April 5, 2005
Milton, Florida

The Marine Advisory Committee met on the above date with the following members present: Chairman Ken Johnson and members Robert Turpin, Dan Wakley, and Jeff Marker. Also present were the County Administrator (Hunter Walker), Public Works Director (Avis Whitfield), and Marine Extension Agent (Christina Verlinde). Chairman Johnson called the meeting to order at 5:10 p.m.

Marker moved approval of the minutes of the March 1, 2005 meeting; Turpin seconded, and the vote carried unanimously. (4-0)

Boating Registration Update

Walker distributed a brief overview of the Vessel Registration Fee requirements and uses. (Attachment in file) He said the county will have accumulated $315,000.00 by the end of this fiscal year. Walker said at the previous meeting Marker asked if vessel proceeds can be used for paving. He said the county attorney reviewed the statute and said it is fairly broad. Walker said Dannheisser said "to the extent relevant" boating improvement fees probably could be used for paving to improve a boat ramp. Walker discussed two examples of paving projects that may be eligible. Marker said his intent is not to fund the entire Archie Glover paving project with boating improvement funds, but to possibly fund the project by splitting the expense between several funding sources such as Vessel Registration Fees, Stormwater Mitigation funds, Garcon Point Mitigation funds, and other county sources. Walker said the only other source of funds the county has is through the district paving funds which are allocated through the budget process. He said the sources of this revenue are primarily gas tax revenue and a small amount of ad valorem tax revenue.

There was discussion on the vessel registration fees and how Santa Rosa County's fees compare to other counties in Florida. Turpin explained the fee schedule. Marker said the possibility of increasing fees can be discussed at a future date.

Whitfield said engineers submitting bids on the Interstate 10 Bridge project are tasked with mitigation projects that will improve the water quality in Escambia Bay. He said the county is suggesting paving the road going into Archie Glover Park as a mitigation project along with other paving projects. Whitfield said he is not sure if this mitigation project will take place, but the county should have an answer within the next few months.

Review of Artificial Reef Proposals

Walker said the county received artificial reef proposals from Walter Marine and Artificial Reefs, Inc. (Attachment in File) He said the county's goal is to have as large a reef as can be provided. Turpin described the differences in the two proposals relative to the size and composition of the reef structures. Walker asked about the durability of the artificial reef structures during hurricanes. Turpin said the State of Florida recognizes two types of damage caused by hurricanes. He said they are destruction of the actual reef structure and movement from the original deployment location. Turpin described the damage that occurred with the artificial reef structures previously deployed in Pensacola Bay. There was discussion on the amount of surface area provided with the two reef structures and whether the county received monitoring information from Artificial Reefs, Inc. on their previously deployed reefs.

Johnson asked which reef structure will be best for attracting fish. Turpin said data does not presently exist because there is no way to monitor the number of fish harvested from the reef sites. He discussed a reef monitoring study underway at the University of West Florida. He said it is too soon for any results.

Wakley said Walter Marine creates larger structures using steel and will place 28 structures 12' off the sea bottom. He said Artificial Reef, Inc. deploys modules within modules and there is no available report on how the previously deployed modules are doing. Turpin said after the hurricane the state only found remnants of a few dozen of the 53 modules deployed. He said it appears the smaller modules survived the storm better than the larger modules. Verlinde read sections of the state's damage report associated with both types of reef structures.

Marker moved to accept Walter Marine's proposal and requested monitoring be included in any future deployments; Wakley seconded, and the vote carried unanimously (4-0).

Boaters Guide

Marker said to give the county some exposure he would like to see Santa Rosa Sound included on the cover of the boaters guide under the name Pensacola Bay Guide. He said Verlinde has already submitted the proposal, but she has not received an answer. Johnson said the committee previously voted to have Santa Rosa recognized in the boaters guide. He said county staff is working on this. Verlinde said she will have something to bring back before the committee in the next month or two.

