

Myakka River Management Coordinating Council
Colonial Oaks Park, 5300 Colonial Oaks Blvd, Sarasota, FL 34232
May 9, 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 April 25, 2025.

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Jono Miller – Sierra Club
Steve Giguere- FDEP
Stefan Kalev-City of North Port
Ann Hardy-SCLWV
Victor Dobrin-Homeowner
Randall Shotto-City of Sarasota
Howard Berna-Sarasota County
Lee Amos-BWLT
Barbara Lockhart-ECNP
Chuck Johnston-O Bar O
Juliette Jones-FWMS

Glenn Compton-Manasota 88
Rob Wright-Sarasota Audubon
Nikki Gilmer-FDOT
Stacey Mazza-Gilkison-Friends of Myakka
Richard Larson-FFS
Becky Ayech-ECOSWF
Jean Pichler-Venice Audubon
Cristina Rimes-City of Venice
Hugh Haylik-GCHSC
Jamie Richardson-FWC
Jennifer Krajcir-NPFOWL

INTERESTED PARTIES

Chris Oliver – FDEP/FPS
Ray Westbrook-Homeowner
Miri Hardy-Friends of Myakka
Chris Becker-FDEP/FPS
Kristen Nowak-FL Wildlife Corridor Foundation

Nadine Hallenbeck – FDEP/FPS
Michelle Keirse-FDEP
Linda Wilson-ECOSWF
Derek Gilliam-Suncoast Searchlight
Mike Jones-Sarasota County

- **Call to Order and Role Call.**
- **Approval of the Meeting Minutes from December 13, 2024.** Becky Ayech moved to approve the minutes and Stefan Kalev seconded.

Public Comments: Ray Westbrook reported that the Dolomite property at Border moved. It was a private purchase. They are only going to build two houses. They are going to enjoy that big lake. They got the offer that was asked, and so it was sold. And they are going to be good neighbors for the Myakka River.

Becky Ayech reported that Myakka Road is closed, so nobody can get to the north part of the park. The traffic of seven, eight, and 900 cars a day has been reduced to about 10 or 11. It is wonderful.

OLD BUSINESS

Jono Miller-Chair's Report

Jono shared slides related to the Council's [Old Business](#) and began by discussing a motion made at the December 13, 2024, meeting. He was directed to write to the county commission regarding the Myakka Retreat Center seawall, but the hearing was on December 17, 2024, so that letter did not happen. During those days, Jono was organizing testimony from 11 people. He showed a photograph taken July 24, 2020,

when he and Chris first met on site to tell them that they thought the seawall was not going to be permissible. It had been four years, four months, and 19 days that he has been working on it. While the Council letter was not written before the vote, after an hour and 36 minutes the Sarasota County Commission voted five to zero to deny the variance for the seawall. This was a great outcome. Yesterday, Jono contacted the county asking, "Have you heard anything? Are they doing anything? Are they moving the road? What is going on?" And the answer was, the county has not received a new application or correspondence since the hearings." He does not know what is happening on the property, but as far as he knows they are not revising their plans, or they have not yet.

Jono was supposed to write a letter on the floodplain and conservation subdivisions which he did on December 26, 2024. He sent a letter to the commissioners that included the motion with a little additional information, and that backed up a previous email they had sent them from October about conservation subdivisions.

Jono continued discussing Curry Creek noting Chris Oliver received an email from Ronald Daring who had concerns. Jono projected a portion of the letter. If people are interested in working on this Curry Creek issue, they could get in touch with Ronald. Ronald has concerns on the management of this increasingly critical drainage area, and states there is a lack of jurisdictional oversight. There are half a dozen private and public entities, very selective in their assertion of responsibility or denial of responsibility, failure to adequately clean up from hurricanes. Jono pointed out that the northernmost canal that was dredged from the Myakka River to the coast is Curry Creek and the southern one that was dredged is Blackburn Canal.

Additional discussion on the history of these drainage features occurred.

Jono continued, there was a motion about light pollution. Jono wrote on December 27, 2024, to the commissioners about that, including some facts and the wording of the motion.

At the December 13, 2024, meeting there was a presentation about conservation easements and a motion to requested legislators amend it. On January 7, 2025, he wrote to the county commissioners, but those are not the legislators. He forwarded them the article, [Keeping the Perpetual in Florida's Conservation Easements](#), by Nancy McLaughlin. It is a good article about what is not working with conservation easements. But he did not write to the legislators. Part of the reason for that is that when he sends a motion letter, he likes to include some context of what the discussion was and what the information was. The minutes were not available at that time, so he set that aside. At the presentation it was said that some legislator was going to introduce a bill. Jono thought he could wait for the bill and write in support of that. Once the session started, he contacted David Smith who was supposed to be introducing the bill. He said he has not introducing a bill this year so there was no good bill related to improving the conservation easements. Jim Waymer in Florida Today wrote a nice piece about problems with "[Conservation Easements \(don't always protect land 'forever' in Florida\)](#)".

There was a bad bill by Rodriguez, titled "Release of Conservation Easements". When Jono last looked online, it said it was indefinitely postponed and withdrawn from consideration, but they have extended a legislative session into June 2025. Anything could happen. Sometimes these bills are so narrowly focused that it appears for some peculiar situation that some powerful person wants action on. This bill text pertains to land that is less than 50 acres bordered on three or more sides by impervious surfaces, and the undeveloped adjacent parcels are less than 15 acres and also bordered on three sides by impervious

surface. This sounds like some sort of lot subdivision with pavement around it, and then they want to have relief from that. Jono does not know if it is going anywhere, but that is Senate Bill 1142. Glenn Compton recalled that we have also been discussing conservation easements specifically in the Myakka Watershed. He was wondering if there was anything new on that or for a future agenda?

Jono replied that he had been talking with Big Waters Land Trust about identifying these parcels.

Lee thinks this would be a simple mapping exercise.

Glenn replied he was also interested in the management practices in comparison, to see what is going on.

Jono added that something they have talked about and something they have done twice previously in Sarasota County is they have had an environmental audit where they bring managers out from the Web or from wherever, Kissimmee Prairie, and they come and tour the county's land management and then write up a report and say, "You are not burning enough or the ecology is this or that." That would be a good thing to do is to have another environmental audit with outside people are giving feedback.

Lee added that FNAI has an online map of conservation lands. That data is displayed by ownership type. You can see if it is by conservation easement. If you click on each parcel, you could then see the owner.

Jono moved on to the Waterfalls of Venice parcel. Many people know that it is where the Dolomite pit was before you get to the Carlton Reserve. The new owners, the Noel Louis Bergeron Trust.

Ray endorsed the new owners saying they fully understand everything and value and appreciate the beauty of the land. The previous person with the option on the land, is fighting the sell in court.

Jono continued with the Waterfalls of Venice noting he had been in communication with Kirk Crane with the county. There are no new applications for that parcel. There was nothing new to report.

National Wild & Scenic Partnership status (Chair/Miri Hardy)

Jono gave an overview of the National Wild and Scenic River Partnership. The partnership model is a relatively new type of Wild and Scenic River. The old-fashioned Wild and Scenic River had a lot of federal management. In this situation, federal ownership and management are not authorized. It is locally managed. A local Council, which would be this Council, with broad representation, that guides management. There is uncertainty with the federal budget, but up until recently, rivers that are in this partnership program received some funds to improve river resources. The current state Myakka Wild and Scenic River Program has no direct funding. A dedicated source should be helpful.

Jono cannot work with any of the Council members in between Council meetings without either creating a Sunshine Violation or having to schedule a subcommittee meeting, which is a burden on staff, but he got together five people to work as an ad-hoc group to help with this national legislation that Representative Steube is sponsoring. Miri Hardy, Chris Oliver and Jamie Doubek-Racine, formerly with the National Park Service and then Jon Thaxton with the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. This group has over 150 years of experience dealing with the Myakka.

