

Punta Gorda Isles boaters eye Alligator Creek

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PUNTA GORDA — The city's Waterfront Development Advisory Committee heard standing-room support Thursday for the city to cut a new channel for the Punta Gorda Isles canal system into the mouth of Alligator Creek.

Dorothea Zysko, an environmental consultant, presented the results of Team Punta Gorda's analysis of what will be involved to create a new inlet for PGI at the western end of Almar Drive. Alligator Creek already provides access to the Gulf of Mexico for Burnt Store Isles and Charlotte Park boaters.

The City Council is scheduled to discuss Wednesday Team Punta Gorda's Alligator

Creek report.

Team Punta Gorda, Zysko said, plans to make similar presentations to other Punta Gorda and Charlotte County boards and stakeholder groups. For more information, call Team Punta Gorda at 941-637-8326.

While the northern end of PGI provides boaters with seven inlets to access Charlotte Harbor, PGI boaters on the southern end of PGI have only the Ponce de Leon Inlet. Some boaters have as much as a 45-minute to an hour-long boat ride just to get to the Ponce inlet.

Among the advantages for an Alligator Creek inlet, Zysko cited boater safety, since it would lessen congestion on the Ponce inlet, reducing

erosion in the Ponce inlet, due to a lowering of boat traffic; and better water circulation and water quality within the canal system and Charlotte Harbor, which is deemed by the state as an aquatic preserve.

Costs

But such an inlet doesn't come without a price tag. Team Punta Gorda estimates to permit, design and construct the inlet could cost \$2 million or more.

The channel would need 2.5 acres of a 10-acre privately owned property. Zysko characterized the property owner as "favorable" to the project.

The goal would be to dredge a 927-foot-long,

100-foot-wide channel to a maximum depth of 8 feet. An important part of the permitting, Zysko said, will be water flow and quality studies to ensure that the inlet will not degrade Charlotte Harbor's water quality.

"The largest costs will be the dredging," she said. The dredging alone could cost \$985,000. "These are just ball-park estimates."

And the bottom-line question is how to pay for the project and who pays for it. The funding could come from the PGI Canal District, which pays for maintenance and other PGI canal projects, or from a special municipal service benefit unit.

To pay for a bond on the project, Team Punta Gorda estimated PGI

waterfront property owners might have to pay a special \$100 annual assessment for five years. PGI property owners now pay a \$400 annual canal assessment.

Waterfront committee member Bill Dixon also serves on the city's PGI Canal Advisory Committee. Dixon warned funding an Alligator Creek inlet could see a community backlash from some PGI property owners.

Mayor Larry Friedman said he saw no problem getting the City Council or people in general to agree "conceptually" with the Alligator Creek inlet. However, he did question whether people would be willing to "belly-up" and pay for the project.

"I don't feel all warm

and fuzzy ... if this comes up to any plebiscite ... that folks will belly-up with a \$100 (canal assessment) for five years," Friedman said, adding that no one should expect city property taxes to fund the project.

Friedman also suggested if county residents supported the extension of Charlotte County's one-cent infrastructure sales tax, which is now due to expire in December, that a portion of the Alligator Creek project could be paid with sales taxes.

"If we don't convince our neighbors, then this won't be done," he said. "But I think we are off to a great start."

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