would be looking for something that specifically denotes Terra Nova in relation to these issues.

Ann asked if this will be undermined by Senate Bill 180.

Becky replied that Senate Bill 180 is being litigated by Manatee and Orange County, it may be litigated by Sarasota County because they feel that their hands are being tied to do flood control. A bigger culvert, that is more restrictive. Becky and others got people to send emails to the Florida Associations of Counties. They were soliciting requests for things you would like them to do on behalf of your county and your commission. A bunch of people wrote in and said, "180 out."

Miri added that in the Manatee County Commissioners meeting last week, they discussed 180. The commission plans to have a special hearing about 180 soon. During last week's meeting,

Commissioner Kruse specifically said, "We are going to move forward with what we want to do. Let them sue us." He is adamant to make this happen.

Becky added on her motion that all the land along the Myakka River in Manatee County is ranches. There were no houses, and there were no golf courses. The river needed protection, but there were no density stresses that are going to be put on the entire river.

Jono added that when they showed up years ago and said maybe Manatee County should have a Wild and Scenic River, the reaction was no. In March of 1978, he put a canoe in at Crane Park in Myakka City and canoed to El Jobean. Before they could get to Myakka River State Park, they had to go through nine barbed wire fences. They did not cut any fences; they spread them apart. Whether people owned across the river or did not own across the river, it was not considered navigable. People thought that they could have the cows run on both sides of the river, and that is still true. The property immediately upstream of Myakka Park or upstream of the bridge, Triangle Ranch, they own both sides of the river for several miles.

Steve replied that this is good. The numbers he sees in the proposal are different than what they have in Sarasota County. Does it make sense to mirror the numbers already in place for Sarasota County to propose to Manatee County?

Chris replied that those numbers are complicated, partially because the county broke in lots under five acres as 50. Lots that are bigger than five acres are 150. The idea was this is all big, parceled land.

Becky added that she did some research on that with some very astute people, and they came up with that. Down in the North Port area, up above the North Port area, they have a lot of little trailer parks that were there for a long time. This is all basically virgin land from the development standpoint.

Jono re-read the motion and called for the vote.

Motion:

Becky Ayech motioned that the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council contact Manatee County Commission chair and fellow commissioners and request the commission adopt a protection zone for the Myakka River by ordinance. The boundaries of the protection zone will be determined by 50 feet beyond the ordinary high-water line, or the maximum extent of the wetland vegetation or the FEMA 100-year floodplain, whichever is the most protective of the river. No fill will be allowed 150 feet landward of the protection zone boundary. Residential structures will be set back 150 feet landward of the protection zone. Dark skies regulations will be implemented in a five-mile radius of a protection zone. Rob Wright seconded. Emily Barnett (FDOT), Katie Cassell (Sarasota County), Bruno Kapacinskas (SWFWMD), Stefan Kalev (City of North Port), Sarina Barnard (CHNEP) and Debra Woihe (Manatee County) abstained. Motion passed.

Jono called for the separate motion based on Miri's presentation.

Esmeralda Figueras added that it is great to have a two-pronged approach in front of the Manatee County Planning Commission, it is good to have two strategies going forward.

Motion:

Glenn Compton motioned that the chair of the MRMCC write letters to the Manatee County Planning and County Commissioners to:

- thank them for commitment to protecting wetlands by reverting to 50-foot buffers and restricting density in floodplains and reiterate the importance of Myakka's wetlands and the Myakka River to the State of Florida and the nation
- express concern about the potential lasting impacts of developments recently permitted on the Myakka River within the floodplain on water quality and the river's outstanding values
- question the use of average buffer size, wetland mitigation banks and outdated floodplain maps in this highly sensitive ecosystem
- request that any future applications or policies impacting the Myakka River floodplain directly solicit the input of the MRMCC

Stacey Mazza-Gilkison seconded. **Emily Barnett (FDOT)**, **Katie Cassell (Sarasota County)**, **Bruno Kapacinskis (SWFWMD)**, **Stefan Kalev (City of North Port)**, **Sarina Barnard (CHNEP)** and **Debra Woithe (Manatee County)** abstained. Motion passed.

Discussion continued about virtual meetings and how stakeholders are able to express themselves.

Break 10:39 to 10:49

NEW BUSINESS

Jono Miller-Chair's Report

Jono projected his [Report Slides](#) on topics starting with noting Dwayne Carbonneau, the Assistant Alligator Management Program Coordinator, is central to decisions on the recreational harvest of alligators on the Myakka. Jono called him up and told him Myakka is a well-known gator viewing location. This alligator viewing is a resource value of the river, that people are poaching alligators in the park and they now have crocodiles in the river. Jono asked Chris about issues related to the alligator take.