Jono projected a bill that has been filed, HR 642. It is cited as the Myakka Wild and Scenic Act of 2025. He highlighted portions, "The state of Florida has demonstrated its commitment by its Wild and Scenic designation. The Florida county of Sarasota and the cities of Venice and North Port have demonstrated commitment by their Comprehensive Land Use Plans, ordinances, and land development regulations."

The text continues to discuss, the desire for designation of this river as a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System has been demonstrated by strong public support, state and agency, and the endorsement of the designation by the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council. While this Council directed me (in December 2023) to explore this partnership designation, we have not specifically endorsed this bill. Since then, we clearly expressed an interest in the legislation but should formally vote on this bill at today's meeting.

Jono continued with the overview discussing the definitions of wild, scenic, and recreational. Wild are rivers or sections that are free of impoundments, generally inaccessible except by trail with watersheds or shorelines, essentially primitive and waters unpolluted. Scenic are rivers or sections that are free of impoundments with shorelines, largely primitive and shorelines, largely undeveloped, but accessible. These segments are usually more developed than in the wild and less developed than recreational sections. The recreational sections are readily accessible by road or railroad, may have some development, and may have undergone some impoundment or diversion. Does not imply that recreation is an outstanding, remarkable value, or that the segment must be managed or developed for recreational activities. The bill enumerates the different sections of the river. Within the park down to S.R. 72 would be scenic. Then there would be a wild section, a scenic section, the recreational section that went just below the interstate, scenic, wild and scenic. Jono projected a map showing where the different sections would be located and additional discussion occurred on these sections and elements of partnership rivers. Jono showed the original proposal from the early eighties compared to what is being proposed now. Part of the reason for this shift is that when the original analysis was done by the federal government in the eighties, the only protected stretch of the river was in Myakka River State Park. They prepared a series of 37 maps that show all the land that since 1980 have either been purchased or protected through conservation easement. It is the vast majority of the river. The river is better protected now than it was in 1980. There are only 18 partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers, so there are not a lot of them.

Becky asked why there are so few?

Miri replied that it is because this is a very complicated process. Getting a bill introduced is the easiest part of the process and that took a long time. The first part of the process, when they reached out to Congressman Stuebe's office. There was a lot of backwards and forwards of why should we do this? What does it help? Why is this appropriate? There are national organizations that try to help with this process because this designation greatly benefits rivers. There is knowledge that is in the National Park Service system. There is also access to partners that have specific interests in rivers. One such national organization, very prominent, is American Rivers. They have a half century of experience reconnecting rivers and reconnecting communities to those rivers. They offer strategic direction and support for river conservation, restoration and enhancement, regardless of whether you are designated or not. But they have a specific division for the Wild and Scenic Rivers where they offer advice at these stages of the designation, how to navigate this process. She has had conversations with folks from organizations that represent specific rivers, and each river has their area of focus. Each river is different, that is something that is also very clear throughout the program. There is no one way to protect a river. It all depends on your situation.

Now the key partners throughout this have been the staff in Congressman Steube's office, and they have been fantastic. They started working first with Reed Powell. At the time, he was a legislative aide. He was promoted to the D.C Legislative Director. He is still involved with the work, but he was instrumental in those initial stages of getting the bill to the point that their attorneys were happy to sign off on it. They are now working very closely with Ronnie Carabbia., who is from Sarasota. They were able to have him over to the park, a first time for him, a couple of weeks ago, and he learned a lot about the river and their

outstandingly remarkable values that they have. Ronnie met this week with folks from Big Waters who are on the Hill for Advocacy Week as well. He learned a lot about conservation easements. It is these kinds of partnerships that are not going away. They are on board, and they are working very hard to make this happen. How does a bill get enacted? It must go through a lot of processes. This is where the partners who have gone through this and the partners in the coalition have been invaluable. The best way to figure out what the next best moves are, are to look at the rivers that were most recently designated, which is the York and the Housatonic. They were referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources. Both the Housatonic and the York were designated after going through that same Committee in the Senate. That is something that we are working toward too. In a recent conversation with Ronnie, he kept saying what the attorneys for the committees want to see is that you really want it. They also need us to continue to provide clear support from the community that speaks to, we really want this, and this will really benefit us. They want to hear why this would empower the community, and why the river matters. The letter from CHNEP, which endorses these efforts, is fantastic. (The CHNEP letter was passed around.)

Miri continued. The Board of Sarasota County Commissioners just approved writing a letter of support for this process as well. They are looking for letters from other community partners and private landowners. That is extremely important because on the Hill, in the Senate, they want to be sure that everyone here feels that this is a good thing, and that people support it and want to see this happen. Most importantly, they need to illustrate that the Council is behind this and wants to keep on working to make this bill move forward and be enacted.

Becky asked about earlier when Jono showed a slide of the ownership of lands and the government entities that are attached to those. Have they been reached out to and have they also signed on?

Chris noted that CHNEP Policy Committee members usually represent our regional and local government entities. DEP is the co-chair of this committee that sent the letter. Other members are high officials from Sarasota and Charlotte Counties, and the Water Management District, that should be their policy position.

Jono projected the language of a draft motion.

Stacey Maza-Gilkison motioned that in appreciation of Congressman Steube and his staff's efforts, I move the Council officially endorse H.R.642, the Myakka Wild and Scenic River Act of 2025, and authorizes the Chair to assist in actions furthering the designation of the Myakka and Sarasota County as a National Partnership Wild and Scenic River, which would provide prestige and support while avoiding additional regulation. Further, she moved the Council encourages others to support this important legislation. Becky seconded the motion. (Motion unanimously passed after discussion. Nikki Gilmer abstained.)

Motion discussion.

Victor commented that it is essential to also get individuals to contact, and it would be good if there was a list. If a list could be provided to Chris that he can send to the Council. So, members can distribute that, that would be helpful. He would be willing to write a petition on Change.org, if needed. He encouraged others to ask friends and organizations; this will increase the visibility of the bill.

Juliette Jones endorsed the idea. Community is the little guy who owns the land. She gets these petitions all the time relative to natural resources. She signs them and passes them on to people who are interested.

Stefan asked if the designation would have any effect on the tributaries to the Myakka River, such as the Myakkahatchee Creek?

Chris replied that because it would remain state administered, it would take the state legislature to change the current rules in the current statute. The designation act that they have now that was passed in 1985, protects only the Myakka River in Sarasota County. Anywhere on the main stem up to the ordinary high-water line in freshwater and the mean high water in tidal bodies, but not the tributaries. The only addition to that is the Myakka River Protection Zone, which is a county code, another local thing. The county could change that. It is an overlay, unless the local government changed things, it would not change.

Jono added that Deer Prairie Slough is not even included.

Jennifer Krajcir added that it opens the door for the local agencies to say, because of this protection and this connection, it can be protected by extension.

Chris commented that extra protections may arise from the prestige, if there is any new threat to it, but the current laws are already strict. It is interesting but the most local rules are sometimes, the strictest, Howard correct me if I get this wrong, but in some ways Sarasota County's permitting for docks is stricter than the state rule, 62D-15 for protecting the river. Because it was locally created and again in the eighties and the rule was finalized in 1990, It is basic protections. It is not extreme. The county, which made the rules a little bit later, was even more protective.

Jono confirmed that nothing in this would affect the Myakkahatchee Creek.

After the motion carried, Jono continued to discuss the aspects an effective letter. One that is personally written and has specifics about the Myakka. If it was the Audubon Society, to talk about the importance of bird life and rookeries on the Myakka River, et cetera. The specific content in a letter or email would be the most effective.

Miri agreed. She added that Ronnie is going to be aggregating all these letters together with a letter from Congressman Steube's office. He has very specific instructions, which she will share when it is time.

