

MINUTES
FORT MYERS BEACH
AAC/MERTF Joint Meeting
Town Hall Council Chambers
2731 Oak Street
Fort Myers Beach, FL 33931
Friday, February 21, 2025

I. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by AAC Chair King.

II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

III. WELCOME FROM AAC AND MERTF CHAIRS

AAC Chair King welcomed everyone and MERTF Chair Nusbaum introduced himself.

IV. COMMITTEE MEMBER INTRODUCTIONS

AAC members: Chair Chris Riedel King, Ted Lawwill, Ed Schoonover, Sam Lurie, Jennifer Rusk (member of both committees) and Council Liaison Jim Atterholt.

MERTF members: Chair Dave Nusbaum, Leo Sand, Sharon Hegstrom, Robert Howell (virtually), Ed Rood and Council Liaison John King.

V. INTRODUCE STAFF ASSOCIATED WITH COMMITTEES

Environmental Projects Manager Chadd Chustz and Harbormaster Curtis Ludwig. Harbormaster Ludwig reviewed the AAC responsibilities and Manager Chustz reviewed the purpose of MERTF.

VI. INTRODUCE CAPTAIN CHRIS WITTMAN

MERTF Chair Nusbaum introduced Captain Wittman, co-founder of Captains for Clean Water. Captain Wittman reviewed why Captains for Clean Water was formed and described the degradation of wildlife and the economic impacts on businesses. He stated the problems started after the Everglades were drained and the water was stopped at Lake Okeechobee. Although the water going south was compartmentalized, the water in Lake Okeechobee had to go somewhere. He discussed salt water versus fresh water and noted that Florida Bay became three times saltier than the Gulf of Mexico and killed the seagrass and oysters. The Everglades dried out and the ecosystem changed as a whole. He described how scientists decided to restore the Everglades by reconnecting Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades and Florida Bay. Reservoirs would be built to hold the water before being filtered to the Everglades throughout the dry season.

He discussed how the sugar industry lobbied to protect their industry to the detriment of the Everglades and the 68 projects that were supposed to be built. Captain Wittman noted that since the public was not informed or educated, there was no pushback, so he formed Captains for Clean Water. In order to get political will, they needed public pressure and the people had to be educated and confident in what they were saying.

He reviewed the Lee, Collier and Charlotte study handout regarding the economic losses from the 2018 and 2019 water quality crises. He stated that a legislative priority to protect the quality of life should be number one in perpetuity. Funding projects, better water management, and better management of Lake Okeechobee were the number one critical requests. He noted that ten years later, over 55 of the 68 projects were under construction, but they had to continue to fund the projects. He encouraged the community to educate themselves with resources provided by Captains for Clean Water and make every effort to preserve the area.

VI. DISCUSSION/QUESTIONS

The biggest obstacle was losing momentum due to people being complacent about decent water quality for a few years, hurricanes, or a pandemic. He discussed the politics behind efforts to confuse and divide people to prevent them from focusing on problems. Education is the best way to keep people engaged.

Captain Wittman addressed the governor replacing the South Florida Water Management District members years ago and noted the agency made a 180-degree change and was leading the Everglades restoration. There was record funding over the past six years, but continued funding was constantly threatened. He was not sure how many of the 55 projects were completed, but he described some that were. He explained how the sugar industry was suing the Army Corp of Engineers and still interfering in the operation of the EAA reservoir.

Captain Wittman stated there were incremental improvements in the discharges as projects came online. He explained how the Army Corps rehabilitated the failing dike at Lake Okeechobee to prevent flooding the surrounding community. More information can be found at captainsforcleanwater.org.

Septic systems, inadequate sewage infrastructure, fertilizing yards, phosphate mining, and even washing cars affect water quality, but the discharges were the main culprit and had to be addressed. As long as the discharges continued, fixing every septic problem did not matter.

Captain Wittman stated that in 2000, the public voted to approve a stamp tax on real estate to fix the problem, but the funds were not spent in the best way for restoration. He addressed cures for red tide but believed they needed to address the cause rather than the symptom.

He noted that everyone had a critical voice in driving change by educating themselves and pressuring politicians to improve water quality and advance Everglades restoration. He encouraged people not to underestimate the size of the island or the community to affect change.

Captain Wittman commented that he had not been getting reports that the red tide off the coast was getting worse. He noted that recent conditions have been helping to keep it away from the coast. Captains for Clean Water was a 501(c)(3) organization and did not endorse or contribute money to candidates. There were voter guides online that listed resources to identify who was taking money from the sugar industry and who supported restoring the Everglades.

Captain Wittman discussed improvements to fisheries, nurseries and catch effort measurements by eliminating mixing salt and fresh water in estuary areas. He described improvements from not having blowouts of fresh water during the dry season. He added that the recovery swings had to be much longer and spread out than those of impact. Stormwater drainage had more of an impact on algae blooms than the killing of seagrass, although everything had some impact.

Captain Wittman stated he has started seeing local recovery in some sea grass and oyster bed areas. After losing 50,000 acres of seagrass in 2015, Florida Bay was just beginning to come back with noticeable amounts.

Gail Crabtree P. asked whether there was a relationship between beach renourishment and water quality. Captain Wittman replied that he did not have an answer because he did not have scientific data.

He commented that the top issues affecting water quality and water quality were the conveyance and timing of discharges, legacy pollution in Lake Okeechobee, phosphorus levels coming into the lake and identifying point sources.

MERTF Chair Nusbaum thanked Captain Wittman for taking the time to share his views with them. Captain Wittman will share links to the economic study and other pertinent studies.

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

MERTF Chair Nusbaum adjourned the meeting.

Adopted 3/24/25 with/without changes. Motion by Fred Lawwell
(DATE)

Vote: unanimous Signature: Chris Ruedel 15

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4/10/25
Dan O'Keefe
Chairman
MERTF