

**Biscayne Bay Commission Minutes**  
**Jan. 19, 2024, at 9:00 am EST**  
**Cutler Bay Town Hall – City Council Chambers and GoToWebinar**

**General subject matter overview:** The Biscayne Bay Commission meets to review and discuss plans to address water quality impairments as well as the priority projects and financial resources that could address these plans.

Attendee Name	Title	Status
Noah Valenstein	Chair	Present
Adam Blalock	Vice Chair	Present
Danielle Cohen Higgins	Commission Member	Not Present
Kevin Cabrera	Commission Member	Present
Micky Steinberg	Commission Member	Present
Tim Meerbott	Commission Member	Present
Scott Wagner	Commission Member	Not Present
Dr. Thomas Reinert	Commission Member	Present
Spencer Crowley III	Commission Member	Not Present

### **Welcome and Introduction**

Jon Moore from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Southeast Regulatory District welcomes the room and asks all to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. He informs the audience that the meeting is being recorded, a copy of the agenda is available for in-person and virtual attendees and that public comments are due by Jan. 26, 2024. Public comments may be emailed to [BBCommission@FloridaDEP.gov](mailto:BBCommission@FloridaDEP.gov). Mr. Moore thanks the town of Cutler Bay for hosting.

### **Commission Procedural Items**

Chair Valenstein takes roll call and requests a motion to approve minutes from the September 7, 2023 meeting. The motion is made, seconded and passed with all in favor.

### **Update on Miami-Dade County's Biscayne Bay Economic Study**

Grace Johns from Hazen and Sawyer, presenting on behalf of Miami-Dade County, reviews final estimations on the total economic value of Biscayne Bay. The study objective primarily focuses on recreational use and value of the Bay from 2005 to 2022.

Linked is the Biscayne Bay Economic Study: [Biscayne Bay Economic Study Final Report, Sept. 15 2023 \(miamidade.gov\)](#)

Commissioner Valenstein notes the bay's role in Miami-Dade's large economy to drive economic value. Ms. Johns responds that all data from this study is from 2022 and years prior, and data points have likely risen since, as well as the 0.3mi study parameter from the bay likely limiting its true impact on Miami-Dade County. Commissioner Steinberg states that a direct relationship exists between Biscayne Bay's

condition economically and environmentally, in addition to its effect on property values and quality of life.

### **Overview of Florida CRCP's Biscayne Bay Water Quality Improvement Grant Program**

Joanna Walczak, of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Coral Restoration and Protection Program, presents an overview of the Biscayne Bay Water Quality Improvement Grant Program. The presentation highlights a conservative number of awards received to date at 26, along with conservative estimates of the total nitrogen to be eliminated from the Bay. These projects emphasize wastewater and stormwater direct nutrient reduction projects with some modeling and water quality characterization.

Commissioner Blalock reinforces the work of the grant program and its effectiveness with septic to sewer projects along with stormwater projects. Commissioner Blalock also stresses the importance of the program and spurs other municipalities in the Bay to participate in the program. Identifying septic tanks and converting them to the sewer system while focusing on stormwater will be greatly emphasized in future projects and further reflected in funding. Commissioner Blalock notes additional funding recommended by the Governor and the projects viability as recognized by the Legislature. Commissioner Valenstein emphasizes the importance of public feedback when considering budgets and funding for this program.

### **Project status updates from the FWC in Biscayne Bay**

Tom Reinert, the South Region Director for FWC, presents an update on a mangrove restoration project, law enforcement efforts, and derelict vessel removal in Biscayne Bay.

Commissioner Steinberg reinforces the necessity for local marine patrols to combat derelict vessels and emphasizes the collaborative effect of this effort. Commissioner Valenstein mentions the FWC staff and budget request from the governor and legislature for continued FWC presence in the Bay.

### **Project status updates on the Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands Project**

Nicole Niemeyer, a lead project manager from the South Florida Water Management District, presents updates on the Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands Phase 1 (BBCW) project. The purpose of the project is to rehydrate coastal wetlands and reduce damaging point-source freshwater discharge to Biscayne Bay and Biscayne National Park. The goal is to restore wetland and estuarine habitats and divert nearly 60% of annual coastal structure discharge into freshwater and saltwater wetlands, rather than directly into Biscayne Bay and Biscayne National Park. Approved by Congress as part of this project, the Deering Estate was completed in 2012, the Cutler Wetlands is anticipated to be complete by 2025, and the L-31E Flow-way culverts were completed between 2010 and 2018, although the remaining L-31E Flow-way components are expecting completion by 2025. The Biscayne Bay and Southeastern Everglades Ecosystem Restoration (BBSEER) project is in the planning phase and following evaluation will be authorized by Congress.

Commissioner Blalock asks when BBSEER is likely to be authorized. Ms. Niemeyer responds that authorization will likely be delayed to 2028. Commissioner Blalock advocates for the project in conjunction with septic and stormwater projects. Commissioner Valenstein likewise reinforces the South Florida Water Management District.