Jean added that for people who might need extra help, there is a lot of information now about how to write effective emails and make effective brief phone calls to legislators. If anybody needs any bullet points, she would be happy to share that.

Becky applauded Miri on her presentation and agrees that bullet points are important because, while you want individual letters daily, she gets requests to sign a lot of letters.

Turbidity violations above MRSP (Miri Hardy)

Miri [projected slides](#) and gave an update on water quality testing above Myakka River State Park (MRSP). Back in August 2024, there were reports about a fish kill north of the park on the river. There was concern by residents in the area that the fish kill might be associated with two new golf developments in Manatee County that were under construction and are still under construction on the river. Terra Nova, also known as Myakka Golf Club and Soleta Golf Club. At the time, the residents noted that since the golf courses began construction, they have had bad sediment flow with every rise in the river. When the water drops, any low areas have one to two inches, on average, of black, nasty sediment that they state

they never had before. The beaches that used to be white when the water drops are now black after each drop as well.

Due to complaints by the residents, DEP did send out a compliance inspector who noted severe turbidity violations at Myakka Golf Club. The fish kill was reported in the middle of August, so this is a couple of weeks after those high turbidity levels exceeded the limits of his equipment. Later, when he came back in September 2024, they were at 472 NTUs. Turbidity of any water that leaves a site and impacts the water system cannot be higher than 29 NTUs above background. This is because the Myakka River is considered an impaired waterway. If it was an outstanding waterway, that number would be zero so nothing is supposed to go into the water. A lot of stuff was going into the water. It was heading into a wetland off-site near the Myakka River, where extremely high turbidity measures were collected at the point. They reached out to Dr. Abbey Tyrna of the Suncoast Waterkeepers to help them get a community-based water quality testing program in place because they, along with the residents, were very concerned. They are grateful to Abbey and Suncoast Waterkeepers. Myakka is not part of their watershed, but Abbey offered to help and she has been helping them since the beginning of the year. She trained and has been overseeing their grassroots operation where they have been doing weekly testing, and Stacey has been one of their testers. They have been doing weekly testing since January 22, 2025, collecting water quality data, turbidity, using the same kind of measurements that DEP uses to test turbidity, as well as any related visual observations such as odor, watercolor, or the presence of algae. The measurements are being taken below the golf course developments, as well as a background measurement that is being collected above so that they have their background testing for the 29 NTU rule. Miri noted she and Chris have been working closely on this together. The local residents continue to share words of concern about what they are seeing on the river. Some of their testers, the residents, have lived on the river all their life, and they were dismayed at what they were seeing. Miri projected various slides of quotes from residents and photos along the river showing one of the golf clubs. It gave them pause, to the point of looking at permits and trying to understand how, what looks like a zero setback from the river, could be allowed.

Chris mentioned that these developments did not come to the Council for comment. The Council did not provide an opinion to Manatee County before they changed their setback minimums from 50 to 30. This development was under the 30 rule, but this is not even 30. In the photo just projected, it is arguable that even at top-of-bank is wetland. Meaning river is not zero for the start of the setback. During Hurricane Ian or even the storms in 2024, water would be well into this field area. In an ordinary year, at a minimum, it is close to the top of the bank. It may be that they bought mitigation credits to be allowed to do this.

Miri noted that photo was taken in March 2025 when levels are near the lowest. She continued the measurements were typically conducted on Wednesdays, to be consistent.

Becky asked if they had a rain gauge there. She did not get any rain in that period, and she lives down the street. It is very sporadic.

Miri confirmed that they do. The point of this water-quality testing is to have a baseline for the dry season, so that when they do get the rain coming in, they have a better sense. They are not at this point, but will be, measuring nutrients. The developers are nearly done with their soil-moving, now it is about laying the sod. The whole area right on the river is going to be sod.

Juliette added that everybody knows how many chemicals they put in there. She asked if a complaint was made, how did they get away with this? Did they get fined?

Miri continued noting she will cover the question. After that rain, which Miri will quantify how much rain that was, the residents were commenting about the issues. They started talking about the minnow population being lower than it used to be and There is more silt in the river. Normally the bottom is clean and sandy this time of year, and there is a solid layer of vegetative silt covering the bottom of the river. There is a layer of sediment over the sand that did not exist previous to this construction. The deeper holes always had a sediment layer, but there is so much sediment now that it is throughout the entire river. Usually in the wintertime and all throughout the spring, the river would be extremely clean looking, which is not the case now. It is hard to convey that to people who are seeing it for the first time. The measurements of turbidity never exceeded the 29 rule. However, considering the residents' complaints and concerns, the DEP compliance inspector did issue another interagency complaint form to SWFWMD because he can test turbidity. He cannot talk about wetland delineations. That is not his jurisdiction, and he cannot make any kind of assessment of any impact to the river, which is what the residents were suggesting is going on. That was issued in March 2025.

While this is happening, there was a second application from the golf course to SWFWMD, which has been approved, and they are asking for additional impact to wetlands on their property. In the first application they thought they would be able to mitigate on site, they concluded that that was impossible, so they bought mitigation credits from the Myakka Mitigation Bank. While this was all happening, Miri and Chris reached out to the environmental scientist who was assigned to these environmental resource permits, to express concerns and to ask questions whether they would consider doing some sort of assessment to quantify and verify what exactly these deposits are in the river and address the resident complaints. There was a compliance inspection by SWFWMD in response to the interagency complaint, and the visual inspection did not detect turbidity or any irregularities in the river or problems with the BMPs. The WMD did not think that anything more thorough was warranted.

Mike Jones asked who runs the Myakka mitigation bank?

It was stated that Earth Balance runs the mitigation bank.

Miri continued. Going back to the original DEP complaint and the severe turbidity issues, the development did rectify all the problems. They were issued a short form consent order, and they were fined \$6,500, which they have paid, and the case is now closed.

Miri stated, to end on a positive note, in 2025, they have been working hard to bring in the county commissioners from Manatee County to talk to them about the Myakka River because you cannot have a Wild and Scenic River, state-designated, hopefully soon to be nationally designated, and the head is a little bit sick. It does not work that great. They have had some interesting and promising conversations both with Commissioner Kruse and Commissioner Felts, who both publicly proclaimed their commitment to improving protections of the Myakka River in Manatee County. They both addressed the idea that you do not have to have designation to protect a waterway. You can codify protections such as the fantastic protections that Sarasota County offers through the Myakka River Protection Zone. If there was something like that in place in Manatee County, all this could not happen. Working towards making improvements moving forward and improving their water-quality team which they would have access to groups who are doing this kind of work and want to share the information through the Federal Wild and Scenic designation. There would be funds to make this more comprehensive, and to involve more of the river and address some of the concerns that are outlined in the River Management Plan as well.

Juliette asked how they determine the fines. They should have higher fines and more publicity about this.

Miri discussed the process, noting a long form would have been issued likely with higher fines if violations were ongoing. Because the developer did address the concerns and did mitigate after the initial findings. The fact that they were fined is an incremental improvement. It is on record. There was an article about this golf course in The Observer, where the gist of the story was that this is an environmental win, this development. If protecting the environment is important to the developer, this is also an opportunity for them to work more closely with him and his team to make sure that what they are doing and their plans to protect the river really do protect the river.

Chris added that in fairness to that gentleman who is the manager or owner, he called to ask him about plants for wetland plantings. They stated they are going to try to make some improvements.

Discussion continued on water quality issues, needed protections, and fines.