Chris has two big concerns for recreational conflict; they are the fact that you could paddle Myakka and have a great day and end it by seeing someone take a gator out in the middle of the day. That is a recent rule change. A more complicated element, which is that in the permit packet itself, on the Sarasota map, which would show where you could hunt in Sarasota, says that you cannot take an alligator within 400 feet from emergent vegetation or the ordinary high-water line of any park or preserve. It is arguable that that would make most if not all the river ineligible for the hunt. At minimum, it makes it very difficult for hunters to know where they can take them.

Jono added that there has been a lot of press on social media lately about the Myakka being gator-filled or gator-infested. The Myakka is one of the 10 spots in Florida where people would recommend you go so you can see gators.

Chris stated it is arguable that that is one of the main resource values.

Jono agreed that they are a resource value for the river system. One big issue is poaching. Jono showed records of an 11-footer that was taken in 2019 and two 10-footers and a 6-footer where people said they were taken in Lower Myakka Lake, which is in the wilderness preserve. These were hunters with FWC permits. Now we have crocodiles. It seems obvious to be able to tell an alligator from a crocodile, but it is difficult in the wild.

Jono showed a photo of a crocodile taken out at Border Road on private property. The Landis parcel.

Andrew Black asked if the crocs were native saltwater crocs or are people putting them in?

Chris replied that they are native crocs and added that one in the photo was a nine-foot eight-inch female. It was caught by a licensed trapper. The trapper called FWC and then it was released at Border Road.

Jono continued projecting some data from FWC for the period of 2015 to 2024. There were 81 alligators taken. Mr. Carbonneau said that if they stopped a recreational harvest in the Myakka, that would shut down all recreational harvest in Sarasota County. Jono wrote to him and told him that he reviewed the data and the most common location listed in Sarasota County was blank. People did not fill it in. There were 35 instances where people did not say where they had taken their gator. The second most common location was Curry Creek and then Myakka River was 12. That was not counting the four that were taken illegally in Lower Myakka Lake. There were some taken in Deer Prairie Creek, which may have been inside the county's preserve. Based on that available data, it looks like a little more than a quarter were taken in the Myakka River. Taking the Myakka out of the legal places to hunt gators would be a reduction. That would not eliminate the hunt. Jono asked if he could tell him what the management objectives are either for Sarasota County or the Myakka River. That was 11 days before this meeting. Jono followed up with him the day before the meeting but did not hear back. People come to the Myakka to see gators. They are a resource for the river area. They have two tour boats that are operating where people hope to see alligators. To let one person take a ten-foot gator and deprive a thousand people of seeing a ten-foot gator does not seem right.

Debbie Musallam made a comment about people feeding alligators on the Myakka River. She was out with her grandkids on her dock and instead of retreating into the water, it came out of the water. She contacted the nuisance gator phone line.

Becky asked when Jono talked to this gentleman, "Did he talk to him as the chair of the Council or as an individual?"

Jono replied as an individual, that he thinks he understood that. Jono advance slide to address a potential development named Wellen Park H. Shanell Bosch who works for the city of North Port wrote to Chris. Jono projected her letter. If you see anyone in North Port, you should thank them because this is exactly what is supposed to happen. People that are aware of a permitting issue that affects the Myakka River should be contacting Chris for guidance. Jono projected a map of the former West Villages, now Wellen Park. Some of it is on the river. Jono showed their village H, and the drawing that is included in their material highlighting current wetlands. Jono showed where future lakes would be located and residential streets. There are two islands owned by the same company, but the plans do not say what would happen to them. It is very unclear what would happen. There is an adjacent property that is already owned by Sarasota County. In the proposal he saw, they mentioned 150 feet and 50 feet, but it is 220?

Chris clarified that it is but 220 is the actual size of what is envisioned as the buffer. You are allowed to bring structures up to 150 feet.

Jono continued. The other issue is a creek that flows into the river that is going to have stormwater ponds built on either side of it. In a drought situation, the water table is going to drop, here and here. He expects that would change the flow in the creek because the water is going to be lower. That is a potential issue.

Becky asked if they are stormwater ponds or lakes?

Jono was not sure but guessed they are lakes for fill.

Becky added that the issue that they talked about of lakes being filled with treated effluent. This needs to be examined. If it is effluent, then they should ask them to be lined.

