

Public has power to end Oslo Road Boat Ramp folly

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The biggest ecological controversy in Indian River County at the moment is the dispute about whether to expand the Oslo Road Boat Ramp, a project that has already sucked up more than \$1million in taxpayer money.

Now the county wants to spend another million on it despite widespread opposition from marine biologists and conservation groups who say the work will inflict severe damage on an already badly damaged lagoon.

The long-running dispute flared up on Dec. 3, when commissioners voted to pay G. K. Environmental, Inc. another \$12,500, on top of \$100,000 the company has already received, to defend the project from scientific criticism at an upcoming judicial hearing.

A week later, on Dec. 10, Grant Gilmore, the area's top expert on fish in the lagoon, responded with powerful presentation reiterating his opposition to the plan.

Gilmore said the mainland shore of the lagoon adjacent to the existing well-used boat ramp is unique in being a critical nursery for four kinds of game fish: spotted sea trout, red drum, snook and tarpon.

"In more than 40 years of studying fish populations in the lagoon, I have never seen another locale where all four species develop," Gilmore told commissioners. He said the importance of the area to local and regional fish populations has increased over the past several years as the lagoon's ecology has col-

lapsed to the north, with massive seagrass, fish and marine mammal losses.

"Our valuable fisheries have been experiencing declines due to loss of habitat and other causes and I encourage the use of the Oslo Ramp area for conservation, not development," said Gilmore, who was a founding scientist at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute and today is Senior Scientist at Estuarine, Coastal and Ocean Science, Inc.

The county has been pushing the boat ramp expansion for more than six years. During that time, it has been turned down by every applicable state and federal agency on environmental grounds. In response, it has repeatedly scaled down and otherwise modified the project, without ever giving up on the idea.

St. Johns River Water Management District finally approved a truncated project in August, but Pelican Island Audubon Society and Vero Beach Ecologist David Cox filed a petition to have the permit reviewed by an administrative law judge.

Gilmore, Cox, Florida Inland Navigation District Commissioner Paul Dritenbas, Pelican Island Audubon Society President Richard Baker, a University of Florida Biology Professor Emeritus who has worked near the boat ramp for decades, and numerous other scientists and conservation organizations are adamant expanding the boat ramp will damage fish nurseries, threaten marine mammals and endanger the county's remaining seagrass beds.

A hearing on the matter is scheduled for February. If the administrative law judge finds in favor of the peti-

tioners opposed to the ramp expansion – which would involve dredging the existing channel from the ramp to the Intracoastal Waterway, building a new dock, paving Oslo Road leading to the ramp, and building a parking lot that would require filling in wetland – the matter will be decided in favor of the lagoon.

If the judge overrules the petitioners' objections, the matter will come back before the Commission at the bidding and final project approval stages next spring, which means commissioners still have time to change their minds about the wisdom of spending yet another million taxpayer dollars on a project almost all area lagoon scientists say would damage the environment.

That makes this the best time for the great majority of the public to let commissioners know they think the boat ramp expansion is a bad idea.

Public pressure swayed the commission last summer to finally adopt a strong fertilizer control ordinance to help protect the lagoon from nutrient pollution, even though several commissioners had long opposed that move, and a similar outcry now might motivate commissioners to reevaluate the ramp plan.

Every commissioner has said protecting and restoring the lagoon is a top personal priority; experts agree the boat ramp expansion would hurt the lagoon; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission rates the existing ramp condition as "good to excellent" and rates parking conditions "good."

Surely there must be some better use for a million dollars in tax money. ■