Lee County pans Fort Myers bid to move city boat ramp across river to North Fort Myers

Fort Myers officials have strolled into another controversy in their efforts to get a new hotel built downtown.

The city is considering replacing a boat ramp adjacent to the Caloosahatchee River at Centennial Park to a site in the River’s Edge section of North Fort Myers.

Fort Myers.

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Located in downtown Fort Myers on the south shore of the river, the ramp is across the street from the proposed Luminary Hotel. Downtown events can make the boat ramp inaccessible. An increase in the number of events triggered by the hotel could put the facility off-limits even more frequently.

The potential loss of a center-city boat ramp and suggestions that a replacement be built in North Fort Myers has raised issues for some.

View from River’s Edge area of North Fort Myers, where the City of Fort Myers, across the river, is interested in building a city boat ramp. (Photo: NEWS PRESS STAFF PHOTO)

John Cassani, who serves as the Calusa Waterkeeper, leading the non-profit’s advocacy for the region’s waterways, said closing the Centennial Park launch will leave
a void.

"For the city to abandon this long-standing public boat ramp is really an issue for boaters," Cassani said. "My organization thinks they need to find an alternative location that is relatively close to the one they’re leaving."

Putting a new boat ramp in North Fort Myers as an alternative to the downtown ramp is not a new discussion. But it is complicated by the need for waterway construction permits and possible involvement by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Gene Gibson, president of the Calusa Waterkeeper board, told the Fort Myers City Council in 2015 that the permit application process could drag on for 18 months or more. Council member Michael Flanders recently predicted that it could take at least six months.

The search for an alternative boat ramp has taken on some urgency in light of plans to replace the boat ramp and adjacent parking lot to create more amenities with the planned Luminary Hotel.

Downtown Fort Myers boat ramp with Harborside Event Center in the background. Both sites are important to a planned downtown hotel, and the city is considering building a ramp across the river in North Fort Myers to replace it (Photo: NEWS-PRESS STAFF PHOTO)

Mainsail Development, the Tampa-based company that will build the hotel, has promised to construct an amphitheater on the city lot across from the hotel site. The boat ramp would close and the city would unpave a parking lot and add landscaping.

The property in North Fort Myers is owned by Georgia investor Michael Macke who paid $750,000 in 2002 for three adjoining parcels, totaling 16.5 acres in the River’s Edge section.

Macke said he has had "very limited" discussion with Lee County about using the site, but said they were brief conversations.

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“Nothing more than just tire kicking, it’s happened twice in four years,” Macke said. “The story was maybe they wanted to do some other work across the river and were looking for an alternative site.”

A demolition permit was issued last week for a vacant building on the property, according to county records. Macke said he is going to tear down a dilapidated building on the site. He plans to add more space for the Brown Bag Deli, the furthest inland of his existing tenants.

The landowner's public position is that the city has not gotten serious about the talks.

“There’s nothing there,” Macke said. “I wish there was.”

The building closest to the river, a used appliance store, is moving out. Macke said he is seeking a tenant for the building. A used car dealer and a boat sales company were formerly in that location.

Because North Fort Myers is part of unincorporated Lee County, closest emergency services would come from the Lee County Sheriff's Office and the North Fort Myers Fire Control District rather than the city police and fire districts across the Edison Bridge.

The prospect of a city-owned public facility on the north side of the river has some county officials worried that Fort Myers will try to expand its boundaries to take in part of North Fort Myers.

“That’s my chief concern, I don't want the city of Fort Myers to buy land outside of the city limits and possibly annex it,” said County Commissioner Brian Hamman. "We certainly do need to replace the boat ramp – in Lee County we can always use another boat ramp and purchasing that land can help."

Commission Chairman Cecil Pendergrass said annexation could lead to a battle similar to the city of Cape Coral's decision to annex land near Matlacha, a move that has led to court fights and efforts to incorporate Pine Island as a separate city.

"I'd rather keep it in the county and keep North Fort Myers whole," Pendergrass said.

Both commissioners expect the residents of North Fort Myers to take strong exception to having part of their community seized by the city to the south. Hamman noted a lesson learned from a proposal last year that brought out fierce opposition among residents.

“Look at the proposal to change the name of North Fort Myers,” Hamman said. “People are very proud of the community,” Hamman said. “The people responded and said 'no this is our community, we want our own community.'"

Noting the need for river access for boaters, Pendergrass said a North Fort Myers boat ramp would best be a project in which the city participates, but the county acquires the land.

"I think we can build a project bigger and better," he said. “The city doesn’t have the money for it anyway, I think we could do it ourselves and get it over with."
The nearest boat ramp with enough space and available parking is at the Davis Boat Ramp 10 miles away.

A ramp on West First Street has limited parking and difficult access. It was opened to the public as part of a deal to build a high rise apartment building.

"I've been to a lot of public boat ramps in my life, but that's essentially a joke," Cassani said. "The city has an obligation to boaters for this long-standing boat access, if there was another one down the road, I wouldn't have a problem if it was a decent public boat ramp."