Stefan Kalev added that as a new division with natural resources, they want to seek this valuable input from the Council. This is something that they want to encourage, this type of communication. They still need to aim for rules based on their Unified Land Development Code and then recommendatory input to the applicant as well. Either way they will gather some good feedback from the Council.

Jono thanked Stefan for bringing this to Chris' attention. Jono continued that the Venice Campground is in the due diligence phase, and the county expects to acquire it in late '25. The county is still talking to the Southern 65 owners about possible acquisition. The portion that is close to River Road would be developed and portions in floodplain conserved. The Westbrook Parcel is also in due diligence. He showed the Englewood Youth Foundation property. The county already owns an undeveloped portion, and the Sleeping Turtles Preserve opposite it. The entrance to the Englewood Youth Foundation goes across the Diocese of Venice property and they have a right-of-way. They have an agreement where they can access the property for their current use, but were the county to acquire it, there would have to be a separate agreement with the diocese. That has not been worked out yet. There is a parcel in North Port that is a potential acquisition. In the past, the city of North Port expressed an interest because it is along U.S. 41, that they would prefer to see it developed and protected. They do not know if that is currently the case. The most exciting one is the Rocky Ford property. The county acquired a lot of property from the Green Trust, but they withheld this parcel which has 3,000 feet of river frontage. This would be a great acquisition. It is a willing seller. That would be great. Sarasota Magazine has had a couple of articles recently about the Myakka. This refers to the fact that in 1975, the county commission voted to pursue having a federal designation for the Wild and Scenic River. It is 50 years of the county commission being interested in protecting the Myakka River. John McCarthy wrote about kayaking and Miri wrote about wildlife on the river. The river has come up a little recently, but back in early January, there was not enough water in the river to paddle.

Katie Cassell-Sarasota County

Katie introduced herself. She is acting as the alternate for Sarasota County. She is the Environmental Supervisor under Howard Berna and her team enforces the Myakka River Protection Zone and WCNA through permitting and code enforcement.

Becky asked if Sarasota County is moving forward with dark skies protection for the river?

Katie replied she will ask about that.

Debra Woithe-Manatee County

Debra is the Environmental Lands Division Manager of Manatee County. She was hired to implement the referendum to buy more conservation land, and it has been quite a challenge. This week coming up, she anticipates that they will be closing on the Crane Park addition. It is about 14 acres. They hope to partner with CHNEP and do some restoration along the Myakka River there because the river gets a lot of use. The addition will be a park, not a preserve. Maybe in the future when there are funds, there could be some restoration of the banks and the floodplain there. She continued discussing conservation purchases. Only seven of those 10 purchases have used the conservation fund. When they have a property that is nominated, they consider all of its best uses. Sometimes it turns out it is better for another purpose. For instance, one of them is being used to mitigate for road impacts, it is wetland improvements for mitigation. That did not come out of the conservation fund. In the Myakka River Watershed are Mossy Island Ranch. She spoke with the Rural and Family Lands program this week. They are sending a Memorandum of Understanding, for a partnership between Manatee County and the Rural and Family Lands that they each pay half of that easement cost. The owner is interested. It is 350 acres, and they are excited about that. Another potential parcel is called Prairie View. It is on the rim of the marsh. You look over and it reminds her of Payne's Prairie. The owners are selling it. It would be a fabulous property that if the buyer wanted to sell further development rights, they could buy the conservation easement. There could be some ecotourism and other things that could happen there. It is beautiful. There are some nice native plants along the bank. They have one home there. A lot of it is wet, it is already protected. The LMAC did approve it for conservation easement.

The next property they are calling both Anson Road Properties and the Myakka Corridor Addition, depending on which version you are looking at. They got it added to the Florida Forever List last year. They were hoping to partner with them and get some of their funds, but the legislature decided that all the funding for next year for Florida Forever is going to the O-to-O corridor in North Florida. Very disappointing because they had hoped to have some partner funds for this property, but it looks like they are going to need to use their conservation fund fully to buy it fee simple. It is worth it. They need to do it. They do have eight properties they are working on countywide right now. Some of them are outside of the Myakka River Watershed. It has some fabulous scrub habitat. It has the potential to benefit the future of the M4 scrub jay population because it decreases the dispersal distance between the other populations of the bird, and it has great potential. It is adjacent to the 105 acres that they have already purchased. They have been calling Triple Oak. This is going to create about 700 acres. It is helping them make connections between their existing conservation easement down south in the Myakka River. Up across State Road 70, FDOT has already identified that area for a potential future wildlife crossing. Her group wants to work on some Ag-easements that go to the north that connect with the conservation easements west of Flatford Swamp. They are working on some conservation easements, maybe with agritourism on the south side of the properties.

