

Tampa Bay Times



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Dredging finally under way in West Shore canals



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TAMPA — After more than 30 years of neighborhood petitions, the dredges are finally in the water in the canals of West Shore.

But that doesn't mean everyone's happy.

That's because the city of Tampa is not dredging every canal in the area, nor is it dredging every part of the canals where it is working.

Here's what the city does plan to do: Over the next 15 months, it will dredge some or all of 10 residential canals between Kennedy and Gandy boulevards. The \$2.8 million project is aimed at improving water quality, tidal flushing and the habitat for marine life.

The fact that the dredges are not going farther is not new, city officials say. They said they've showed residents the proposed limits of the dredging in a series of meetings and posted those maps, which go back nearly three years, on the city's website.

Still, Jeff Woollard was surprised to learn the dredging along his canal — officially known as Canal 14 — will stop short of his home on W San Rafael Street.

The canals were dug in the 1940s and '50s and flow into Old Tampa Bay. As recently as 15 years ago, residents enjoyed seeing manatees and snook from their back yards. At one time, some canals were deep enough that shrimp boats could dock along West Shore Boulevard to sell their catch.

Now many are filled with muck and silt.

Part of Woollard's annoyance is that he recalls city officials saying his entire canal would be dredged. But he also believes that's what the city should do. Otherwise, he predicts, once the dredging is complete, sediment from his part of the canal will ooze over and silt in the new, deeper channel.

Dredging only part, he said, will be wasteful.



"That's so counterintuitive and illogical that I just shake my head," Woollard said. "The bottom line to me is that there's no way that until they dredge the whole thing out that they're not going to have an issue."

Woollard likely is not alone.

"More and more people will be upset when they see they're not getting what they expected," said Mike Rothenburg, an environmental engineer who chairs the stormwater committee for the Sunset Park Area Homeowners Association.

Tampa officials say there are a couple of reasons why this project has evolved as it has.

As planned, the city plans to remove sediment to create a channel 20 feet wide and 5 feet below the mean low water level.

But as approved by environmental regulators, the dredging must stop at least 5 feet from privately owned docks and 10 feet from the seawall. (Get any closer, officials say, and you risk undermining the seawall.) The dredging also has to stay clear of sea grass, oysters and mangroves.

That means there are spots, such as where canals get narrow, where the city could not get an environmental permit to dredge because it would not be able to observe the required setbacks. Those spots include the section of Canal 14 where Woollard lives. The canal is wider closer to Old Tampa Bay, but narrows as it goes east.

"We explained to people why we couldn't go beyond a certain distance," Tampa public works director Irvin Lee said. "This is not the city of Tampa making this up. ... If we could have gotten a permit to do the work, we would have gotten it."

Money also has been a big factor as the city has struggled to climb out of the recession. Over the past seven years, City Hall has cut more than 700 jobs as property tax revenue fell by nearly a third.

"Every dollar that we could get from any other entity to put toward this project we've been trying to get," said City Council member Harry Cohen, whose district includes South Tampa.

Trouble is, those dollars are scarce, too.

In late 2011, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency canceled a \$1.25 million grant for the work after Congress cut its budget for such projects.

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This spring, the city sought \$1.2 million for a second phase of the project from the Florida Legislature. Lawmakers appropriated \$120,000, but Gov. Rick Scott vetoed it.

"We got nothing, so we're back to square one," Mayor Bob Buckhorn said. "I don't know what phase two's going to look like. It depends on what's available. We were very generous in last year's budget to put a million dollars in" for the project.

Residents say more dredging could generate new tax revenue that could cover the cost.

Last fall, residents and the Sunset Park Area Homeowners Association teamed up to pay for an economic impact study of the dredging. The study, by Urban Economics Inc., found 347 homes on a total of 14 canals that were so silted they can't be navigated.

Comparing home sales along those canals with sales along nearby canals where boating is possible, the study concluded that homes along the unnavigable canals sell for \$254,293 less than similar homes on navigable canals.

So if you dredged all 14 canals where navigation currently is not possible, the value of homes along those waterways could rise by a total of \$88.2 million, the study concluded. And that could push up city property tax revenues by nearly \$506,000 a year.

"Doing it right would pay for itself," said resident Kent King, who would expect many "For Sale" signs to go up if more dredging were done.

City officials say they haven't determined what a second phase might look like.

Lee, the public works director, says he sees something geared toward a maintenance strategy, but not necessarily dredging more areas.

Lee also wants to study how other communities around Florida pay for this type of work — for example, through grants, assessments or by putting something aside every year.

Cohen agreed that what additional work could be done is an open question.

"We just need to at least start doing the work that everybody's been waiting 30 years for us to do," he said. "We're going to continue to move forward and chip away at it. If there's a way of getting to these canals over time, I'm hoping we'll be able to find a way to do it."

Fast facts

On the Web

For updates that show a detailed schedule of which canals will be dredged when, visit tampagov.net/dept_contract_administration/programs_and_services/Featured_Projects/index.asp, and click on "View the April 22, 2013 Waterways Project Update."

For maps showing which canals and which parts of canals will be dredged, diagrams and other information about the West Shore waterways project, click on the link "View the July 19, 2012 public information meeting materials."

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