

## **Summary of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Efforts to Consider Manatee Protection Zones in Western Pinellas County**

**June 12, 2015 Update**

- Due to a sustained increase in boat-related manatee fatalities and other risks, western Pinellas County (especially Boca Ciega Bay) was identified by State and Federal agencies as an area in need of a review to determine if new manatee protection zones may be warranted.
- The State (FWC) is proceeding with possible manatee protection zones based largely on newly collected data which identifies those areas with both high densities of manatees and boats operating above idle/slow speeds.
- FWC asked the County to form a Local Rule Review Committee (LRRC) made up of both boating and manatee advocates. Their task was to provide feedback to FWC on areas where additional manatee protection zones were being considered. The main intent of this was to provide FWC with important local knowledge so that any proposed zones would minimize impacts to the boating public as much as possible while also meeting their statutory requirements to protect manatees.
- Simultaneous with the LRRC process, County staff contacted colleagues in each of the affected municipalities about this project, and both FWC and County staff updated the Big C (a coalition of beach mayors) on the process. FWC encouraged any local governments with concerns or recommendations to raise them as early in the process as possible. They were especially looking for local knowledge about areas where traditional recreational uses (such as water skiing or tubing) might be impacted.
- The LRRC completed its task and issued a report to FWC which can be found on the County webpage cited below. The committee worked well together in addressing both manatee protection and boating concerns and ultimately presented recommendations that reflect compromises on both sides of this issue. Of particular concern to committee members was the creation of additional speed zones within the marked channel of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW), so these areas received heightened scrutiny. Also, please note that many of the areas under discussion overlay existing boating safety zones so the addition of a manatee protection component in these instances will not affect boaters.

- FWC staff responded to the LRRC and drafted maps of potential manatee protection zones. A copy of this report, including the maps, can also be found on the County webpage cited below. Here are a few statistics on the zones that were culled from the FWC report:
  - The total area of inshore waters in Western Pinellas County is 53,132 acres
  - The total area presented to the LRRC as "of concern" was 7,147 acres
  - The total area being considered for potential manatee protection zones is 6,144 acres (11.6% of the inshore waters).
  - The total area of these potential manatee protection zones that would be new to boaters (i.e. that do not overlap existing boater safety speed zones) is 4,339 acres (8.2% of the inshore waters).
  - The total length of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) in the County is 46.4 miles.
  - There are 8.2 miles of existing boater safety speed zones on the ICW.
  - There are only 0.5 miles of new speed zone (during the warm season only) being considered for the ICW.
- FWC held a public meeting in Treasure Island on September 25, 2014 to answer questions and obtain additional public comment.
- FWC staff presented the proposed zones to their Commission at their November 19 and 20 meeting in Key Largo. FWC Commissioners decided to move forward with rule making on the potential new zones.
- The "Notice of Proposed Rule" was published by FWC on December 22, 2014. It can be found on the County webpage noted below.
- FWC staff held two public meetings as outlined below to gather additional public comments on the proposed zones.

DATE AND TIME: January 27, 2015; 6:00 PM

PLACE: Treasure Island City Hall Auditorium, 120 108<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Treasure Island, FL 33706

DATE AND TIME: January 28, 2015; 6:00 PM

PLACE: Clearwater Community Sailing Association, 1001 Gulf Blvd, Clearwater, FL 33767

### **What's next?**

- FWC Commissioners will hold a final public hearing on June 24, 2015 in Sarasota to take action on the proposed zones. Agenda and location information can be found at the link noted below.

Agendas and other FWC meeting information are available at:

<http://myfwc.com/about/commission/commission-meetings>

FWC is maintaining updated information on the overall process at:

<http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/manatee/rulemaking>

The County has created a webpage to help citizens and LRRC members follow developments as this process moves forward. This page will be updated with new information as it becomes available and can be found at: [www.pinellascounty.org/StateManateePlan](http://www.pinellascounty.org/StateManateePlan)

Anyone who would like to submit comments or questions to FWC can do so at:

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