Jim Keltner-Charlotte County

Jim introduced himself. He is an Environmental Inspections Coordinator and Community Development. He deals with permitting.

Stefan Kalev-City of North Port

Stefan indicated that North Port initiated one of their tree planting projects throughout the city which is funded by mitigation from development, and that is a first for their division. Mainly, the

goal is to plant more trees, especially around playgrounds and city-owned areas that are currently ecological deserts. Stefan is working on initiating the city's Land Acquisition Program and they have inspected numerous potential sites throughout the city. Ultimately, these will be presented to the commission.

Jono asked if North Port has funding for land acquisition?

Stefan replied that they do. They used to have a tree fund. This is now called an Environmental Protection Fund. As their Unified Land Development Code has changed, they are able to now use some of this funding towards land acquisition.

Jono stated that when the commission is done ranking the properties they should get the candidates to Sarasota County. If they agree, then the county can help acquire those.

Stefan confirmed that this would be another channel that they can use to acquire. This would be strictly if the city acquired these properties. They will also pursue collaboration with other organizations.

Jono added that one of the things the county is exploring or is interested in is funding some test cases is acquiring land within a municipality and then transferring the title to the municipality.

Stefan has not spent much time looking at the plans for Wellen Park, Village H, but he is 99% sure that they will not be effluent retention ponds. Those should be regular stormwater retention pond areas.

Christina Rimes-City of Venice

Christina stated the city does have a section on the Myakka River with the bank eroding near a sidewalk. Chris sent her a picture. It was getting bad. The park is closed for repairs of that. They are removing the sidewalk and relocating it a few feet west of where it is currently. They are going to replace it with shell, not with pavement, to go with the natural part of the park. They are going to put some plantings in that are going to help stabilize the bank.

Sarina Barnard-CHNEP

Sarina advised that the CHNEP is hosting their annual Southwest Florida Resiliency Summit in September. It is in tandem with the Florida Statewide Resiliency Conference. The CHNEP has recorded Water Atlas tutorial videos showing how to use the Water Atlas. There is a lot of water quality and habitat data related to the Myakka on there, she encouraged the Council to check it out.

Emily Barnett-FDOT

Emily introduced a new employee, Tori Hordeman. She has been with FDOT for a few months. They are very excited to have her on board. Construction on River Road is still scheduled to finish up in early 2027, so there are no changes there from the last meeting.

Jono asked if there has been any resolution about the tree mortality and who is responsible for that?

Ray Westbrook replied that the way Sarasota County was purchasing their property near Snook Haven Park. Many properties were damaged by the dewatering for the road project. The county is working with the owners.

Andrew Black-FWC

Andrew mentioned new FWC survey data on alligators from July 28, 2025. This was for Myakka River and Lake Myakka. They had a total count of 321 gators. There were over 127 adults, bigger than six feet. While monitoring these populations, they mostly care about adult population since they are the breeders. The total count for the year is relatively high compared to previous surveys in other years. If anybody does have issues with alligators, say nuisance calls, they have a SNAP program that you could contact through the FWC agency office. It has to meet two criteria. It has to be at least four feet in length, but also be deemed a nuisance, bothering you, your pets or something. Not just existing in the water.

Esmeralda asked what the SNAP program does.

Andrew replied that it is their nuisance alligator program. If a gator is coming and bothering you, they will have a trapper come and eradicate the gator. Most of the time they get rid of them.

Additional discussion occurred about the SNAP program.

Bruno Kapacinskas-SFWMD

Bruno mentioned the SFWMD kicked off their Cooperative Funding Initiative (CFI) for 2027. Their CFI funding is a matching funds program. They are focused right now on alternative water supply and smaller projects of municipalities, smaller organizations and HOAs. The WMD has recently conducted a prescribed burn north of Prairie Creek down at Deer Prairie, south of I-75. That was at 7001 Forbes Trail. Their staff hydrologist has noted that their climate prediction center has indicated that they expect above normal rainfall from August through November 2025.

Becky asked about Flatford Swamp.

Bruno replied that They are still injecting out there.

Becky asked how many gallons a day?

Bruno did not know because they got electrical hits out there. They take a lot of lightning hits out there with the pump and with the well. He will provide that information.

Additional discussion on lighting rods occurred.

