

Manmade habitat island could be completed in Naples Bay this year

By KELLY FARRELL

Monday, March 18, 2013

NAPLES — A 3.3-acre manmade island soon may begin taking shape in Naples Bay.

The idea to build the habitat island has been floating around for four to five years with permitting and other hurdles seemingly falling away as the Florida Department of Environmental Protection recently gave public notice it intends to issue permits to the city of Naples.

The island is to be built with dredging material coming out of Port Royal's residential canals.

"We've been working on this for quite a while. I think it's a great project utilizing Mother Nature's ways to help clean up Naples Bay," Naples Mayor John Sorey said.

The habitat island was a bit of a pet project for Mike Bauer, manager of the city of Naples' natural resources department.

The idea seemed to be controversial in recent years, with nearby residents concerned about their views and state regulators delaying permits. So Bauer thought it might not be such a good idea.

"I thought it would be a better view. I didn't want to make it controversial, so I dropped it. City Council liked it, though," Bauer said.

But he and other city officials didn't completely give up on the idea and finally the right time and place seemed to have come along with the Port Royal project. Port Royal plans to dredge the ever-shallower and narrower residential canals this year.

Bauer was attracted to the idea of creating artificial islands with otherwise wasted sediment to increase habitat in Naples Bay, emulating similar manmade habitat islands in the Indian River Lagoon, Sarasota Bay and Tampa, he said.

"Naples Bay has been so devastated, losing 70 percent of its mangrove fringe, 80 percent of its oysters and 90 percent of the sea grasses in the past approximately 50 years of development," Bauer said.

Bauer found a potential location for the island on the southeast side of Naples Bay, where residents with mangrove views would continue to have mangrove views and others with clear water views would keep that.

"Then along came the project to dredge the mouth of Port Royal," Bauer said.

Disposing of the dredged material by dewatering it and trucking it to a landfill costs about \$1 million, Bauer said. Taking that same dredging material and instead piping it to the new island location would cost less than \$1 million, he estimated.

The city's project recently went out to bid, but because it is innovative, not many contractors bid on it and the prices were higher than expected, officials said.

The island is engineered to protect the shoreline and mangroves as well as increase habitat for birds, fish, oysters and native vegetation.

"I don't see a downside. It will increase fishing opportunities and won't affect navigation," Bauer said.

Boats won't be able to pull right up to the island, which is to be surrounded by large rocks known as riprap to protect it from erosion.

Steve Teaford, the docks and waterways chairman for the Port Royal Property Owners Association, said he saw the city's use of the sediment to be a significant public benefit.

"The canals near the entrance to Naples Bay have become shallower over the years with boats going by our entrances. This project will get our canals back to their historic depths. Then it was a matter of what to do with the material," Teaford said.

Disposal options were to either find public land where the material could be disposed or to dewater and truck it away.

The habitat island is engineered to keep the cost of the dredging project under control, reduce shoreline erosion, improve water flow between the island and the shoreline, increase habitat for fish and birds, improve water quality and preserve mangroves, Teaford said.

"The riprap around it will keep the island from going anywhere while giving an opportunity to plant oysters," he said.

The island, once completed, should come with minimal cost to maintain. The city plans to spend about \$100,000 to plant native vegetation and the only costs foreseen would be to remove any exotic vegetation should it arrive on the island, Bauer said.

The Port Royal dredging is to begin in late summer or early fall with the new island completion before the end of the year, officials estimated.

The habitat island may become a prototype, Sorey said.

"This is finally getting close and we're excited about it. We'll be using Mother Nature's way of cleaning up pollutants in Naples Bay. If this goes well, we anticipate more islands like this in Naples and throughout the state and it will likely get less expensive each time," Sorey said.

DEP Press Secretary Patrick Gillespie said DEP intends to issue permits barring any public requests for an administrative hearing.

It remains to be seen whether the habitat island idea will be repeated throughout the

state based on the effectiveness of this project.

“Each project the department (DEP) looks at is reviewed on its own merits. Ecosystems and circumstances vary,” Gillespie wrote in an email to the Daily News. “The department believes this project will provide no adverse impacts and with planting of mangroves and salt marsh vegetation, it should be a beneficial project.”



© 2013 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online