

MINUTES
FORT MYERS BEACH
MARINE & ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES TASK FORCE
The Mound House – 451 Connecticut St.
Fort Myers Beach, FL 33931
Wednesday, September 13, 2023

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chair Johnson.

II. Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance

III. Roll Call

Members present: Wendy DeGaetano, Robert Howell, Steve Johnson, Rose Larkin, Jennifer Rusk and Mary Rose Spalletta.

Excused: Greg Fossum

Council Liaison: Bill Veach

Staff: Harbormaster Austin Gilchrist

IV. Approve The Agenda

MOTION: MERTF Member Spalletta moved to approve the agenda; second by MERTF Member DeGaetano.

VOTE: Motion carried unanimously.

V. Approve Previous Meeting Minutes – June 14, 2023, July 12, 2023, and August 9, 2023

Correction on June 14 minutes: Chair Johnson stated that a multi-family dock ordinance was ~~out~~ ~~of~~ in MERTF's scope.

July 12 minutes: Leon Moyer, resident living on a boat, noted that Bonita Bills installed locks on their water ~~faucets~~ faucets...

MOTION: MERTF Member Spalletta moved to approve June 14, 2023, July 12, 2023, as amended, and August 9, 2023; second by Chair Johnson.

VOTE: Motion carried unanimously.

VI. Public Comment – no public comment.

VII. Current Items Staff Report

A. Vegetation/Tree Ordinance

MERTF Member Larkin stated that the tree ordinance presented at the M&P meeting was the same as the April 2022 draft and not all the updates made it into the final draft. The vegetation ordinance presented was not revised or edited since the January version in 2022. On September 7, 2023, she asked Project Manager Chustz to send the latest version

of the vegetation ordinance to MERTF members before their next meeting on the 9th, but it was not sent. The ordinance must be updated before the Town Council can vote on it. Chair Johnson noted that Project Manager Chustz had not been an effective liaison and the process was not working. He discussed the importance of getting the ordinances approved. Liaison Veach will meet with the Town Manager to discuss items. MERTF Member Rusk shared a story about native plants surviving storms versus non-native plants. She indicated that the Native Plant Society may donate plants to MERTF, but the board has not approved it yet. She mentioned displaying native plants in the pop-up tent so residents knew what to plant.

B. Residential Canals

MERTF Member DeGaetano questioned who was in charge of the canals and liaison Veach replied no entity controlled the canals; some were private and some were public. The canal behind the old beach theater is a residential canal, but with the new owner's proposal, the canal becomes a commercial canal with a depot at the end. The community had concerns regarding the size of the vessels and disturbing the neighborhood. MERTF Member Rusk believed the issue is for MERTF to tackle due to increased traffic and the potential harm to wildlife. MERTF Member DeGaetano questioned how the narrow canals would accommodate wide boats. Chair Johnson commented on protecting manatees. He was unsure what MERTF could do regarding the canals since it was a Town issue. Harbormaster Gilchrist explained that speed zones regulated the waterways. He suggested researching the West Coast Inland Navigation District (WCIND) for a flowchart regarding the canal systems and waterways.

MERTF Member Rusk mentioned the trash on Bird Island and Harbormaster Gilchrist replied that Fish & Wildlife Conservation (FWC) was aware of the situation and he suggested that she contact the Estero Aquatic Preserve for more information. Discussion was held regarding how MERTF could help the residents with their concerns.

MOTION: MERTF Member Spalletta moved that MERTF has been informed of possible changes regarding residential canals, which would allow for commercial usage. MERTF shares the owner's concerns that such commercial traffic would degrade the owner's property, harm wildlife, especially Manatees and increase erosion. We request that the Council address this concern and MERTF will be available for advice as needed; second by MERTF Member Larkin.

VOTE: Motion carried unanimously.

C. Effect of Density/Intensity on Barrier Island Environment

MERTF Member Rusk recorded a conversation with Dr. Gunnels, Chair of the biology department at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), concerning his thoughts on density. Chair Johnson questioned whether they were interested in researching the topic or leaving it to professionals. MERTF Member Rusk commented that evacuation times were increased with a higher density. Chair Johnson tabled the discussion for the next meeting. MERTF Member Howell will research the effects on Manatees and seagrass water quality, MERTF Member Howell will address vegetation, MERTF Member Spalletta will explore the effects on sea turtles, Chair Johnson will research the impact of increased temperatures and MERTF Member Rusk will investigate the increased time it will take to evacuate the

island. Discussion was held about how increased density/intensity affected the quality of life in numerous ways.

VIII. Members' Items and Reports

MERTF Member Larkin stated it was time to plant vegetables and herbs in raised beds or pots with purchased topsoil. She confirmed that residents could test their soil at the Lee County Extension office or send a sample to the University of Florida campus.

MERTF Member Spalletta reported that the hurricane and the increased light negatively affected the turtle nests. However, the black skimmers did really well and the colony on Fort Myers Beach was the only one in Lee County.

MERTF Member Howell requested that the propeller guard be added to the agenda. He brought up gopher tortoises being relocated to Texas. He questioned what they could do to keep them on the island in an undeveloped area like Bowditch.

MERTF Member DeGaetano described a program called Classes for the Grasses to help clean the Chesapeake Bay. She wondered whether grasses could be transplanted into the Town's waterways to help the water quality. MERTF Member Howell stated that the Town was not ready for grasses because the oysters had to clean the waters first. She praised MERTF Member Rusk for her work on the pamphlet and for educating the public. She offered to help her complete it.

MERTF Member Rusk stated that Linda Miller from the Farmer's Market said it was okay to do something with the native plants since the plant vendor bailed. She described the positive energy in Times Square since the Farmer's Market opened. She questioned who to contact regarding Crescent Park and liaison Veach noted that Lee County had a lot on its plate. MERTF Member Rusk read the membership requirements for advisory committees. Future pop-up dates are September 15, maybe September 20 for the school kids, September 29, October 13, and October 27.

MOTION: Chair Johnson moved to readvise Council as they deliberate on the issuance of a permit to reconsider the fact that if construction occurs the applicant loses the appeal and the bridge has to be removed that it will cause unnecessary destruction in the environmentally critical zone; second by MERTF Member Howell.

VOTE: Motion carried unanimously.

Staff Update:

Harbormaster Gilchrist reported details on the sea turtle nesting and noted that shorebird nesting season was coming to an end. Hurricane Idalia caused erosion and sand overwash, but the berms prevented further damage and minimized storm surge. The Town was obtaining final permits for the beach renourishment project, the beaches on the north segment were being restored and more berm segments were being built. He shared details regarding FEMA berm status after Idalia. The water quality samples have been good since 9-5-23.

IX. Public Comment – no public comment.

X. MERTF Award

MERTF Member Rusk nominated Lacey and Summer, who painted a mural on the old elevator shaft in Times Square. Chair Johnson reviewed those in the bank. MERTF Member Spalletta nominated Dixie Fish for their sign concerning the harm of feeding leftovers to wildlife. Consensus was held to award the Murphie to Lacey and Summer.

XI. Set Agenda for Next Meeting

Add propeller guards and beach school cooperation.

XII. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: Chair Johnson moved to adjourn; second by MERTF Member Spalletta.

VOTE: Motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:22 p.m.

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