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Bonita looks to improve waterfront access for the public

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Bonita looks to Dog Beach, Spring Creek for better access from dry land to region's waterways

The Bonita Springs City Council signaled an interest in making a significant investment in improving waterfront access Wednesday, tossing the top recommendations from a consultant in favor of sites that offer more room, but higher development costs.

The council voted to ask parks and recreation staffers to work on projects that would lead to better access to the Gulf of Mexico and Estero Bay at New Pass Bridge near Lovers Key, and the first real access to Spring Creek at Bonita Commons.

Hans Wilson and Associates, a Fort Myers-based marine and environmental consulting firm, looked at improving access to bay, river and gulf recreation areas and determined that it was the bay access that is most in need of improvement. Hans Wilson suggested that a boat launch on Melody Lane off Hickory Boulevard across from Beach Access 8 was the top spot, followed by a Hickory Boulevard site near Beach Access 8.

Mayor Ben Nelson Jr., a marine contractor, said he was familiar with all of the locations discussed in the Wilson report and noted that the list is short and peppered with locations on which space and parking is scarce.

"The scary part of the report is, if we don't protect these, there aren't any more," he said. "The age the city is at right now, if this is all we're going to have, this is it, at the very least we need to protect these things."

Council members agreed that the Melody Land site, with a mere five parking spots, is too small and too localized a venue.

Instead, the board voted to make developing access to Spring Creek the top priority.

Wilson said the Spring Creek access has been "privatized," but speculated that arrangements might be made with private property owners.

Council member Steve McIntosh called Spring Creek "a step-sister in our waterways," which could draw higher levels of maintenance if developed so that more people use it.

"We have to fight to get it dredged, to get the exotics (plants) out, if we get more people in Spring Creek, to use it in a careful, safe manner, we won't have those problems," he said.

Spring Creek access would require a parking area and a boardwalk to be built through a conservation easement area.

The council also voted to ask for plans for developing a fishing pier and parking area at Dog Beach, south of Lovers Key State Park, a site favored by Nelson, even though it would require \$2.3 million for a fish pier, access and parking around New Pass Bridge.

"That's just awesome," Nelson said. "It's not something the city should shoulder on its own, it's going to take partnerships with the state, city, the county."

Nelson said financing could come through a state-city-county partnership with the city using impact fees for its share.

City Manager Carl Schwing said it will take "quite a while" to come up with firm plans because each project has its own design, partnership, public input, funding and ownership issues to be addressed.

"This is not happening next week," Schwing said. "There will be multiple times in front of council before we get to where we need to be on either of these two projects."

Nelson lamented that development decisions in the past now mean work has to be done, and money spent, for a water-based community to create access to the water.

"If we were starting this city all over again, we'd have a comprehensive plan that says 'we're going to allow you to build on the waterways, but we're not going to allow you to sever the public access'," he said. "You would put that in there, you would put that in there from the beginning."