Dark Sky update (Miri Hardy)

Miri [project slides](#) and gave an update about Dark Skies Protection. In her December 13, 2024, she illustrated increased light pollution at MRSP and in the river corridor. She reviewed existing relevant policies and management objectives and discussed the next steps to reduce detrimental impacts from light pollution on MRSP and the river corridor. Since December 13th, 2024, Jono sent a letter to the county commissioners and the county administrator which included the presentation. He pointed out that the Council shares Friends of Myakka River's concerns about the growing detrimental impacts of light pollution and supports their efforts to seek necessary action by the Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners to control and reduce negative impact on MRSP and the river from light pollution.

She noted that Derek Gilliam, a week later, wrote a fantastic article, talking about the Council's support of measures to keep skies dark in new developments. She received a lot of feedback about his article. It was comprehensive, it was informative, and it was shared widely. Miri thanked Derek and Becky for inviting Derek to the last meeting. Her next step was to meet with the Sarasota County Commissioners and between February and March 2025, she had one-on-one meetings with all five of the commissioners where she shared the evidence of growing light pollution. She discussed why this is an issue and requested actions necessary for implementing enforceable protections for the park and river as per policies outlined in the UDC and the Sarasota Comp Plan. She also reviewed Dark Sky best practices. The conversations were good and fruitful. In April 2025, the board directed staff to review other jurisdictions for their best Dark Sky practices and provide a report back to the board. She sees this as a positive move forward. To follow up on the exact conversations she had with the commissioners and specifically the chair, she has asked for an appointment to touch base and discuss the next steps.

Becky added that there was another request of rezone for Lakewood Ranch, another portion, and it just got approved, but they said they have stipulations that they would like to have reviewed. One of those stipulations was called Black Skies. They used the regulations that Venice uses for their turtles to show what they mean by black sky regulation and shared that with the county. They met with the developers because originally the county did not approve the development. They are not going to have any streetlights, which is one of the things they asked. They are looking into turning off their accessory building light at around 10 o'clock. The downside is, they want to highlight their old canopy trees with lights. They got the streets but did not get the tinted windows which they were hoping for. At least, they are not going to be inundated with streetlights. There is an incremental improvement.

Miri thinks that is a fantastic result. She was sure a lot of folks in the meeting were following the rezone application for the Smith Farm and Dark Skies. There was a main concern as well. In response to community concern, the developer put together Dark Sky stipulations, a Dark Sky plan, that was more

stringent than the recommendations of Dark Sky International. It can be done. What they need from the commissioners is the expectation that new development, or the code that this is what needs to happen. There needs to be an ordinance. The river and park need to be protected.

Status of Downs' Dam planned restoration (Chris Oliver)

Chris gave an update on the Downs' Dam removal. He has been talking about Downs Dam for quite a while, including at the August and December 2024 meetings. They were hoping for spring mobilization around Valentine's Day, but everything has been a bit complicated. This was a Department of the Interior, US Fish & Wildlife Service funded project, zero state dollars, completely federally funded. That was all frozen in January. They tabled the project in February after attempting to mobilize. They heard nothing about the funding until last week. The funds went unfrozen. The contractors were available and said they could get started. They arrived at the park on Tuesday and started working on Wednesday. They are trying to be as fast, but as thorough as possible. There are lots of steps left, but they hope to be done by early June 2025.

New Member Nominations:

Chris gave some background on the Council's philosophy about its members and the process of selecting and nominating new members and what would happen after that. This information is in the bylaws which are available on the website, on the library page. Chris went over the current make up of the Council and noted recently departures including the regional planning councils. He noted that in the past, the Council had two agricultural interests. Seven or eight years ago, O Bar O Ranch joined the Council. They are currently the only one. Right now, they are down to just two residents on the river. That is Victor and Debbie. The Council may consider adding two or more homeowners overtime on to the Council. There may be other gaps between environmental organizations or other interests that need to be added to the Council. There are two pathways to becoming a member on the Council. One is, the Council makes a nomination and then that goes to DEP. DEP also has the authority to select someone to be on the Council, like they did in the initial formation.

Jono asked for nominations for people to join the Council.

Stacey Mazza-Gilkison nominated the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation. The Foundation works to permanently connect, protect, and restore the Florida Wildlife Corridor. They are a vested stakeholder supporting the Myakka River Watershed. Kristen Nowak, who would most likely be the Foundation's member, has extensive knowledge of the watershed and has worked on important projects to restore the natural flow of the Wild and Scenic Myakka River. Becky Ayech seconded the nomination.

Kristen introduced herself noting she worked with FDEP on the Downs' Dam and on the Upper Myakka Lake Weir Removal Projects. She loves seeing the update about Downs' Dam. She virtually presented those projects to the Council back during COVID. She loves the Myakka River. She was a consultant for 20 years and joined Florida Wildlife Corridor in January. She wanted to do more conservation work. She has been doing stream restoration and wetland mitigation for 20 years. Now she has the Corridor Implementation Manager and what that is, is going into meetings with stakeholders in areas of the corridor that are urgent. A lot of the Myakka River in Manatee County is not protected at all, but it does fall fully within the corridor. Those areas that are not conserved yet are called opportunity areas. Her job is to hone into those and see who the players are to try to get those areas protected.

The nomination of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation passed unanimously.

Jean Pichler with Venice Audubon nominated Ray Westbrook, who has been at several meetings very eloquently speaking about the concerns of south county development, concerns about the flooding issue, and the development of that property on the old Dolomite mine. Becky Ayech seconded the nomination.

Ray introduced himself. He stated that he has learned so much in the last few years of participating in the Council meetings. He has been so impressed by the people he has met here and the knowledge he has gained. If approved, one of the things he would focus on is getting some young people involved. There is a tremendous knowledge base here that any young person of interest could gain so much. He has a father of six, soon to be a granddad of 16. This is all important to him.

The nomination of Ray Westbrook passed unanimously.

Lee asked if they could nominate Manatee County representatives, other than the government.

Chris replied that the Council is allowed to choose whoever they want to join. DEP has that right of refusal. If it is an individual resident, it is a little less in the Council's bylaws, approved by DEP, but there is no harm in asking. If it is an organization that would absolutely allowable.

Lee Amos nominated the Manatee County Cattlemen's Association. Becky Ayech seconded the nomination.

Lee continued. He has not sure that Manatee County Cattlemen would want to join but he was willing to the initial ask if they are interested.

Jono asked for a vote for the nomination with caveat that the Manatee County Cattlemen's Association is interested in serving on the Council.

The nomination of the Manatee County Cattlemen's Association passed unanimously.

Lee Amos nominated Sarasota County Cattlemen's Association. Becky Ayech seconded the nomination.

Chuck stated that they (O Bar O) are the only members of the Cattlemen on the river in Sarasota County.

Jono confirmed they were. They used to have Lewis Blackburn but that is Deer Prairie Slough Preserve.

Chris asked for clarification if Chuck was making the argument not to include the Sarasota County Cattlemen's Association.

Chuck thought it would be redundant because they do not have any other members that have direct involvement there along the river. It makes it to where they are more focused on exactly what is going on there. He agrees with Manatee County, because there is all that agricultural interest upriver. That would be important.

Chris added that having the best possible BMPs, like the ones O Bar O follows, has a positive impact. They have a lot of ranch land, the floodplain, and everything comes to the river.

Chuck agreed that is the big thing, this utilization of BMPs. That is why we have reported regularly here what we have been doing on the ranch with the USDA, and work on water quality through FDACs. Projects that they have done on the ranch. It would be great if the Cattlemen were there to be able to see on the other side of it and say that this is what they do because their water goes to the river eventually.

Lee added that the Carlton Ranch is very much in the watershed, as is the Walton Ranch. They are still draining that way to the river.

Chuck added that the current president of Sarasota County Cattlemen's is Lisa Carlton.

Jono asked for a vote for the nomination with caveat that the Sarasota County Cattlemen's Association is interested in serving on the Council.

The nomination of the Sarasota County Cattlemen's Association passed unanimously.

