

County faces uphill battle for Oslo Boat Ramp permit

Posted: Tuesday, March 31, 2015 9:32 am

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Even though the County Commission earlier this month outraged the public by voting to let county staff continue seeking a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers for its snake-bit plan to expand the Oslo Road Boat Ramp, the chances of the permit actually coming through anytime in the near future seem as slender as a blade of the seagrass opponents say the project would destroy.

Recent correspondence from the Corps shows the agency continues to have serious doubts about the environmental impact of the dredge and fill scheme in an aquatic preserve, and the Commission's bizarre action, coming just months after it voted to put the ramp expansion on hold for at least three years, has reignited the same well-organized opposition that forced the earlier vote to table the project.

A Nov. 7 letter from the Corps to the County stated, "The Corps received over 300 objections letters/emails and a petition signed by over 3,026 individuals against the proposed project . . . Based upon all the information supplied during the public comment period the Corps still has concerns regarding the impacts that this proposed project will have to aquatic resources including fisheries, manatees and submerged aquatic vegetation.

"If you do not plan to withdraw the project the Corps will follow up with a more detailed request for additional information and subsequently reinitiate consultations with the FWS and National Marine Fisheries Service."

What that last sentence means is, after 10 years of trying to push through a ramp expansion lagoon scientists have decried from day one, the county is still at the starting line in the process of getting permission to move ahead. The county did finally get St. Johns Water Management District approval, but it can't fire up the bulldozers or turn a single shovel of dirt without the Corps OK.

"The Corps will do exactly what the letter says," said Vero Beach ecologist and Pelican Island Audubon Society member Dr. David Cox, who helped lead opposition to the boat ramp expansion. "They are going to reinitiate consultation with state and federal agencies, and that is a process that could take years. The Corps is overwhelmed with permit applications for projects applicants are ready to build right now. It is hard for me to imagine they are going to streamline the [permitting] process for a project the County



Commissioners table Oslo Boat Ramp project for 3-5 years

FILE.

Commission says is not going to happen for 3 to 5 years.”

Meanwhile, political leaders, concerned scientists, environmental organizations are looking for ways to make the permitting process harder still.

District 3 Commissioner Tim Zorc, who voted against continuing to seek a permit, has floated the idea of having the area around the ramp listed as a critical habitat, a federal designation that would make it nearly impossible for the County to bulldoze mangroves and dredge seagrass beds.

“I spoke with Dr. Baker, Dr. Gilmore and Lange Sykes about that idea after the meeting [where the other four commissioners voted to seek the permit],” Zorc said. “I will do whatever I can to help. I won’t be able to get any staff time to assist with the effort, because that motion would be voted down, but I will help however I can.”

Baker, president of Pelican Island Audubon Society, the organization that has blocked the ramp expansion for years, and Lange Sykes, president of the Treasure Coast chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association and now a candidate for Debbie Mayfield’s house seat, organized the public protests that convinced the commission to put the project on hold last fall.

Gilmore is the leading expert on lagoon fish life and reproduction. He has conducted research at the ramp area for more than three decades and established scientifically that it is a uniquely important fish breeding area that helps supply not just the lagoon but much of the east coast of the United States with game fish.

“I encouraged Dr. Gilmore [to seek a critical habitat designation],” says Zorc.

Gaining that designation will take some time, but Gilmore, who has dedicated his life to unraveling the mysteries of the Indian River Lagoon and published extensively on its ecology says he is rushing to contact scientists he works with in the agencies that would be involved in granting protection.

“I need to move quickly in my conversations with the state and federal scientists and get some advice with all those levels. They have been funding my research since I left Harbor Branch in the 1980s and I have good relationships with them.”

Gilmore believes if he can get agency scientists on record about the exceptional importance of the fish nurseries at Oslo, and share that commentary with project reviewers at the Corps, it will bring more scrutiny to the project and greatly lessen the chances of a permit being issued in the near term.

“The last seagrass surveys the County submitted in support of the project were taken at the very beginning of seagrass growing season,” says Cox. “When the Corps sees that, that know what is going on. They know when someone is looking to do a survey before the seagrass has a chance to grow. The Corps will have field biologists out there in the growing seasons to see for themselves the condition of the seagrass beds [in the area the County wants to dredge].”

Influential island environmentalist Judy Orcutt and others have called for federal public hearings prior to any permit being issued and Pelican Island Audubon has launched a new letter-writing campaign to let the Corps know public sentiment and scientific fact about the County's plan, which has already cost taxpayers \$1 million and is projected to cost another \$1 million to tear up and rebuild an ecologically sensitive area that is already a successful small boat ramp in excellent condition well used by the public.

The letters from the first campaign clearly had an impact on the Corps' thinking, according to the letter the agency sent the county back in November, and the new letters are likely to deepen doubts about the wisdom of destroying seagrass and fish nurseries and endangering manatees in a lagoon already in crisis.

This article republished from sister paper Vero Beach 32963.