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Sarasota County gets \$14M to clean up Alligator Creek

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BARB RICHARDSON Sun Correspondent

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SARASOTA Fresh off the award of a \$201.5 million Housing and Urban Development block grant last week, Sarasota County is the recipient of a \$14.5 million grant for the Alligator Creek restoration project.

Alligator Creek in South Venice is an 11-square-mile tidal creek with headwaters near East Venice Avenue and flowing southeasterly into Lemon Bay, north of Englewood.

The new National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant for transformational habitat restoration and coastal resilience program will help a county project "to mitigate the past negative impacts of the urbanized Alligator Creek and restore vital ecological habitats," according to a county news release.

That program is committing \$265 million to 38 projects in several states to improve coastal ecosystems.

Sarasota County has already committed \$1.4 million to the project which is currently in the design phase. Plans call for construction to begin next year.

The goal of the project, similar to one occurring at nearby Dona Bay, is to reconfigure about 42 square acres to improve water quality by reducing nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphates flowing into Lemon Bay.

It also seeks to reduce sediment accumulation, restore a more natural hydrology, reconnect to adjacent wetlands, and increase access to low-salinity habitats improving the variety of fish species using the creek.

"The Alligator Creek Stream Restoration project is an outstanding opportunity for Sarasota County to demonstrate that stream restoration via natural channel design is feasible in Florida," Sarasota County Public Works Stormwater Environmental Utility Manager Amanda Boone said through the release.

"The restoration extends beyond the stream, restoring wetlands and upland habitats. Fisheries are an important part of Florida's economy, and our restoration effort is intended to bolster habitat for important fish species," Boone added.

Also involved in the project is Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium, whose scientists began monitoring and sampling key fish species in 2021 in the creek to establish baseline data before the start of the project.

They will continue to assess the effect of the restoration project on the health of these species during and after completion of the project.

"The health of these fish populations is a direct indication of the creek's water quality, which is why we're focusing our efforts on monitoring these species," Dr. Nate Brennan, Mote's Alligator Creek restoration project manager," said through the press release.

Sarasota County commissioners are expected to accept the award and make the appropriate budget allocations in mid-June.

Email: barbararichardson996@gmail.com

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