

The  
**Midnight Pass**



SOCIETY, INC.

"MIDNIGHT PASS - PASS IT ON!"

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MIDNIGHT PASS POSITION PAPER

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THE FUTURE OF MIDNIGHT PASS,  
THE JIM NEVILLE MARINE PRESERVE  
AND LITTLE SARASOTA BAY

SYNOPSIS

A great deal of attention has been focused on the problems associated with Midnight Pass... what went wrong, who's to blame, what will it cost to right this wrong? This paper is devoted to the opportunities available once the decision is made to positively resolve the Midnight Pass issue.

The restoration of tidal flow through Midnight Pass will be of immense benefit to the embayment's historic coastal lagoon ecosystem. While it will take time, there is every reason to believe that the marine plants and animals that had inhabited this area will recolonize it once again.

There are steps we can take to aid and abet the recolonization process and other environmentally sensible options available to preserve the abundant natural assets while maximizing the ability of Sarasotans to enjoy and to appreciate them.

To insure that the actions taken to "improve" this special area complement one another and will serve the environment, we need to adopt some long-term management strategies... a MANAGEMENT PLAN. We herewith offer some suggested actions, plans or programs we feel should be part and parcel of such a plan, tempered by the availability of financial resources to fund implementation of these ideas.

GENERAL

In planning for the future of Midnight Pass, the Jim Neville Marine Preserve and Little Sarasota Bay, some review of the past is in order if only to be sure we don't repeat the mistakes of the past again... and again. But far too much attention has been placed on the problem of Midnight Pass... who or what was harmed, the damage done, who was responsible, what should or should not have been done. It's not hard to lose sight of the fact that "what's done is done." It really doesn't matter.

"Man" interfered with the dynamics that controlled Midnight Pass and caused it to cease to function, causing serious and substantial damage to the long-established ecosystem of Little Sarasota Bay. Marine plant and animal communities in the Jim Neville Marine Preserve have endured

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significant losses as to both numbers of individuals and diversity of species living there.

It's time to focus attention on the OPPORTUNITIES available at Midnight Pass. The chance to restore an historic saltwater doorway between Gulf and Bay. The chance to take positive actions which will significantly improve environmental conditions and restore needed marine life habitat. The chance to reclaim lands despoiled in the name of progress. The opportunity to actively and aggressively manage this area so as to protect its abundant natural assets while maximizing the ability of Sarasotans to enjoy and to appreciate them.

The restoration of Midnight Pass is the only environmentally responsible course of action open with respect to this essential inlet. But, to maximize the benefits of restoring Midnight Pass, we need to adopt some long-range strategies, a MANAGEMENT PLAN. such a plan would prioritize our intended actions. It would insure that our goals were aligned so our actions weren't at cross purposes but complemented one another. A management plan would provide a proper balance between protection and enhancement of the environment as against the rights of individuals to utilize the area... with the environment coming first. After all, if we don't first protect and preserve these natural assets, what will be left to appreciate?

Following is a brief sketch of each of several suggested plans, actions or programs we would like to see as part of such a management plan. We recognize that our enthusiasm to enhance and improve this special part of Sarasota County must be tempered with the availability of the financial resources to carry out these ideas.

**MARINE PARK.** We propose the establishment of a special Marine Park zone extending from just above the junction of the ICW and the northern channel to Midnight Pass, southward to just below Spanish Point and extending from the Gulf of Mexico eastward to the mainland shores of the Bay but including the tidal areas and flood plains of Catfish and North Creeks. This would be a TRUE marine sanctuary where the overriding objective is the replication, to the extent possible, of the natural environment and conditions prior to the influences of "Man." Included in the Park would be all of the waters in the area (including the creeks) and all of the encompassed County-owned lands: The Jim Neville Marine Preserve, the south end of Siesta Key and the north end of Casey Key.

**NO WAKE ZONE.** We propose that the entire Marine Park area be designated a "no wake" zone... including the Intracoastal Waterway to the extent it falls within Park boundaries. surely we can dedicate one area in the Bay to the environment as a true marine sanctuary.

**MONITORING.** While some monitoring will necessarily be required as a condition of the Pass restoration permit, there is a lot that can be learned here as well. Comprehensive water monitoring needs to be established to fully assess the improvements to water quality once tidal flow is reestablished. A comprehensive biological monitoring

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program is also essential to assess the effects the restored environmental conditions have on the benthic community, the migratory marine animals and the bird life.

Regular monitoring should also be initiated of the local beach profiles, the rebuilding of and accumulations at the ebb shoal, the rate of deposition in the sand bank in the throat of the inlet and the effect restored tidal flow has on the historic tidal channels... especially the northern channel. People monitoring would be useful, too: the numbers and characteristics of the individuals visiting the area and the purpose for their visit... as a throughway to the Gulf, as a destination, for picnicing, fishing, bathing, etc.

**MITIGATION.** As part of the restoration plan, quite a number of young mangroves will have to be transplanted. Additional plants can also be set out along with the transplants. These new plantings need to be monitored as to survival rate. Low survival rates should trigger additional, but revised, planting efforts. A similar transplanting program will be needed for sea oats growing in the inlet site.

**LEAST TERN NESTING AREA.** While the beach material at the inlet site is not suitable for least tern nesting purposes, the area south of the Pass has been nested by them for years. To continue as such, the beach area will need to be managed... kept clear of non-compatible materials, primarily vegetation. The area will also need to be kept clear of people, at least (no pun intended) just prior to and during the nesting season.

