

Tampa Bay Times



Long-awaited canal-dredging in South Tampa gets a green light



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TAMPA — After decades of appeals from the neighborhood, Tampa officials last week voted to spend \$2.8 million to dredge 10 residential canals in the West Shore area.

"It's about time that something is done," City Council chairman Charlie Miranda said moments before the council's unanimous decision to approve a contract with Duncan Seawall, Dock and Boat Lift of Sarasota.

The canals were dug in the 1940s and '50s and flow into Old Tampa Bay between Kennedy and Gandy boulevards. Once they were deep enough for shrimp boats to dock along West Shore Boulevard to sell their catch. Even 15 years ago, Sunset Park homeowners watched manatees and snook swim behind their homes.

Now the canals are largely filled with silt and muck.

As approved, the city plans to remove sediment, creating a channel 20 feet wide and 5 feet below the mean low water level. That is expected to help improve water quality, tidal flushing and the habitat for aquatic life.

Duncan Seawall is expected to start dredging by April, and officials expect the job to take 15 months to complete. City officials say the dredging will not disturb patches of sea grass, oysters or mangroves. The dredged-up material will be disposed of at a permitted site in Old Port Tampa.

The dredging will stop, however, 5 feet from privately owned docks and 10 feet from the seawall. That means homeowners will have to pay the contractor themselves if they want the dredging extended to their docks.

"We do have a lot of property owners who are planning to do that," said Carrie Grimail, president of the Sunset Park Area Homeowners Association.

Residents have long lobbied for the dredging, and it hasn't been easy to get this far.

In late 2011, the effort suffered a big setback when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said it would not contribute \$1.25 million that it had pledged for the work after Congress cut \$140 million for such projects.

This year, Mayor Bob Buckhorn's administration found \$1 million in the city budget to replace the federal funds.

"The city has done what they can with the limited resources that they have," said John B. Grandoff III, a Tampa lawyer who lives in Sunset Park and has worked on the issue with other residents. "Not everybody is absolutely pleased, but it's a good start."

The project won't dredge every canal in the area, so residents hope that once this job is done, the city will start to work on a project to clear those canals, as well as a maintenance program.

"We're hoping that they don't wait another 30, 40 years," Grimail said.

City officials will "carefully consider" how to best maintain the canals and how to pay for that kind of work after this

job is finished, Tampa public works director Irvin Lee said. They expect to learn a lot from the first project that could be applied to any work in the future.

But, he said, "we want to get through this first."

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