Caroline Ritchey & Richard Larson-Florida Forest Service (FFS)

Caroline stated that the FFS is doing site preparation for 178.5 acres for planting South Florida slash. Some of that is in an area that did not have good regeneration and some of it is making up for the salvage harvest they did for Hurricane Ian. In addition to that, they are doing habitat restoration, and single-pass drum chopping as well. Last year they did some drum chopping and mid-story work with funding from the Turkey Federation and they were sending before and after

photos to them attempting to get more funding for this coming year. The jury is still out on that, but they were impressed with the before and after. They have seen an increased population of turkeys in the forest already. They would love to say it is management, but it is probably Wellen Park going in. The forest is the last little green zone across the street. They are trying to make it the best for the incoming wildlife.

Caroline noted some invasive species management. Most of their work last month was cogon grass followed by Brazilian pepper.

Currently, road work has been put on hold on their Shell Road while they are waiting for a hydrology report from engineers because they want to put in culverts. SWFWMD came out and gave them some recommendations. Before they can do the culverts, they need the specific construction documents from the engineers based on that hydrology report. SWFWMD did give them their permitting for their ADA compliant boardwalk that is going to go into the depression marsh, because they have such a high request for more accessible ways for people to interact with their forests. They will be hopefully moving forward with construction on that in the coming year.

Richard Larson noted he is a county forester for private landowners. He is working on a couple restoration plans in Myakka City equaling about 50 acres. He has a property under stewardship management that borders MRSP. That is about 200 acres. He is working with the potential property buyers of the old Oak Ford Golf Course. They want to do full restoration of that property if they are the ones that acquire that one.

Continued discussion on Oak Ford, open space requirements, and the general location Wellen Park.

Becky Ayech-ECOSWF

Becky stated that conservation subdivisions are no longer allowed in the rural area. She thanked Jono for getting up and speaking to the commissioners about how ridiculous it was. Thanks to Commissioner Smith. He said it was the stupidest idea you ever heard. That was a quote from her, but he did not recognize her. Finally, that absurd notion that you could pile houses all on top of each other out in rural areas, dig a pond, put a bunch of water in it, pave over everything and change the entire landscape - is not a conservation subdivision anymore. That is wonderful news.

ECOSWF has been working to get everybody to realize the insanity of House Bill 180. She has been involved in the bear hunt fight, and it seems as though the people that are making the decisions are kind of clueless. They complain because the environmentalists are emotional and yet they have given them facts, but the hunters are not emotional, and they have given no facts. They too have had trouble trying to get them to address wildlife populations, their significance and their importance in the whole scheme of life. They are still working on that one.

Becky said she is helping people in Terra Nova. She met a whole bunch of people out in Myakka City that are interesting in protections. She continued saying that she is concerned about the potential impact to the Myakka River. Sarasota County has an injection well that they want to put in for their treated effluent at the Bee Ridge Road facility. ECOSWF first came to this because it is going to be injected as deep as the wells on Hi Hat Ranch. It is in the same zone. The wells on Hi Hat Ranch are cased shallow, meaning they have a borehole of 1,435 feet and they have a well casing of 45 feet. All the water moves up like this and out into a different

aquifer, which is illegal but has never been enforced. She raised the issue with DEP, and they told her she should be happy because the pressure out by the Verna Well Field is going to go up and the water level is going to be raised by half a foot. It does not stop at the Verna Well Field, and it does not stop at her house. It is in the Myakka River watershed. She does not know if raising the hydraulic pressure in the Floridian aquifer, which then allows migration of poorer water quality up into the intermediate aquifer and then potentially into the surficial aquifer is going to have impacts on the Myakka River. She asked them to look at the watershed more specifically. She asked that both the City of Sarasota, which is improperly cased, as well as the Hi Hat Ranch to properly case the wells so that cross-contamination does not happen. They are waiting to hear what they are going to do. Hi Hat Ranch is going to develop so they are not going to need those irrigation wells except to augment their lakes when there is not enough treated effluent to fill their lakes. That is called reuse. It is not aesthetics because they are not pumping it straight onto the land. They are pumping it into the lake and then the lake water is used for irrigation.

Becky concluded noting that Representative Greg Steube has proposed legislation to look at PFAS, why they have them, where they come from and where they are going. She did alert him to the fact that Lakewood Ranch has a lot of treated effluent lakes that are filled and not lined. The water is probably migrating his way. Lakewood Ranch has told them that they like lateral seepage. What and where this will ultimately go, she does not know, but it is happening in the Myakka River watershed.

Jono told Becky that he and Julie took samples for PFAS in Myakka Park and Border Road and got them to somebody in Gainesville. If she writes to Julie, she may be able to tell you if they have gotten answers back about how much PFAS. Is there any news about amendment one litigation?