Barbara Lockhart nominated EarthBalance. Victor Dobrin seconded the nomination.

Chris added that business interests may be considered. In the past this Council has considered other business interests, like river tour operators.

Steve mentioned that they have used that company to do work in the park, particularly recently with flood plain restoration work. Would that be a conflict of interest? Would he be able to discuss restoration work?

Jono added that it might be something that gets flagged at a higher level.

Chris noted that the only denial, he is aware of, happened is that DEP looked at that nomination and said DEP has a lot of regulatory processes with the business, them creating a potential conflict.

The nomination of EarthBalance passed. Becky Ayeach voted no. Nikki Gilmer, Jamie Richardson, Howard Berna, Chuck Johnston, Stefan Kalev and Richard Larson abstained.

Stefan Kalev nominated UF/IFAS, either Sarasota or Manatee County. Becky Ayeach seconded.

The nomination of UF/IFAS passed unanimously.

Lee mentioned the proprietor of Snook Haven.

Ray commented that that is going to go up for bid. With the demolition, it is going to be closed for a year. The process they are looking at, given the recent approval of the Sarasota purchase of Camp Venice.

Lee mentioned that he does not know what their cycle is, and then this is a yearly cycle, it just seems like they are running a lot of tours, that is a significant amount of river use, and they should be at the table.

Ray commented that they have got Howard here from Environmental. But Parks and Recreation are going to have the restaurant and the campground. He thinks there should be another representative from Sarasota County focused on parks.

Jono added that the Council can have as large a Council as they want, but it is crucial that members are committed to showing up for the meetings. If they do not, then there is no quorum. When reaching out to these candidates, it is not just an offer or asking if they have an interest in the Myakka River, it is also asking if they or an alternate can commit to attending the meetings. If not, it is going to create problems.

Chris supported Lee's point about having either the restaurant or the tour operator, pointing out they both have separate uses of the river or river area. The restaurant has control over the car parking, where they have some of the impact by not having setbacks. The river tour could have impacts on the water

resources. But it can also help like when they were reporting crocodile sightings, exactly one year ago from now, there was a crocodile hanging out and they were his eyes on the water. He was getting a lot of data from them. He does appreciate that as a good recommendation.

Ray added that since it is going to be closed for a year, it is a good discussion point for next year.

Jono confirmed that they are going to table this until then.

Elections

Jono reviewed Article VII. Nominations to be made, elections held, vice chairman at the annual meeting. Majority vote of Council members present. Serve for one term, assume office upon election and can be removed by a two-thirds vote.

Becky Ayech nominated Jono Miller for Chair of the Council. Juliette Jones seconded.

Jono shared that he was willing to serve. It is a lot of work, but he enjoys doing it.

No other candidates were offered for Chair. Jono was voted Chair for another year.

Juliette Jones nominated Victor Dobrin as the Vice Chair. Becky Ayech seconded.

No other candidates for Vice Chair were made. Victor was voted Vice Chair for another year.

Victor thanked the chair because he does the work, but he has here to help you if needed. He thanked the group.

Break 11:12-11:20

NEW BUSINESS

Jono Miller-Chair's Report

Jono [projected slides his report](#) showing the area that Sarasota County already owns, and they are trying to acquire the Englewood Youth Foundation. The problem is that the access to the Englewood Youth Foundation crosses the Diocese of Venice property. To have public access to this property, an arrangement would have to be made with the Diocese of Venice. Sarasota County has proposed having the diocese sell a 60-foot-wide parcel, that the county would pay for, and then the proceeds from that could help the diocese build a new entrance. But that has not been resolved yet. Camp Venice Campground, they are looking at it as two parcels. Part of the area would be acquired with Environmentally Sensitive Land dollars and the campground itself would be acquired with Neighborhood Park Land dollars. The county voted this week to acquire the Venice Campground for \$14 million. Jono showed a slide of the groundbreaking at Snook Haven on Thursday, May 8, 2025. Camp Venice has operated for four decades as a campground. It is 135 campsites, RV and tent camping, features the manager's office, two wash houses, laundry facilities, 13 independently owned park model modular homes, shuffleboard courts, swimming pool, grilling, kayak launch, boat ramp and private wastewater. Jono gave additional details and time online on this item.

Jono continued, once the \$8.8 million renovation of Snook Haven is complete, Sarasota County will seek to operate both Snook Haven and Camp Venice together, they will issue a new RFP. Sarasota County has an overall strategic plan to increase access to waterfront land and promote ecotourism as well as nature-based experiences for school children. Something Jono stressed when meeting with the county

commissioners, is that since 1985, Florida state law has required periodic studies to determine the quantity and mixture of recreation and other public uses, which can be permitted without adverse impact on the resource values of the river area. This has never occurred. Ideally, FDEP, FWC, the water management district and the county would work together on a study and manage the impact of recreational use on the resource. It could be boat wakes. One of the things they are aware of is the disturbance of alligators and turtles, they need to come out and sun themselves to thermoregulate. People want to see alligators. But flushing them then means nobody sees them and they are not getting along. Part of the challenge they face is to find an entity, either a private consulting group or an affiliate with a state university who could do this kind of work, and they would have to come up with a budget and at least a rough draft of how that would proceed.

Chris commented that if they get into the national system, there would be an organization that would help them do that study. The funding could be matched for any partner. Everybody can come together, but that first match and having an organization that can help facilitate that, that is one reason why this has not happened. If DEP owned the entire 34 miles, it probably would have already happened. This is the first thing that this new organization would look at and go, this is a part of the management plan update.

Jono projected the various ownerships in the area noting parcels the county is in the process of acquiring including one called the Southern 65. He noted a green area, the Meadows RV Park and the area next to it, to the west, is Bob Johnson's Landing. The county's buying the Meadows RV Park and it will be split. He did not know where the exact split will be, but clearly this area immediately adjacent to the Bob Johnson's Landing will be part of the park and the area down here will be surplus and sold and that money will come back into the Environmental Lands Program.

Jono continued highlighting a parcel owned by Big Waters Land Trust. Next door is a possible acquisition, but it has not even been discussed.

Chris added that this parcel has a long history of wetland impacts and mangrove shoreline impacts. From the aerial view, it does not look as nice as it did in the past, partially because of some of the land clearing activities.

Lee added that two acres of that Sarasota County did own, about seven years ago and they surplus it. He is not sure why they would acquire it again.

Chris continued. While it is been impacted and the aerial does not look good, it will recover and it already is recovering. If they can stop the impacts, the soil looks good, other than storing some boats and equipment on the property. That property could be a good companion to the Big Water's preserve.

In January 2025, Jono became aware that North Port was considering going to the MPO, which does the transportation planning to seek funding for two projects, one which would extend Price Boulevard to the west and Toledo Blade to the north. He wrote to the county commission not as the Council chair, but as a concerned citizen who had already written an article about it many years ago. Jono projected a slide with aerial view. It would involve extending Price Boulevard all the way west across all this preserved land and across the Myakka River to hook up with Center Road. In the prohibitions, in the Myakka Rule, it clearly says, "Constructing in unimpacted areas, new road or bridge crossings or utility crossings except crossings by public utilities." The road does not meet the definition of a public utility "and crossings that would not adversely impact resource values". Any impact is presumed to be negative.

Chris added that it would have a big impact and stated that Chris Becker, who did the permitting prior to Chris, they both looked at this, as un-permittable.

Jono went down there in January 2025, to the North Port Commission meeting and told them what they were proposing was in violation of a state rule. It had no effect on them and they went ahead and sent it up the chain to the MPO.

Chris stated that this is the purpose of the Council. It is to jointly develop the management plan and provide comments on new activities. If the Council would have been brought this, they could have sent this to the North Port Council in advance.

