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ONLINE EDITION

County staff still pursuing Oslo Boat Ramp permit

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Posted: Wednesday, March 4, 2015 7:33 pm | Updated: 10:58 am, Thu Mar 5, 2015.

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Posted on Mar 4, 2015
by [Steven Thomas](#)

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Documents obtained through a freedom of information act request have shown that Indian River County staff is continuing to seek an Army Corps of Engineers permit to expand the Oslo Boat Ramp – even though the Board of County Commissioners voted in October to table the project for at least three years.

After hearing about the Commission vote, Irene Sadowski, chief of the Corps' Cocoa Permits Section that oversees projects in Indian River County, wrote to County Public Works employee Michael Nixon on Nov. 7 asking if the county wanted to withdraw the application.

Nixon, whose title is Roadway Production Manager, has been in charge of trying to usher the project through the permitting process for a number of years. On Nov. 21, he replied with a lengthy and noticeably testy letter disputing points Sadowski made about problems with the project and insisting the Corps proceed to issue a permit.

While Sadowski's letter seeking to close the books on the project was copied to all five commissioners, Nixon's letter refusing to withdraw the permit request was not copied to any of the commissioners.

When District 3 Commissioner Tim Zorc heard Wednesday about Nixon's efforts, he said it came as a complete surprise.

"I didn't know about that," Zorc said. "I thought they put everything on hold when we voted. I will have to make an inquiry."

The battle over the boat ramp was one of the most contentious environmental disputes in the county in the past decade. Over a period of more than five years, the county spent in excess of \$1 million trying to get approval for the dredge and fill project in midst of an aquatic preserve.

The project scope was repeatedly revised over the years as every applicable state and federal agency refused to permit it, calling it environmentally destructive and illegal.

In its final form, it would have destroyed 1.41 acres of mangrove wetlands, expanded and paved the parking area near the existing ramp and the section of Oslo Road leading to the ramp, added dock space and dredged the channel connecting the ramp to the Intracoastal Waterway.

The county said all along no environmental harm would result, but leading lagoon scientists and conservation organizations disagreed.



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Pelican Island Audubon Society, Marine Resources Council, Sierra Club, Save the Manatee Club, Coastal Conservation Association and Indian Riverkeeper Marty Baum are among those who said the proposed "improvements" would disrupt a phenomenally important game fish nursery, endanger manatees and damage seagrass in one of the few areas where it still thrives in Indian River County.

They pointed out the ramp is located within the boundaries of a state aquatic preserve on property the county bought through the Florida Communities Trust Program primarily for conservation and said it makes no sense to invite increased boat traffic and bigger boats in such an ecologically sensitive area – especially since the existing ramp infrastructure is in good condition and is well-used by small boat owners.

Operating in an atmosphere of alleged political influence, St. Johns River Water Management District did eventually approve the much-revised project but members of the public turned out en masse at several County Commission meetings to decry the project and the Commission eventually voted 3-2 to put the

project on hold for "3 to 5 years."

"I thought the vote made it very clear what our intentions were," said Zorc when he heard about the staff effort to secure a permit from the Corps, which would be needed along with the St. John's permit to build the project.

He said he has instructed his assistant to put an Oslo Boat Ramp discussion on the agenda for next Commission meeting on Tuesday, March 10.

"I think that is the best way to clear the air and make sure staff understands our intentions," Zorc said. "The discussion may be under Public Works matters or under my matters near the end of the meeting."



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