Becky replied that that can has been kicked down the road and they cannot get their partners that litigated with them before to go back into that litigation. Even though Earth Justice represents them in their pro bono, there are still the hard costs. No, it is gone. They are finished.

Esmeralda Figueras-Big Waters Land Trust

Esmeralda stated Big Waters is working on a bunch of things that are not quite ready to be announced yet. They are continuing to save land and restore habitat and treat invasive species through burns. There is hopefully going to be a burn at Tatum, on the Myakka next week. They are also doing some wildlife surveys that they are going to hear back from soon about bats in the Myakka Headwaters. If anyone is interested in hearing the results of that, they can email her.

A brief discussion of Sunshine Law occurred. Chris added that members can contact him if needed.

Steve Giguere-FDEP/Myakka River State Park (MRSP)

MRSP had an interesting year. The park went from extremely dry conditions to extremely wet conditions in a very short period. Visitation wise, they had a fairly slow year. That is probably attributed mainly to the tour boats not being able to run from around mid-December through their busy season. The decrease in visitation has led to a better experience in the park, especially for locals who like to enjoy the park for its resource values. He looked at March

visitation numbers from 2012, their peak year, and they have gone down almost exactly by half from then. Less visitors have led to a nicer park.

Chris noticed that the boats were not running the day before the meeting, and they had not run even since water levels came up this season. His understanding is that the concession does not have the staff.

Steve continued, they are trying to hire a boat captain and resume tours. Wildlife is great out in the park right now. If you have a chance to visit the park, along the park drive, deer are out, turkey are out in big numbers, tons of wading birds. It is a nice time to visit. At this time, we are still waiting for the annual budget. The division lost positions statewide, and MRSP were one, unfortunately losing another staff member. That would be three full-time staff members that they have lost over the past 10 years.

Jono asked about the status of the update for the Unit Management Plan (UMP) for MRSP.

Chris Becker replied that Tallahassee has had some staffing turnovers, and they have other new obligations. They are hearing that the public meetings for the management plan should be this winter.

Jono asked about public hearings and the group of locals that are convened before the hearings.

Chris Becker replied that they are usually scheduled together, and it is called the advisory group. Usually, the advisory group will meet after the public meeting. If new things came up during the public meeting, they could be discussed by the advisory group who helps direct any changes to the plan.

Additional discussion occurred about the format of the new UMPs.

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

Chris started his update with map pointing out the Vanderipe Dike which is a large structure on the southwestern corner of the Upper Myakka Lake. They have been talking about it for a couple years. He worked with the SWFWMD and applied for a CFI. That CFI project was close to being funded, but it did not happen. He went to Ducks Unlimited. They were interested in potentially doing the initial survey work and potentially working with modeling companies to see what the benefit would be. That structure, which was built by the CCC around 1940, the main dike is about a thousand feet long. It has some other additions that were made later. The structure is having an impact. There are a lot of invasive grasses and things that are growing in it. The dike has been breached. Hurricane Ian was the first breach when it was small. This last set of storms now, it is about jonboat wide, six or eight feet. It is not going to get any better. Does this structure have any impact on flooding the adjacent community? That is not known.

Jono showed the dike that separates Upper Myakka Lake from Vanderipe Slough and then there is a housing development on the west side of the slough. The dike is unfortunately both in the park and on private property, which is similar to the dike at Hidden River.

Jono used to be able to step across the breach.

Chris added that breach is wider now. They could in perpetuity do nothing. Typically, their UMPs tell them not to do that. The plans say they need to evaluate what is the best thing to do, and if feasible, do it. Vanderipe is more feasible. The Hidden River Dike has houses right behind the dike and until all the owners take a USDA buyout or something else, that is less feasible. Chris continued there are several shoreline permits and issues. The Cope property, that house is very close to the river, like Senator Bob Johnson's home near Laurel Road. That project has a different consultant which is looking at using more of a natural systems approach. Like what they were trying to get the church to do a few years ago. Chris showed a photo of the asphalt path at Venice Myakka River Park at the end of Laurel Road. They met maybe a year or two ago on site. They saw this coming. After the last couple of storms a few cabbage palms pulled off the bank. They did go in the water, and they pulled some soil with them. There is about a foot of undercut. The plan was to slowly phase out this paved path and which is happening now.