Jono continued highlighting issues with the proposal. Is this in furtherance of evacuation? Once you get to SR 72, what do you do? Do you go west to I-75 or do you go over to Arcadia? This is a road that floods in hurricanes. Suggesting that it is a great evacuation route did not make a lot of sense.

Becky brought up communities sheltering in place versus trying to get out on the road with no gas stations. When you talk to them and they talk about that, did Jono talk about sheltering in place?

Jono replied that he did. He said they should be thinking about solving their problems within North Port because visualize the number of people that are going to be in Collier County, Lee County and Charlotte County who are going to be going north on I-75. Then how many people from North Port are going to be able to get on that highway because it is going to be a mess. They need a solution. Part of Jono's testimony included that North Port wants to explore two devastatingly bad projects outside its municipal boundaries. One involves an un-permittable crossing in the Myakka River. The other treats SR 72 as some sort of fantastic evacuation route. But getting to SR 72 is no solution because it floods and it delays how long it would take to get to a real evacuation route.

Jono projected the park gauge water levels from May 5th, 2024, to May 5th, 2025. You can take your kayak or canoe, but you must figure out how fast you can drag it because it is not going to float all the way down the river. This is too low and then up there it gets to be too high. This green area is one where you would want to be canoeing in the river and then you should subtract these two areas because that is when it is dangerous to canoe on the river.

Chris added that there was hardly any rain since the last hurricane. This spring there was a severe drought. Since February, it was too low for the average person to kayak or canoe. In the last two months he has walked sections of the river. There are areas like, if you get a wilderness permit, and go to the Lower Lake, you will never see better birds. Yesterday, there was huge flocks of American white pelicans. There were so many sandpipers. There were probably forty-five great blue herons just on the Lower Lake. The wildlife is always good at Myakka, but it is especially good during these drought periods. You change your type of recreation to doing it on foot and using binoculars or a camera.

Howard Berna-Sarasota County

Howard Berna introduced Katie Cassell as the new designated alternative for Sarasota County, she is a supervisor on the permitting team. It is good to have an alternate. The comment about potentially adding parks as a member, he would support that because over the years he has had to tap into them to get comments on things.

Jono stated he will speak to Nicole about that membership element.

Barbara suggested it might be a good idea to, even though it is after the fact, to have the Council write a letter to put in writing everything that Jono said regarding extending the roads in North Port and why it was a bad idea. In Barbara's observation, just being aware of what has been going on in North Port for so

many years, she would not be convinced that this is not going to come up again in the future. This is the second time they proposed going through the Carlton out to SR 72.

Barbara Lockhart motioned that the Council send a formal letter with Jono's presentation to North Port to put them on notice of the Council's position on extending Price Boulevard and Toledo Blade Boulevard. The Council would ask, in the future, that they be notified so they can issue their statutory and obligated non-binding advisory opinion. Becky Ayech seconded. (Motion unanimously passed after discussion. Nikki Gilmer, Howard Berna, Richard Larson and Stefan Kaley abstained.)

Motion Discussion.

Stefan commented, there are so many moving parts, there are so many projects in North Port and he believes that this will be beneficial. He believes in communication and having this clarity and this clear communication between North Port Commission and the Council, that will be an extra safety layer. He will personally pay more attention toward these aspects. Sometimes it is challenging because he is dealing with certain things and in some cases may not even be aware of others.

Victor added that he feels Stefan is the proper messenger from this Council back to the commission. The commissioners do not know what the laws say about what is allowed and what is not allowed. At the same time, he would like to hear from Chris about why it did not come to the Council. Victor stated he has been swamped with his community and did not know about this road proposal. He would have gone to the meetings if he knew. He would like to do a better job and support this action.

Chris pointed out that it is hard because there is a lot of things that are happening, whether as a member of an agency or a resident. If you do not attend regular meetings or miss one, something could happen that should come before the Council.

Barbara returned to her motion for the Council to provide the city with all the reasons we discussed. All that information he shared in the public comment, whatever else is supplemental could be given to them in some packet form to refer to when this idea comes up again, because with all the mindset of economic development and development coming out of the city in general, development at all costs, it would be good to give them the information now the next time.

Chris stated that it could be a letter with the presentation as an attachment the chair would send.

Barbara said yes. A letter where you are saying, here is all the reasons why this is not going to work. If there is a new commissioner and it comes up, that new commissioner will not know what is happening.

Jono added that one of the things he mentioned when he testified in North Port was that they used to have a regional planning council that would do hurricane evacuation analysis and figure out what I-75 could handle. There has been so much development south of North Port that somebody needs to get a handle on, whether that is even feasible. They are proposing to extend Price 4.7 miles. Presumably you would get on River Road and come up to the interchange. If North Port wanted to, they could come up Biscayne and add an interchange. They would have to condense some land, but it would all be entirely within the city of North Port, they would not have to transgress any preserved lands.

Becky supported the motion for two reasons. Institutional memory is important. As a person that reads public documents for pleasure, she always likes to be able to find a document somewhere where someone has identified something, that maybe at that moment, that commission, she was not listening. A new set of

commissioners are commissioned so she would always have something that she could go back to that was in the record, that was a formal statement that she could then refer to. It is incredibly important.

Jono had a column in the Herald-Tribune about 15 years ago when they wanted to extend Toledo Blade north and they made similar arguments.

Discussion continued on the timeline of discussion on this topic.

Stefan Kalev-City of North Port

Stefan started his update to the Council noting that the public works, they completed their Myakkahatchee Creek debris clearing project. Over 7,000 cubic yards of debris, mostly from Hurricane Ian, were removed from the creek. That the section cleared was approximately four miles of waterway, which will ultimately impact flooding risks in the future. Parks and recreation, they are moving forward with the engineering plans to support the renovations of the historic buildings at Warm Mineral Springs. The plans include flood proofing and restoring the admission buildings, converting the spa buildings into an open-air pavilion while keeping the iconic Sarasota School architecture style of the buildings. Preserving the Cyclorama until restoration funding is secured for that. He will do more research on what was brought up here at the Council.

Barbara asked about the status of conservation easement at Warm Mineral Springs?

Stefan did not have any updates.

Lee added that Big Waters Land Trust is involved in that project, and they continue to talk with the city to work towards it and they are talking about easement terms so it is still ongoing.

Christina Rimes-City of Venice

No updates.

Nikki Gilmer-FDOT

Nikki mentioned that Chris reached out recently regarding downed signs along the bridge of State Road 72. He asked about updating the signage language to specifically say no parking, sitting or fishing off the bridge. They have relayed that message to their traffic OPS team, but have not heard anything back yet. They will continue the coordination internally and hopefully provide an update for the signage. Construction on River Road is estimated to finish in 2027. It could change based on hurricane money or supplies. They looked into the lighting along River Road. The shared use paths that are being installed along the road will not be lit. There is no plans for that. However, the roadway lights will be installed, but in a way to which the light fixtures are going to be pointed at the roadway, so away from the right of way line. Based on what the way that they are designed and constructed, there is no need to put the extra shielding on the light poles. Lastly, the I-75 rest area at River Road is currently being used as a staging area for their construction crew. Once construction is complete, the discussion regarding using that area as a trailhead can continue further with district leaders.

Chris added that the reason the SR 72 bridge issue is important is because a lot of people are stopping there, People driving out there and there will be five or six cars pulled over sometimes more, and they stop there, they get out. When they get ready to leave, they do a three-point turn when people are doing 70-80 miles per hour. Chris appreciates the effort on this ongoing problem.

Nikki added that she appreciates people reporting these issues because if FDOT does not know about them then they cannot do anything to address them.

Jamie Richardson-FWC

Jamie introduced the new regional biologist with their invasive plant management section, Andrew Black. He is now the FWC alternate.