## **Septic to Sewer Connections, Stormwater Pilot, and Innovative Technology Project Updates**

Pamela Sweeney and Gloria Suarez Mendez of DERM and Irela Bague, the Chief Bay Officer, provide updates from Miami-Dade County on septic to sewer connections, a stormwater pilot project, and innovative technology updates. The goal of the Connect to Protect Project is to increase compliance with existing laws to result in the immediate connection of approximately 12,000 properties to the sewer system and the project is in various stages of this goal. The Stormwater Pilot Projects have resulted in over 50 stormwater structures receiving stormwater treatment devices. The Innovate Technology Project, aka SMART Covers, aims to prevent contamination of surface waters and negative wildlife impacts, and from January to November 2023 prevented 39 sanitary sewer overflows (SSOs). Commissioner Blalock asks when the nutrient analysis of the Stormwater Pilot Project will be completed. Ms. Sweeney will follow up with Commissioner Blalock once the analysis is complete. The Committee plays a video from DERM. Ms. Bague speaks on her final year as Chief Bay Officer and Commissioner Valenstein thanks Ms. Bague for her years of service and passion for conservation.

## **Biscayne Bay Commission Strategic Plan Final Draft**

Mollie Cordo, the Southeast Region Administrator for DEP's Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection, presents a final draft version of the Biscayne Bay Commission Strategic Plan. The presentation focuses on strategic goal parameters, which fall into three primary topics: enhanced water quality monitoring, improved communication and public outreach, and addressing sources of nutrients and restoration needs.

The commission discusses the main goals and changes to the final draft plan, including verbiage and ensuring the public can comment on these changes. The commission mentions two edits to the draft when finalizing the format. Motion to approve the final draft has been moved to the end of the meeting.

## **Public Comments**

Public comments are opened and led by Jon Moore. Each commenter is limited to three minutes.

- In-person commenter: Maji Ramos
  - Discusses concerns with motorboat speeding in the waterways off Morningside Park. Requests slower speed limits to protect kayakers and wildlife and law enforcement.
- In-person commenter: Lauren Jonaitis, Senior Conservation Director at Tropical Audubon Society
  - Discusses the necessity for slow speed zones at the spoil islands off Morningside Park, more regular FWC wildlife surveys, and increased funds to FWC, MDC, and the City of Miami law enforcement.
- In-person commenter: Monica Tracy, MDC Resident
  - Discusses the absence of Critical Wildlife Areas and law enforcement in MDC, as well as the need to designate protected areas for bay health.
- In-person commenter: Ray Schooley, MDC Resident
  - Discusses the environmental impact of mobile homes and trailers in the South Bay area and the role of citizens in wildlife conservation.

- In-person commenter: Laura Reynolds, Friends of Biscayne Bay, BBROIPS Project Manager
  - Discusses the delay of the Biscayne Bay and Everglades National Park restoration projects and asks the BBC to request funds to accelerate them. Announces the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Aquatic Preserve.
- Virtual commenter: Rhonda Roff
  - Asks if the potential for phosphorous runoff is considered in roadway construction and whether warm water refuge for manatees is considered in coastline construction.
- Virtual commenter: Silvio Pupo, Climate Resilience Committee for Miami
  - Proposes a drone program to monitor and safeguard natural space, as well as a shared map containing all conservation projects in the state and a biodiversity baseline census of local ecosystems. Also discusses implementing slow wake zones.
- Virtual commenter: Aliza Karim, Miami Waterkeeper
  - Discusses the need for more marine patrol presence and enforcement, as well as additional funding for Everglades restoration and increased water quality monitoring.
- Virtual commenter: Kat Holland
  - Discusses concerns with the Migratory Bird Act and methods to increase outreach for young citizens.
- Virtual commenter: Lisa Spadafina, DERM Director
  - Shares appreciation for the committee and staff.
- Virtual commenter: Sam Van Leer
  - Discusses increased police presence and law enforcement on the Bay and anthropogenic concerns with Mangrove Island and Bird Key.
- In-person commenter: Zachariah Cosner, Organizer of Friends of Biscayne Bay
  - Discusses an increase in resources for marine patrols, as well as consistent regulations on the water. Discusses concern for further signage and enforcement on the Bay.
- In-person commenter: Jackeline Bonilla, Urban Paradise Guild
  - Discusses increasing enforcement, signage, and education for the Bay, as well as further protection for the Rookery and funding for FWC.

### **Commission Discussion**

Chair Valenstein starts by noting the Biscayne Bay Commission Strategic Plan and its potential approval. Chair Valenstein recognizes a motion to approve and receives a second. Following no additional discussion, the committee approves the strategic plan. The committee asks Ms. Cordo to put together an agenda from the public comments. Chair Valenstein thanks the DEP and reminds the Commissioners of the project tracker.

### **Closing Remarks and Adjournment**

Chair Valenstein makes closing remarks and reminds attendees that the next meeting will not be at Cutler Bay, but likely at Florida International University. The meeting is adjourned.