A lot of the stuff that they do in MRSP relies on other people. They have a great volunteer team. They have awesome partners. They met twice since the last meeting with FWC. One is their navigation waterways group called IPM, and the other is the AHRES, Aquatic Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Subsection. FWC has funded a lot of their projects. AHRES paid for the construction phase when they removed the weir at the Upper Lake in March of 2022. They get together usually once or twice a year and they say, "How can FWC support us? How can they apply for grants? How can they use their expertise to get more stuff done in the park?" One of the things that they were looking at is the leaf of a yellow water lily, *Nymphaea mexicana*. It is native. They surveyed looking to see floating leaf plants in the system. Chris projected two photos from the Upper Lake near where they found the two individual water lily plants. In the past around 100 acres of floating leaf plants were frequently present in the Upper Lake. There are several drivers, but the driver that they currently have is invasive tropical fish. They are too numerous. Having the floating leaf plant coverage, this not only has water quality benefits but having that structure in the lake is going to make a much better fishery. Why did they have it in 2013 when from 2001 to 2012, they did not see any floating leaf plants in the system? It is because they have freezes every now and then. They are less frequent now. As it gets warmer and they have less freezes that are less intense and do not last as long, they are going to have more problems with invasive fish. It is something they were talking about potentially putting in cages with plants into the lake, doing a test plot. They put an application that did not get funded for this cycle. They were trying to figure out, is there something they can do? Which plants should they use? It is an ongoing project, and they are still working on it, and it will probably be in their next UMP to continue that work.

Chris stated the Downs' Dam Restoration was a huge partnership. They had FWC support. The water management district helped them with the feasibility study. Chris showed an aerial view that USDA took from their helicopter. The Downs' Dam project was completed, the final walkthrough with their consultant WSP on May 21st. WSP determined the project substantially complete. That was followed by the as-built survey, which is typically the last thing you do to show how all the elevations ended up. Those as-builts were sent to WSP for their final review before they submitted their final paperwork to the Army Corps of Engineers.

Chris highlighted and read from the September (2024) MRMCC Minutes, "Chris talked about the Downs' Dam removal project planned for early 2025". "The project is still waiting on an Army Corps permit, which is their last major obstacle. If that is all secured. If they have good weather and can get physically down there with equipment, then the Downs' Dam will be removed." Chris noted that was the plan, and they almost did that, but their funding was frozen by the

federal government. They planned to again kick off in January or February. They tried to mobilize and then realized they did not have any funds.

Chris continued noting the [2019 adopted MRSP Unit Management Plan](#) and several of their plans before that, including the 1990 Wild and Scenic River Plan and the 2011 Wild and Scenic River Plan, specifically called the study, included the removal of both the Upper Myakka Lake and Downs' Dam. Similarly, the [SWFWMD's Charlotte Harbor Swim Plan](#). The Myakka River flows into Charlotte Harbor and in 2020 that stakeholder driven product said, "The District has co-funded studies conducted with the FDEP, Division of Recreation and Parks, to investigate restoration options...The Downs' Dam study is on-going at the time of this SWIM Plan update. Once completed, the study will provide recommendations for restoration and restoration plans are expected to be developed in conjunction with USFWS and FFWCC to implement the recommendations". Chris projected the scores from the cost-benefit analysis. and recommendations from the feasibility study noting Alternative One, the removal, scored eight points. Modifying it so that manatees would be less likely to find it as an obstacle and fish passage would be improved, scored a one. Re-building the dam like it was originally built scored a zero. These scores are based on everything from how easy it would be to permit, to water quality, and recreation.

Chris highlighted the Conditions at Downs' Dam section from the feasibility study showing the park was seeing negative consequences from the dam. You can do nothing, or you can do what is recommended by a study. Chris projected slides showing the condition of the dam. Even with the sluice gate open, erosion was causing MRSP to lose hydric hammock, which is one of their wetland protected habitats. He showed how hazardous it was for recreationists and the breach. If you were trying to paddle through, you had to navigate all the trees.

Chris projected a summarized timeline for the project noting the initial conversations started in 2017, 2018. The kickoff of the study was Valentine's Day 2020. There have been discussions this whole time about what to do. Chris pointed out key items like in March 2021 with the draft feasibility report and that is when the recommendations are already apparent since the scoring was in. He noted the yellow highlighted dates for public comment and when the Council could weigh in. Then they got their first permit from the water management district, put a notice in the newspaper, later they got their Army Corps permit, and then established their formal agreement because US Fish and Wildlife Service conducted and paid for the entire construction phase. Early 2025 the project was paused. Then they mobilized, completed the project and then the walkthrough.