Andrew stated that FWC are planning future treatments on the Myakka River. They are going to be treating paragrass with drones, which is a new technology. Drones can be more precise and be used in tighter areas and not have to use airboats, which can be more intrusive.

Jamie noted that FWC has a project application with their Aquatic Habitat Restoration Section further treat invasive plant problems within the state park and then revegetate with aquatic native plants. This has not been approved yet. There has been concern about alligator harvest in the past on Myakka River. She has been directed to bring the Council's concerns to the project coordinator or to send an email is what he suggested. If the Council wants to put a formal email together and send it to the coordinator, she has his information. He is based out of Ocala.

Becky stated a motion would be needed for that.

Jono agreed, and gave some background, the Council has previously noted, first, the Myakka's recognized as one of the best places to see alligators in the state. Deep Hole has blown up on social media. The Myakka is associated with an opportunity to see alligators. When a recreational take is allowed on the river, that means one person gets to shoot a 12-foot alligator and have it mounted and put on the wall and then 1,000 or 2,000 people do not get to see the alligator. The state language says that you are not supposed to have a recreational take in a preserve.

Chris clarified that state parks are prohibited, but then it also says preserve, you must be 300 feet away.

Jono continued. The Myakka Wild and Scenic River is not designated as a preserve, It is designated as a Wild and Scenic River and nobody at FWC has chosen to interpret that state Wild and Scenic designation as being a preserve. They need FWC or some entity to say it is a preserve. The other issue they have identified is they have recorded two sightings of crocodiles on the Myakka River. They would like to avoid a situation where someone thinks they are in an area where there cannot possibly be any crocodiles and has a permit for a recreational harvest of an alligator and then shoots a crocodile. That seems problematic.

Chris clarified these two sightings, were from two separate years, each for multiple days over months at Border Road, which is not that far from the state park, about five miles south. There have been numerous sightings near US 41 and the lower river. With sea level rising, with climate change, with warmer winters and less freeze events, they are going to get more and more sightings. That as a part of the alligator hunting and hunting in general often in Florida is, it relies on the hunters to be responsible, so they get a permit. One of the biggest issues that brought this to the Council a few years ago is if you go on FWC's database, you can pull and see who collected an alligator in Sarasota County and what did they report back to FWC. A lot of times the location is blank, so they do not know where they took it. Sometimes it says Myakka River, they could have got it in what the current rules, the current interpretation, would say that is probably allowed. Too many times, though, in many years' reports, the record states "Lower Myakka Lake" that is way into the state park. Some people have come into the park, and they are taking some of the biggest alligators, which other people have come to see. At Deep Hole the alligator numbers

have gone way down. Is it because hunters come into the park at night? It is complicated, the motion should probably direct the chair to reach out to Jamie to start this process.

Lee added that people are hunting or launching from private property and taking alligators.

Richard Larson-Florida Forest Service

Richard stated that Myakka State Forest is doing a hundred-acre treatment project for Brazilian pepper, cogon grass, lygodium, and rosary pea. The 200-acre pine planting was successful. They are finishing up the forest inventory now, finishing up their new equestrian campsites. They have got a new vault toilet at Flying A Campground. Then the private landowner side, they are continually working with multiple landowners, some habitat restoration within the Myakka River corridor. They have had a few wildfires at Myakka State Forest and they are running fires every day throughout the district.

Jono asked if the pine planting was South Florida slash?

Richard replied it was.

Ray Westbrook asked if they are doing the burn permits for commercial.

Richard replied here's no burning right now for acreage, just piles.

Jono saw burning when he left Snook Haven yesterday.

Ray commented that the soot filled his backyard, and the neighbors were wondering how can a developer be allowed to do that, in these drought conditions, on a very windy day in a residential area?

Richard replied to call dispatch.

Steve Giguere added to call the local regional office for forestry to make a complaint, they will investigate.

Becky added that on the air quality index, for Sarasota County, frequently approaches the time when they must tell people to stay inside if you are old or young, because the air quality, particulate matter is high.

Steve informed everyone that there is an app called AirNow. It tells you the current air quality index and the forecast a couple days out.

Becky Ayeche-ECOSWF

Becky gave some updates, starting with the President of the United States has asked the Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency to make a new determination on what are waters of the United States. The Clean Water Act is to regulate point sources that discharge pollution into the water to the United States in these permits, control water pollution by setting conditions for the discharge of pollutants. The Army Corp and EPA have been told that they must follow the law, that they must reduce red tape, cut permitting costs, and lower the costs of doing business. There was a court case in front of the Supreme Court. [Sackett versus the EPA](#), and they sent out clear definitions of what are waters of the United States. A lot of people did not like those, so they are trying to get them changed. The reason this is important is one of the criteria that they want to require is that to be a water body of the United States,

you must flow all the time. As you heard Chris say, he can walk across the Myakka River (in dry periods). Now some are trying to say it must be surface flow. Suncoast Waterkeepers then spoke about the Myakka River specifically and said, "Well, how about sub-surface flows?" Becky was on the list to speak, but two and a half hours later, she still had not got to speak. She got on another list to speak; to say no, the Sackett Case clearly tells us what the waters of the United States are. It is a Supreme Court decision and this is what needs to be done. This is going to affect everyone everywhere in the United States. Wetlands, if there is not a continuous surficial connection, nope, you are gone.

This is an unbelievable assault. NPDES permits will not be required on all these places that everybody wants to dump in, places they would currently need a permit for. The comment period is closing, and people should sign up, they will have to have more speaking sessions. The idea is that they want to overwhelm them, send them stacks of paper, these are testimonies. They are getting testimonies from everywhere, from religious groups, to American Indians, to environmental organizations. This is horrible.

Additional discussion on times in May to speak, testimony and online options.

Becky brought up the wall on CR 780 bridge, noting that the structure backs water up and causes erosion. Becky received an email from Lee Amos letting her know there is erosion happening on the other side along the Big Water's property. Because the wall backs up the water and it goes around the bridge. The erosion needs to be repaired. Becky showed two pictures provided by the consultants (during the design phase). She had no argument with that, never did. What is up there now is not what was promised by the consultants that Sarasota County hired that came and made presentations to the Council as well as public outreach groups. They said that you can drive and you can see a scenic river on both sides. What is there does not allow you to see anything. They had an airplane that crashed on the other side of the wall. You could not see the airplane because you could not see over the dam wall, and it dams everything up. Becky noted now that the road is closed. It would be easy for the county to work on the dam wall and take the dam wall down. A member of ECOSWF brought this to the county commission's attention at the meeting that just happened on Tuesday and showed them a picture. It is all new commissioners, so they did not have a doggone clue. Becky sent them everything that she had sent previously, with pictures, with notices. The county promoted this; she has the public relations papers that they sent out that she sent to the county. Now may be the chance that the dam wall can be changed so they can see the river because the road is closed. It can be worked on.

Becky motioned that the Council ask the chair to resend the letter that he had previously sent to the county commission reiterating the desire to have the wall on the north side of the bridge crossing the Myakka River and Old Miakka taken down to restore the view that was promised. Victor Dobrin seconded the motion. (Motion unanimously passed after discussion. Nikki Gilmer, Howard Berna, Jamie Richardson and Stefan Kalev abstained.)

Motion Discussion.

Becky continued. It would be to make it like it was presented to the community. The community club hired an attorney to go through all the emails for this project. They made a public records request, and the attorney looked at everything. There was never a time ever that this change went before the Board of County Commissioners for a vote. There was no paper trail anywhere. It was just changed.

Jamie asked when this came out before.

Becky replied that it would be in 2018, 2019, before COVID.

