

Midnight Pass plan has interlocking parts

By DOUG SWORD

doug.sword@heraldtribune.com

SARASOTA COUNTY — Midnight Pass will stay open this time because of a 260,000-square-foot sand trap designed to capture sand pushed in during storms, and because of a uniquely shaped inlet that will keep the water flowing.

At least, that is the plan.

The \$15 million project to reopen Midnight Pass and restore dozens of acres of sea grass and mangroves is either beautiful in its array of interlocking pieces or doomed to failure by its complexity.

Regardless of the varying views of supporters and opponents of the project, the plan envisioned by coastal engineer Karyn Erickson is certainly far removed from past efforts to reopen the channel.

Those include four dredging operations in 1983 and 1984 that opened the pass for a total of 10 days before nature closed them down. The state rejected a 1991 plan as being unlikely to succeed.

Permitting

Proving that Erickson's plan will work is what the permitting process is all about, said Spencer Anderson, the county's project manager for the effort.

The county is seeking a permit to reopen the pass from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and also must get federal agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, to withdraw previous objections.

They will not do that unless the county convinces them the plan will work, Anderson said.

While objecting to the county's plan on environmental grounds, the Venice Area Audubon Society voiced a commonly held opinion by op-

struction next spring with the pass opening by the following winter. Dredging and other operations would be limited to the bay side of the pass during turtle nesting season, with work along the Gulf occurring late in the year.

The project

Digging the 9-foot-deep Midnight Pass, which will be up to 330 feet wide in places, will displace large swaths of sea grass and mangroves. In all, Erickson estimates the pass is home to 12.5 acres of sea grass and 3.3 acres of mangroves.

To get a state permit, the county must commit to creating 6.6 acres of mangroves and 50 acres of sea grass, so much of the construction is intertwined with planting and transplanting vegetation.

The first step will be to dredge along the eastern end of the new Midnight Pass, using the sand to fill

in a 3,000-foot long section of the old Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, so that sunlight can reach the bottom.

Then, sea grass along the path of the new pass will be transplanted to the raised intracoastal channel. At about the same time, the Jim Neville spoil islands, which are crucial to the plan, will be cleared of invasive species.

As dredging continues, some sand will be stored in an area constructed just south of the new Midnight Pass while much of the rest is moved to the two spoil islands to create lagoons. More sea grass, including some from the new pass, will be transplanted into these man-made lagoons.

A key feature of the pass will be the sand trap, which looks like a large square attached along the south side of the new channel. This trap will capture sand from

Coastal engineer Karyn Erickson's plan is far removed from past efforts to reopen the channel.

to reopen the pass will probably be washed away and be a big waste of time and money."

The details of the plan and support for it are contained in documents Erickson has filed with the state since first applying for the permit in late 2004.

Erickson, who is just over five feet tall, says the documents would be almost as tall as she is if they were all stacked together.

Not only is this a large and complex project, but it would set a precedent for the state, which has never permitted the reopening of a pass before, Erickson said. That is part of the reason the permit process is now well into its fourth year, she said.

If the county gets its permit, the plan is to begin con-

The area for the sand trap needs to be cleared and its sand, which is not beach-quality sand, will be moved north to the old Mote Marine site, where mangroves will then be planted.

Then work begins on the Gulf side, dredging the west end of the channel, with the sand moved to nearby beaches. Once work on the pass is complete, the plan calls for dredging a 60-foot-wide channel connecting Midnight Pass to the Turtle Beach access channel and a county-owned boat ramp to the north.

After the pass opens, some areas would be off-limits to encourage the growth of vegetation. Other work, such as planting mangroves, would continue for another year or more.