Chris showed post construction slides and images of wildlife noting that once they started removing structures, they started to see better wildlife in the floodplain lakes. Chris showed a photo of the biggest group of American white pelicans he is ever seen in this system. Then an image of the eastern bank which was all washed out by the dam. Chris showed photos of the WSP engineers, the people who came up with their plans and certified the work. This is the coconut coir mat. They planted plants that were growing in the park to put in the bank knowing that they would probably not survive due to water levels coming up and they will have to replant again next year. Chris projected photos looking south to where the USGS gauge is. He highlighted a quick growth from a seed mix that was put down and a large mass of fish. Snook. Many big snook immediately present after the project in the footprint dam.

Chris praised the volunteer super team members and staff for their help. Zach collected a lot of the plants. The PANTHER Team and some rangers helped Chris collect plants. It could not have been done without Friends of Myakka River State Park. That is what they are talking about with partnerships. There were a lot of people involved in this. Since at least the eighties and nineties, people have been saying this has to be done.

Michelle said there were a lot more snook than what was seen in that picture.

Chris replied yes, there were probably 60 to 80 snook right there.

Michelle agreed saying when she first pulled up and started walking down, she thought there were people down there on the water because there was so much sound from the fish coming up over the rocky area where the dam used to be, it was impressive.

Chris emphasized that this is the reason why they have objectives, like their 2019 Management Plan, which is the last one for the park that said they had to do this. They do not want to remove a dam because there is a dam. It is about returning the hydrology to the natural condition. He projected photos that he took. One was at the Lower Lake during the dry season. He showed a photo of the largest group of wood storks he has ever seen. It is the biggest one they have in the database. He showed one of the biggest groupings of roseate spoonbills and a black skimmer. As soon as they pulled out the Upper Myakka Lake weir, they started seeing many more skimmers than previously recorded.

Miri added that this kind of documentation is also important for illustrating the importance of free-flowing rivers, which is one of the characteristics of the Partnership Wild and Scenic River. Helping the community and their legislators understand that it is not about wanting to knock things down. It is about the outstanding values and enhancing them. These images are helpful for the educational portion of these efforts because people who live on the river can be doing these things, and they can see how beautiful it is and the amazing enhancements to the river that would bring them rather than building a wall.

Becky asked if the manatee at the 780 bridge was still there.

Chris received a report from Miri's friend, but he has had trouble getting up into that area lately.

Miri added that the observation at C.R. 780 was July 19th.

Chris replied that it is either eighth or ninth year with observations near CR780.

Michelle added it has been a pleasure to help Chris a lot on the river surveys, especially in the off season when nobody else wants to go. She recently had the privilege of doing the lower section, which she had never done before. She knows Chris shares his reports with a lot with stakeholders, especially a lot of the property managers on the river. But that one especially, even the normal section between the park going down to Venice Myakka River Park, she wanted to comment on the abundance of invasive species issues on the river and where they are seeing some of that exploding, especially the climbing fern and a lot of the limpograss issues. Chris has always been supportive if anyone has access issues or wants to see their property from the riverside, trying to get in on those surveys sometimes would be a good opportunity to see what is going on. Access to those areas to treat can be a real problem, but it

is shockingly depressing how bad some of that is. Especially post-storm. They are seeing it a lot.

Chris added that Hurricane Ian and then the trifecta of storms last season has opened up the canopy and a lot of disturbance loving invasive species have capitalized on that.

Becky asked if Jono had received any response on the letter sent to the county commissioners explaining all the reasons why they were lied to about the dam wall on the river and that they wanted it down.

Jono has not received a response.

Chris noted that we are a touch ahead of schedule, we can touch on topics like previously discussed developments or alligator management or pick out topics for the next meeting? And pick a date.

Becky added that the SWFWMD has updated its regional water plan. She always tells them that the Myakka River is not to be a water source. Please make sure that to recognize that, it is in the minutes. They say that it will not be. It is interesting how they look at rainfall because they do an average. They will say it has been rainy, but it has not been over the Myakka River where she lives. She has had absolutely no rain. That amount of rainfall is the average of their stations. If the Myakka River is not getting any rainfall, but the overall rainfall shows that it is robust, do not look at the Myakka River for a water source.

Discussion on the next tentative meeting date occurred.

Tentative Next Meeting: November 7th, 2025

Discussed about an old USGS gauge near I-75, post hurricane trees blocking egress, and the Old Myakka Fall Hootenanny on October 5th at the Old Myakka Community Club.

Becky Ayech motioned to adjourn the meeting. Robert Wright seconded. The meeting was adjourned.