

White Paper: Dredging Big Marco/Capri Pass

Councilman Rich Blonna, March 19, 2022

Desired Action: Motion to petition the TDC, Rep. Bryon Donalds, and Sen Rick Scott for immediate and ongoing funding for dredging and pass maintenance of Big Marco/Capri Pass and its accessory channels in Factory Bay.

Statement of the Problem

For the past year, members of the Marco Island boating community have been concerned about the deteriorating condition of Big Marco/Capri Pass. While the “pass” is historically noted as Big Marco on nautical maps, the pass is correctly named Capri Pass. This waterway is the gateway to Marco Island and every day more than 60% of all commercial and residential boat traffic enters and exits the island through this waterway.

The boat captains of the two largest commercial vessels, the Marco Princess and the Key West, Express have reported at low tide a maximum water depth of only 6’ within the Capri/Marco Pass markers. As a reference the Gordon Pass (Naples) is maintained to 12’. In addition to the main pass, other accessory channels serving Factory Bay Marina, Marker 3, 3a and 5 have also experienced significant shoaling and are in need of dredging.

On 2/25/22, Dan High, Rose Marine Manager reported this email exchange between him and Captain of the Key West Express, George Blanchard: “Just wanted to update you on the conditions in Capri Pass. The shoaling has gotten worse. The shoaling has migrated west toward the #3 day-mark in the middle of the channel. On almost a daily basis we see vessels run aground in the middle of the channel. Outbound, they pass the temporary green at the edge of the shoal, then head for the #3 day-mark and run aground.”

The US Coast Guard has been helping re-direct boaters around the shoaling by placing temporary markers that indicate a safer route. This has been going on for over a year in both the Big Marco/Capri Pass and the accessory channels.

The Role of the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE) and Tourist Development Tax Committee (TDC)

Dredge prioritization in federal channels is a function of the Army Corps of Engineers, specifically the Jacksonville District. After investigating reports of shoaling in Big Marco/Capri Pass, the district requested funding to dredge the channel.

I spoke to Andy Miller, Manager of Collier County Growth Management Department, Coastal Zone Management Section, about this. He reported that the funding request was initially attached

to the Federal Infrastructure Bill. It was later dropped from the bill as the USACOE prioritized passes that experienced high volumes of commercial tonnage. That obviously ruled us out.

When I asked him about alternative Collier County funding sources, he mentioned that Wiggins, Doctor's, and Clam Passes all receive Tourist Development Tax funds to dredge and maintain their waterways. Collier County uses Tourist Development Tax funds to dredge and maintain these passes because the Tourist Development Committee (TDC) determined that these waterways are vital to support tourism, the direct link to the tax money.

I asked Mr. Miller if the City of Marco Island could request similar funding because Big Marco/Capri pass is the gateway to our boating-based tourist economy and he indicated that he didn't see why we could not ask the TDC for Tourist Development Tax funds.

The Role of the Coast Guard

The US Coast Guard, stationed in St. Petersburg, is responsible for maintaining and replacing the Aids to Navigation (ATONs) from Cedar Key to Key West, an area that covers Marco Island.

In addition to the shoaling in Big Marco/Capri pass and the accessory channels, several ATONs have been destroyed or displaced. ATONs mark the channels for boaters and provide directional guidance through their green and red coloring and/or flashing lights. When ATONs get destroyed or displaced as they did follow Hurricane Irma and other storms that followed, it sets up hazardous boating conditions.

When missing or displaced ATONs are combined with shoaling in major passes and channels it is a recipe for death and disaster.

In response to the most recent communications from Dan High, Manager of the Rose Marina, the US Coast Guard has visited Marco Island several times over the past year and replaced missing ATONs with temporary buoys. The main reason for not replacing them with permanent ATONs is their relationship to the proposed USACOE dredging project.

Had the USACOE received the Infrastructure Bill funding, they would have widened the channel, and set new locations for the ATONs. Since that did not happen, Big Marco/Capri pass is still being marked with temporary ATONs that will shift under harsh weather conditions.

This has left residential and commercial boaters in the most precarious position; severe shoaling in the major and accessory channels servicing over 60% of the island and temporary ATONs that are not completely reliable as channel markers.

The Solution

It is time that the TDC recognizes that Marco Island's tourist industry is heavily reliant on Big Marco/Capri Pass and the accessory channels that feed into it for its livelihood. Since the TDC has a history of earmarking funds for Beach Replenishment and Pass Maintenance, (TDC Beach

Renourishment and Pass Maintenance Fund 195), the City of Marco Island should receive its fair share of this money. Collier County has also used the County-Wide Capital Projects Fund 301 to fund Pass Maintenance.

I reviewed the minutes of every TDC Committee Meeting for the past year (back to March 2021) and there have been three meetings where money was approved to dredge Doctors, Wiggins, and Clam Passes. The amounts were:

- 2/28/22 - \$ 2,197,180.00 (Wiggins and Doctor's Pass Dredging)
- 6/28/21 - \$ 387,739.80 (Clam Pass Dredging)
- 4/26/21 - \$ 114,188.48 (Emergency Dredging of Clam Pass)

This amounts to over \$2,699,000.00 over the past two years. It is time for the City of Marco Island to start receiving its fair share of this money to ensure the immediate and long-term viability of our waterways.