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Despite loss of EPA grant, West Shore canal dredging work to go forward



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TAMPA — Even though the city has lost a promised million-dollar federal grant, Tampa's public works director Monday night told Sunset Park homeowners that a project to dredge about a dozen canals in the West Shore area is far from dead.

"We have a budget issue, and we're going to try to solve it, but we're going to move forward on this project," Irvin Lee said to a smattering of applause at a community meeting at the Jan Kaminis Platt Regional Library.

But clearing away years of skepticism and distrust may prove even harder than dredging the muck out of the canals.

"The common thought is that this isn't going to happen," said resident Howard Whitney, who was a little more optimistic by the end of the meeting.

Some residents have worked to get the canals cleaned out for eight, 12, 15, even 30 years. At one point, shrimp boats would dock alongside West Shore Boulevard to sell their catch. As recently as the late 1990s, manatee and snook swam in the canals. Now, said resident Dennis Noto, "there's nothing but sludge."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency told the city last month that it was cutting \$1.25 million for the \$2.5 million project because Congress had cut \$140 million from its program for such projects.

U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, has since asked the EPA to reinstate the grant on the grounds that it was approved in 2005 and the city has already spent more than \$641,000 on engineering and permits. Lee said the work will continue, with the city finding the money it needs somewhere else.

The city has hired Duncan Seawall Dock and Boatlift to design the project and get permits. Once that's done, the company will give the city a guaranteed maximum price. If that's too high, the city can opt out of the project.

The canals to be dredged flow into Old Tampa Bay between Kennedy and Gandy boulevards. The goal is remove sediment from a channel up to 20 feet wide and 3 to 5 feet below the mean low water level. Clearing out the canals will help South Tampa drain faster, City Council member Harry Cohen said.

But some residents worry that the scope of work will leave at least one canal partly silted in, and that within a few years the remaining muck will fill in the dredged-out channel. "We're not trying to find a way to do this right," resident T.J. Ferlita said. "We're just trying to find a way to do it to appease some people."

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