**CHANNEL MARKING.** While the ICW is well marked, the northern and southern channels to Midnight Pass need to be adequately marked so that boaters are kept off the shallow, grass bed areas. The majority of our local waters could use improved channel markers for that matter.

**HABITAT MODULE.** The National Estuary Program is undertaking to restore native habitat to altered lands in a model project. The objective is to promote habitat restoration in suitable areas throughout the project area. Much of the land, shoreline, intertidal and subtidal areas in the Midnight Pass vicinity have been despoiled or otherwise altered by Man. Most of this damage was concurrent with the alteration of inlet dynamics which led to pass instability and closure. It would be most fitting to restore the despoiled lands at the same time the historic inlet is restored. The three County land parcels in this vicinity are all prime candidates for habitat restoration.

Jim Neville Marine Preserve. Originally and still often referred to as the Bird Islands or Keys, the area was renamed in memory of this local environmentalist (Mr. Neville was an honorary Society Board member). The breakdown of the 111 acres in this parcel is shown in Exhibit #4 of the Opposition paper. About  $\frac{1}{2}$  the emergent lands are vegetated in mangroves. There are 2 ponds on the property. But the elevation of some 20 acres was raised in the deposition of ICW spoils in the early 1960's. The Australian Pines and other exotic species of vegetation need to be removed... the Pine turned into firewood. There are then 2 choices: the lands could be regraded back to their historic elevation and revegetated in native species of plants. There are other areas in

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the vicinity that might accomodate the excess fill. Or, the elevated lands could be regraded to create a unique coastal hammock area in the County...complete with Gopher Tortoise!

The submerged lands have been covered in up to a foot of "fines" running from the undiked spoil areas. Interference with this material would likely be cost prohibitive and cause more problems than were solved. However, with tidal circulation restored, these areas could be recolonized by Cuban shoalweed. The colonization process could be helped along of course through a replanting project. Any such replanting project should include the re-introduction of Turtle and Manatee grasses at their appropriate growing depths.

The "Man-created" salt barrens, totaling nearly 10 acres, should be addressed along with the remains of the spoil piles.

North Casey Key. Sarasota County owns some 36± acres on north Casey Key (see Exhibit #4 to the Opposition paper) of which about ½ needs attention. The Australian Pine-vegetated spoil pile remains should be denuded of the exotic plant species and the land elevation returned to historic levels. Almost 10 acres of submerged lands have been subjected to coverage in clay fines and should be addressed in the same manner as the "Preserve" above.

This parcel contains some high marsh areas. Perhaps the best protection would be to better define the elevation around the southern part of the area and dedicate that to "people" uses, keeping them out of the marsh area proper.

The beach portion of this parcel includes a least tern nesting area. For it to remain as such, it will have to be actively managed to retain the necessary characteristics and environmental conditions.

South Siesta Key. Recently purchased by Sarasota County, these lands include the abandoned MML site. The derelict portion of the lands need to be reclaimed for environmental purposes. The area would lend itself to substantial revegetation in native species. There are Australian Pines to be removed from this area and some lowering of elevations necessary.

**ZONATION OF LANDS.** To accomodate the wants and needs of people while simultaneously protecting and preserving the very environment that is attractive to them is a tall order. But, if the environment is to survive in anything resembling a natural state, it must be done. The layout of the County-owned lands in this area lends itself to a unique approach to this preservation-utilization dilemma: dedicating the different parcels to serve different purposes. Here is a suggested plan of use-zoning:

North Casey Key. Dedicate this park area as the destination site for boaters... which it has historically been. Discourage to disallow landings on the other parcels, at least along the Bay shoreline. Establish an elevated nature trail around the high marsh area and include some rustic picnic grounds facilities. Erect an observation

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tower for viewing the area in general and particularly the Jim Neville Marine Preserve. Assure there's adequate water circulation to control the mosquito problem that's been endemic to this area. And, finally, balance the beaching of boats against the vegetation of the shoreline. Some boardwalking may be necessary to accomodate visitors and preserve native plantings.

Jim Neville Marine Preserve. A special place, it deserves special protection. It should be dedicated to the environment. Boaters should be discouraged from beaching there. Casual strollers should be discouraged, too. If "people use" at all is encouraged, it should be confined to a small section of the Preserve and include boardwalked trails.

South Siesta Key. This area could be dedicated primarily for hikers from the public beach facility, Turtle Beach. To preserve the interior shoreline, boat landings should be discouraged. Rustic picnic facilities would be appropriate. An interpretive nature center... a trail-side natural museum... would be most appropriate. It could be expanded to include a small building which would include a monitoring station. An observation tower as on north Casey Key would be of use. If access to the "Preserve" were encouraged it should be from this site as an extension of the trail-side museum.

## SUMMARY

These are just a few simple concepts that have come to mind. Additional ideas for maximizing the benefits to be derived from this area while preserving its natural beauty are limited only by the imagination and the taking of time to consider the opportunities available.

The point to be stressed in addressing the future for our environmental assets is that we can no longer treat them with benign neglect. There are just too many "people pressures" put on our natural assets... and the natural environment almost always loses in the clash of needs. If we're to preserve our natural environment we're going to have to actively manage its preservation and protection.