Maintenance Dredging Boat Ramps

Marker said me and Whitfield have come up with a possible way of making Floridatown boat ramp more functional using maintenance dredging. He said the dredging will allow boats to get off of the trailers at the ramp. Marker said no cost permits will need to be acquired in order to facilitate the maintenance dredging. He suggested applying for the permits now, so the next time the county has a low tide, the Road and Bridge Department will be ready to do the dredging. Johnson said the county may wish to do some educational programs with regard to the condition of the waterways. He said Marker may wish to include this in his motion. Wakley asked Whitfield if the county is authorized to do 25 cubic yards of maintenance dredging each year. Whitfield said yes.

Whitfield said the county is required to notify DEP and the Army Corp of Engineers to obtain a letter of exemption before proceeding. He said the no cost permit is actually a letter of exemption. Whitfield said the best time to do maintenance dredging is during the winter months when there are extremely low tides. He said the county can get the letters of exemption in place for next winter's maintenance dredging. Walker said there was no maintenance dredging last winter due to hurricane debris clean up.

Whitfield said there is also a problem at some boat ramps because of the powering on of boats. He said this undermines the boat ramp. Whitfield said a permit is required to stabilize the end of the ramp. He said the permits have been acquired, and the county is in the process of doing this type of work at several boat ramps throughout the county. He said the county recently put rip rap or rock bedding stone at the end of Bagdad Oyster Pile boat ramp. Whitfield said the county will acquire whatever is necessary to be prepared next winter. Turpin inquired about the composition of the rip rap. Whitfield said he will get the specifications to him.

Turpin said powering on is one of a number of educational messages that can be put out through the boaters guide and signage at boat ramps. Johnson said funds being used to repair damaged boat ramps due to powering on could be used towards improving the facilities.

Marker moved to make it a policy of the Board of County Commissioners to have the letters of exemption in place to be prepared to do maintenance dredging when appropriate; Wakley seconded, and the vote carried unanimously (4-0).

Local Option Sales Tax

Marker said he suspects there will be a push to have a local option sales tax to increase the county sales tax 1%. He asked for the support of the committee in asking the Board of County Commissioners to dedicate some percentage of the tax increase to marine needs. Turpin asked Walker how individual projects will be brought forward for consideration. Walker said any recommendations will need to be made at the Board of County Commission level.

Oyster Restoration Project

Marker said he became aware of the Division of Aquaculture, Oyster Restoration Project through Verlinde. He said the project will provide some educational opportunities for schools and monitoring. Marker said Verlinde suggested participation with the 4-H club. He said he would like to make the Division of Aquaculture very comfortable in doing business with Santa Rosa County. Marker said the county can do this with funding assistance and cooperation with educational opportunities that go along with the project.

Marker moved to request the Board of County Commissioners approve funding of $2,500.00 to go towards the Oyster Restoration Project. The motion died due to lack of a second.

Turpin asked what the $2,500.00 allocation to the Division of Aquaculture will be used for. He said the county may want to fund a larger amount to the project if there are worthwhile tasks that need to be accomplished. Marker said his objective is for Santa Rosa County to build a relationship with the Division of Aquaculture. He said the funds will be used for anything related to the Oyster Restoration Project through the Division of Aquaculture. Marker recommended putting a deadline on any county funds made available. He suggested any funding not committed or spent within 60 days of completion of the project to go back into the Boating Improvement fund.

Marker moved to make available up to $10,000.00 from the Boating Improvement fund to the Division of Aquaculture to be used towards the Oyster Restoration Project; Turpin seconded, and the vote carried unanimously (4-0).

Waterway Health Improvement Plan

Marker said his hope is to provide ideas on how to enhance the waterways, restore the oyster beds, and ensure reef programs. He said Turpin discussed a marine plan at the last meeting, and he is 100% in favor of the committee developing a Waterway Health Improvement Plan. Marker said he would like to discuss meeting twice a month until this plan is developed. He also recommended some public meetings allowing citizens to share their issues. Johnson discussed the limitations of the Marine Advisory Committee and limited uses of the Boating Improvement funds. He suggested Marker read the minutes from previous meetings. Walker said there could be concerns with availability of the meeting room and staff. He said there is a lot of merit with a Waterway Health Improvement Plan and public meetings. Johnson said in the past there has not been a lot of citizen participation during public meetings.