Becky continued her update. When you flush your toilet, where do you think that stuff goes? It is going to be treated and right now it is treated in Sarasota County, to secondary water treatment standards. Then it goes out to unlined lakes in the affluent neighborhoods. She has had people in Sarasota County departments tell her that is not possible. She had the county utilities department give her a list of all the lakes in Sarasota County, that are receptacles of treated sewer water. These lakes are not lined. When you flush, it goes to a lake, but it does not stay in the lake because water does not stack up, it goes out. It is laterally seeping out into the surficial aquifer. She is concerned, how many of those treated sewer-water lakes are within the Myakka River Watershed? PFAS are not removed from secondary treatment, they can be removed from primary treatment. One of the stipulations that they got at Lakewood Ranch was the two irrigation sewer water lakes that they use must be treated to primary drinking water standards, but they would not line it. She asked the Council to consider this issue. Flatford Swamp is the poster child of what lateral seepage can do for you. There is no difference between raising the water table to do row crop bed, then there is from filling up a sewer lake so that you can irrigate your lawn. The other component here, if communities do not get enough sewer water, the water management district will let them augment it with groundwater because they are not doing it for mistakes, they are doing it for reuse. Remember we are in southern water use caution area, but if they all stopped flushing or There is some delivery system that does not work, they can fill those lakes up with groundwater. This is a lot of water.

Lee Amos- Big Waters Land Trust

Lee mentioned Big Waters has staff in DC this week, advocating for land conservation federally. They have a soft release of a new conservation plan on their website. Pertaining to the Myakka River, there are a few focus areas that they have identified. They have two burns planned in the summertime on two properties in the Myakka Watershed, one in Old Myakka and one on Wauchula Road at their Headwaters Preserve. They have been doing a lot of exotic invasive plant control on the Upper Myakka Preserve, the property just north of MRSP. He has been working with the park staff to coordinate control, especially of aquatic soda apple, which is an invasive plant, that has shown up here and is not found anywhere else in Sarasota or in Manatee counties. They are working together to try to eradicate that. It is showing up on private properties, in Hidden River and Triangle Ranch. It would be great if private landowners can also keep an eye out and control that.

Discussion about the name change to Big Water and property tax records occurred.

Chuck Johnston-O Bar O Ranch

Chuck stated we need some rain. He added he just wanted to clarify as to that traffic out there on the bridge, by the entrance, charge admission. You would make a million bucks. They have hauled cattle out there for the last couple of months on some Sundays. It is not, there might be some people out there or there might be some dangerous situations - it has been really bad.

Lee asked if this is the Myakka Road bridge or SR 72?

Chuck replied the SR 72 bridge. It has been bad out there.

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

Steve stated that MRSP has met all their basic treatment goals for the year. The park is actively doing marsh grass treatments and aquatic soda apple treatments. Aquatic soda apple is like smilax and tropical soda apple had a baby, so it is a nightmare invasive. The AmeriCorps program lost funding immediately. They have relied on AmeriCorps for invasive treatment and burn support for over a decade. A lot of their goals have been fulfilled through them. Fortunately, our Division leadership is seeking emergency

funding, so we can attempt to keep them working as long as we can. We are not sure what the future will hold but hope the federal funding will be reinstated.

Jono suggested that Council members between now and the next meeting could identify projects that they were doing that were federally funded that have been either put on hold or terminated. Then the Council could have one big letter that they would send to legislators in Washington and the county commission and tell them they are trying to manage the Myakka River. They are working on this federal designation, but in the meantime, this is affecting their ability to protect what the federal government said they wanted to protect. Start making notes whether you are a municipality, the county, or an agency, and they will try to collate those and do something with it.

Steve continued. The park got almost 5,000 acres treated with fire so far this year, all good growing season fires. This is the time of year that natural fires would be occurring. Ecologically it is the best time for the Florida Dry Prairie to be burning. They have had some great results. The program is complicated, they have so many floodplain hammock areas that they depend on for fire breaks. Two consecutive strong storms impacted these hammocks tremendously. Canopy hammocks have been reduced by about 50% roughly in the park. Areas that they relied on for fire breaks are now actively burning. They augmented the program early on, realizing that that was an issue. They were focusing more on good dry prairie conditions or areas that do not rely on natural fire breaks. They have got some great fire on the ground. They did have a wildfire in the park, it is not been determined how it started, but it was the next day in one of the adjacent zones that was burned the day prior. That area burned through. It was deemed as a wildfire, close to 500 acres burned. Unfortunately, they have got some plow lines in it, but they are restoring those right now. The area looks great. Forestry assisted them in suppressing the wildfire. They used dozers and plows to put in mineral lines to stop it. Plow lines are not new to the park, but they need to be restored. Because of the low water levels, it is a great time to come out to the park. The floodplain river areas look fantastic, particularly in areas that they have done a lot of work in, invasive plant wise, fire-wise, wildflowers are starting to bloom. It is a beautiful time to come out and check out the park.

Chris Oliver-Myakka Wild & Scenic River Program

Chris mentioned he was having issues getting utility department information. As a part of DEP updating the MRSP Unit Management Plan, which currently has verbiage saying that they are doing residual spreading and spray field applications near High Hat. We know they are not doing that anymore. What is happening now though is the movement of treated wastewater into ponds. How much of that is in the Myakka River Watershed? Chris mentioned a recent incident at Oscar Scherer State Park. While it was the dry season and it had not rained in a long time, water with blue dye was flowing from an adjacent community and going right through the park into South Creek. He followed it up. The community was over filling their ponds (to the point of discharge over a weir), then treating it with dye to make it look pretty. He assumes that it is reclaimed water. What happens with the nutrient? What happens when there is a five-inch rain event and that pond is already full? There is no capacity. Seems like an issue to work on.

Chris went back to the Waters of the U.S. issue, saying SWFWMD's MFL, which addresses the minimum flows and levels of the Myakka River. It is desired and natural condition of the Myakka River to have a no flow season. The river has three blocks. A flood season block, mid-season block, and a no-to-low-flow block. That is the desired condition of the river. It is problematic if suddenly our river is not really a river.

Chris continued, noting the work to improve the floodplain marsh. They are working with FWC, they have been great partners with their IPM group and AHRE Section. They are now looking at doing supplemental plantings. They have created a restoration nursery at MRSP where they have permits from

FDACs to propagate state-threatened lowland loosestrife, and then there are bunch of other non-listed plants that they are trying to grow. Those will go in shoreline restoration projects, including the adjacent Downs' Dam, which I mentioned earlier has mobilized. They grew about a thousand plants to put back into that project. That came right out of the park.

The program is still getting concerns with residents, whether it is about water quality or development proposals in the 100-year floodplain. Hurricane debris still remains. They hoped that Sarasota County would get a contractor to work the lower Myakka River, that simply did not happen. They just did not feel like they could do it. They have gotten some complaints also about state-owned islands that according to the county property appraiser, are owned by MRSP, but they are not, they are just owned by the internal trust fund. There is a lot of confusion about who is responsible. Some of them, no one has been funded or mandated to manage. Alligator numbers at Deep Hole went up a lot from the previous three or four years. They are not at peak numbers; they are about half of the peak numbers they have seen. But for three months in a row, they had about 140, 150 alligators regularly there. Something happened, Chris is not sure exactly what, but the numbers dropped down to about 30 and then 20 alligators.

Steve was there yesterday and said there were about 80 with a lot of mating activity.

Chris continued. When he passed by, he noticed a lot of alligators were moving out of the hammock. You could see drag lines through the woods and through the sandy beach. They were getting to the Lower Lake and they were all moving slowly toward Deep Hole. As the water levels recede, if there is not a lot of bad (human) behavior, you will get a lot of alligators in Deep Hole. Chris conducted and asked the group about the next meeting date and topics.

Next Meeting: August 8, 2025

Next Meeting Topics:

- Unlined treated sewer water in the Myakka Watershed
- Recreational Carrying Capacity Study
- Storm debris
- Alligator hunting