

Tethered to a novel idea

If Gulfport gets a mooring field, it will be Pinellas' first, sparing seabeds and hurricane-tossed boats.

By NICK JOHNSON, Times Staff Writer

Published September 16, 2007

As more boats clog the waterways throughout Pinellas County and available boat slips continue to decline, planners are considering alternatives to traditional marinas, including mooring fields.

A mooring field is a series of permanently anchored buoys, which boats tie up to instead of dropping anchor. They are often installed in a basin or waterway just outside a marina.

The county and St. Petersburg College are considering a mooring field and marina project for Hurricane Hole, a lagoon near Bay Pines VA Medical Center.

St. Petersburg has toyed with the idea of a mooring field for a number of sites.

Gulfport is in the permitting phase and plans to put one in Boca Ciega Bay next year. It would be the first mooring field in Pinellas County.

"We think the project probably has a good chance of being approved," Gulfport City Manager Tom Brobeil said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently denied seven permits from developers seeking to build docks in Boca Ciega Bay because of the increased boat traffic and the impact on manatees there.

Gulfport's proposal is being reviewed by the Army Corps of Engineers but will likely be referred to Fish and Wildlife before final approval.

Still, Brobeil is hopeful that Gulfport will be able to go ahead with its project. "Our Harbor Management Plan which includes the mooring field does a lot of things to improve conditions for manatees rather than impede them," he said.

The mooring field allows more vessels to make use of a marina without the construction of additional docks or boat slips.

There are about 10 scattered throughout the state, including in Sarasota and Miami.

Gulfport's mooring field would add more speed restrictions to the bay, making most of the waters within the city's jurisdiction a no-wake zone.

It would also regulate anchoring there.

"Right now there are boats strewn throughout the bay, anchored everywhere," said Denis Frain, Gulfport's harbormaster. "There are people who know the right way, who put down the proper anchor and chain, and people who don't."

Frain said unregulated anchoring can lead to boats' breaking free and drifting into docks or other boats. And the boats are more likely to become derelict vessels, he said.

"Mooring offer a benefit. If properly done, they ride out a storm," said Andrew Nicholson of Challenger Enterprises Inc.

Nicholson is the engineer working on the design and permitting for Gulfport. He said the moorings can usually weather a hurricane, when a traditional anchor wouldn't stand a chance.

Environmental benefit

If properly managed, they also have less environmental impact than traditional docks.

The moorings are installed by drilling a permanent anchor into the seabed.

After initial drilling, the only impact on the sea bottom is the width of the cable, which is attached to a buoy on the surface.

The mooring also allows the boat to move with the current to preventing shading or a permanently cast shadow, which can disrupt the growth of sea grass.

Frain said that all vessels moored at Gulfport would have to be registered and inspected, and that a pumpout boat would be provided to dispose of sewage.

Cue the critics

Not everyone is convinced that mooring fields will work in Pinellas County.

Alan Phillips owns O'Neill's Marina, a fishing outpost with room for about 250 boats nestled between Interstate 275 and Maximo Park, on Boca Ciega Bay.

O'Neill's is one of several sites where St. Petersburg has considered installing a mooring field. Others are the Vinoy Basin and Big Bayou.

Although plans for the other two sites never went beyond initial talks, Joe Zeoli, the director of the Downtown Entertainment Facilities Department, said the city planned to step in and manage O'Neill's when the lease runs out in 2009.

The city's initial plans include a mooring field.

"Basically it's not going to work. Nobody's going to pay to be on a mooring ball," Phillips said. "It's an inexpensive way to put boats in a controlled area, but you can anchor a boat wherever you want."

Frain said Gulfport already considered that.

"I'm going to make it attractive enough that they're going to want to come to the mooring field, especially during hurricane season," he said.

Although boaters would still be able to anchor just outside Gulfport's jurisdictional line, the estimated \$10 a day they would pay for the service would provide them with the pumpout boat, access to the marina's lounge and the added security during rough weather.

Brobeil said the city plans to meet with the Army Corps of Engineers and Fish and Wildlife Service next month to go over the plans.

The permits would allow for 100 mooring buoys. Fifty would be installed initially, with an option for another 50 if needed.

Nick Johnson can be reached at nickjohnson@sptimes.com or 893-8361.

- There are five proposed sites for mooring fields. Gulfport may install the county's first. St. Petersburg wants a mooring field at several sites, and the county and St. Petersburg College are considering one.

- A mooring field is a series of permanently anchored buoys, which boats tie up to instead of dropping anchor. They are often installed in a basin or waterway outside a marina.

- Proponents say they help the environment in not having to build traditional docks, help regulate anchoring, and protect boats from breaking free in severe storms. One foe says why pay to moor on a ball when you can anchor wherever you want.

There are five proposed sites for mooring fields.

A mooring field is a series of permanently anchored buoys, which boats tie up to instead of dropping anchor. They are often installed in a basin or waterway just outside a marina.

© 2007 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111
[Contact the Times](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)