Wakley said Verlinde conducted a very good survey last summer related to boat ramp improvements. He said there was very good input from across the broad spectrum of the county. Johnson said there was a better response to the survey than to previous public meetings.

Turpin suggested the next Marine Advisory Committee meeting be a marine issues workshop. He said he felt there will be a good public response with concerns relating to waterway debris issues. He said the public workshop will show the community the Marine Advisory Committee exists for marine needs. Walker said there is real value to an open meeting to get input.

Marker said he has been in contact with several people within the FFWC (Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission) that have pointed him in the right direction for information. He said one of the most successful inshore reef programs is in Sarasota Bay. Marker said he will have the opportunity to view some of those sites with their science environmentalist. He said there are a lot of marine projects going on in Sarasota Bay and Tampa Bay. Marker discussed several projects in these areas. He said over the next few months he will be bringing ideas to the Marine Advisory Committee for review.

Marker said he would like to discuss some type of program to accumulate oyster shells from local restaurants. He said we may be able to figure out a way to put the shells to use for a continuing restoration program. Marker said there may be some issues with permitting and odor of the shells. Turpin said there are just a handful of natural habitats in our estuary system. He said oyster reefs previously existed in our inshore waterways. Turpin discussed reestablishing oyster communities in the Pensacola Bay system and organizations that have programs underway. He asked Walker if there will be a problem with committee members meeting under a different venue. Walker said he does not see a problem as long as it is a public meeting.

Turpin said he supports a portion of the local option sales tax being used for marine issues because the county depends on marine resources for development of the tourist economy and local quality of life. Walker said there is not a local option sales tax in Santa Rosa County. He said he felt the Board of County Commissioners will be looking at transportation issues with a local option sales tax. Marker said "if marine issues are not put on the plate, nobody's going to look at it." He urged committee members to show support by attending the Board of County Commission meeting scheduled to discuss a local option sales tax. Marker said citizens will be more willing to vote for a tax if we can show them what the funds will be used for. Walker said he felt the soonest a local option sales tax will be voted on will be during the 2006 election.

Turpin said he felt the next meeting should focus on a waterway health improvement plan. He recommended advertising and taking the first step. He said it may take a year to build the plan, but it will never take place if we do not get a plan started. Turpin said the public workshop will scope citizens' issues. There was lengthy discussion of ways to draw public interest and participation at the workshop, and a format of how the workshop will be conducted.

Turpin moved for Marker and Verlinde to strategize a public workshop to be held during the scheduled May 3, 2005 Marine Advisory Committee meeting; Marker seconded, and the vote carried unanimously (4-0).

Other Business / Adjournment

Wakley said the committee has already voted and approved to advise the Board to put in a pump out station at Navarre Beach.

He said the pump out station can be funded through a grant program called the Florida Clean Vessel Act. Wakley said the grant is a 75/25 match up to $30,000.00.

Wakley said there is a large wash out area in the pavement going to the Navarre boat ramp. He said there is a 5’ drop off between the boat ramp road and Sailors Grill. Wakley said people are using the boat ramp, and it is very hazardous. He suggested putting some fill dirt on the opposite side of the drop off allowing vehicles to stay further away from the drop off.

Wakley said funds are available through the Boating Land Acquisition Fund program and Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program (FRDAP) for land purchases near boat ramps. He said these programs are designed for land acquisition.

Wakley said the Bal Alex boat ramp is too shallow for future improvements and recommended selling this property. Whitfield said the boat ramp is a platted park of the subdivision and can not be sold. Walker said the property can only be reverted to the homeowners association if it is no longer used as a park. Walker said he will discuss this with Dannheisser.

Turpin said we are in the next funding cycle of the Florida Boating Improvement Program grant. He said any ideas can be discussed at the next meeting.

Johnson recommended the meetings not take more than one hour. He asked the committee members to forward agenda items to Walker prior to the meeting. Johnson suggested e-mailing information on any lengthy agenda items to Walker so it can be forwarded to all committee members for review before the meeting. He discussed several ways to shorten the length of the meetings.

There being no further business to come before the Marine Advisory Committee at this time, the meeting adjourned at 7:30 p.m.