



NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Fred Mays
972-838-5163
fredmays44@gmail.com

Progress Continues on the Indian River Lagoon Restoration Despite COVID-19

by Vince Lamb, Chairperson, Brevard Indian River Lagoon Coalition

Although the Brevard Indian River Lagoon Coalition shares some concerns recently voiced in this newspaper about the long term impact of COVID-19 on our community commitment to cleaning up the Indian River Lagoon, work on the Save Our Indian River Lagoon Project Plan continues without delays. This work, funded by the half cent sales tax that was approved by 62% of Brevard County voters in 2016, has remained on track. Brevard County Natural Resources staff has worked without interruption to implement, supervise and monitor this work and provide supervision. The Citizen Oversight Committee has continued to meet monthly, except March 2020, to provide their leadership.

When the sales tax referendum passed in November 2016, the forecasted revenues were approximately \$340 million for the ten year period. With a strong economy when we entered 2020, sales tax revenues for the duration were revised upwards to \$484 million. In the first three years, \$139 million was collected. While nobody can accurately predict sales tax collections in Brevard County for the remainder of this term, most experts believe that the amount will equal or exceed the original expectation of \$340 million. This amount would allow all of the currently started projects to be completed, even those that are now in planning and permitting stages. Other approved projects not yet started can wait until the sales tax forecasts can be accurately updated.

Projects have been completed that remove 17,000 pounds of Nitrogen annually, the most harmful nutrient pollutant in Lagoon waters. Many people have observed that the water clarity is exceptionally good, especially for a warm month like May. Nutrient pollutants reduced or removed by Save Our Indian River Lagoon Plan projects,

less residential fertilizer applications and recent weather conditions contributed to this clear water'

The Restore Our Shores project by Brevard Zoo has five projects currently underway to provide oyster restoration and living shorelines for more than 56,000 square feet of Lagoon bottom that should reduce the Nitrogen by approximately 2,200 pounds per year. This work has continued uninterrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers have been required to practice social distancing and wear protective face masks when working closely together. Brevard Zoo is conducting community fundraising to ensure that the organization remains financially healthy during this unusual pandemic.

According to Terry Casto, Chairman of the Marine Resources Council (MRC): "the current financial crisis is creating hardships for many organizations, until we figure out how to do business in the new normal. I'm encouraged by the way Dr. Souto and staff have continued to execute the mission of the Marine Resources Council. MRC's vital water quality program is continuing, the informative Brown Bag lunches are now delivered via Zoom, our robust mangrove program is continuing replenishment of the IRL shoreline."

In spite of these positive assessments, the COVID-19 Pandemic will have adverse impacts on the Indian River Lagoon Restoration as well as many elements of our community. Our local economy may require years to fully recover. . In Florida, tourism provides approximately 20% of sales tax revenues. Tourism may be slow to fully recover, but our natural Space Coast beaches, conservation lands and waterways, as well as launches sending mankind back to space, offer great opportunities to travelers who want to enjoy clean outdoor spaces with plenty of room for social distancing.

Good jobs, clean water and quality of life remain essential to keeping our community strong. As we move forward, we need to remind our elected officials that we must continue to fund water quality projects. As individuals, we must consider and adopt our voluntary efforts to help the Lagoon. Let's work together to ensure we remain committed to our efforts to have a healthy Indian River Lagoon -- and a healthy economy.