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City back in business with artificial reefs



A crane pushes artificial reef material off a barge into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Jacksonville.

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11/15/2007

by Max Marbut
Staff Writer

Amid the turmoil surrounding the proposals involving the Boselli Foundation's community center lease and the Craig Airport runway extension, the City Council quietly enacted an ordinance Tuesday that will have a positive impact on Duval County's recreation and tourism for decades to come.

Ordinance 2007-999 authorized the execution of 21 offshore artificial reef permits between the Army Corps of Engineers and the City. It also provides for City oversight by the Department of Parks, Recreation, Entertainment and Conservation.

According to the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, there are more than 1,600 artificial reefs off the coastline statewide and currently 96 off Duval County. The carefully-placed structures are popular with municipalities because artificial reefs improve the local fish habitat. That promotes and maintains the recreational fishing industry which — in addition to enhancing the quality of life for residents — also translates into tourism.

"Offshore Jacksonville is what we call 'dead bottom'. It's sandy as opposed to what's called 'live bottom' which has plenty of natural rocky outcroppings," said marine scientist Dr. Quinton White, who is Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Jacksonville University and consultant to the Jacksonville Waterways Commission (JWC).

"Artificial reefs allow us to put down structures that fish food like barnacles and other encrusting organisms can attach to. They also include nooks, crannies and hiding places that create a natural nursery ground."

Artificial reefs have been placed off the coast in

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Jacksonville for more than 50 years, said JWC committee member John Lowe. He recalled the first artificial reefs were deployed by the Jacksonville Offshore Fishing Club and consisted of old home appliances like refrigerators as well as car bodies.

"Years later, they even used the press box from the old Gator Bowl and the Navy gave us some old airplanes," said Lowe. "But all that stuff would rust after several years in sea water, so it eventually just disappeared.

"These days, we know how important it is to protect the environment, so we don't use things like those anymore."

Modern artificial reefs are made of permanent materials like heavy steel structures, concrete culverts and custom-cast modular concrete components called "reef balls," said White. The components are placed on a barge then towed to the reef site several miles offshore where they are submerged.

The legislation enacted Tuesday will end a moratorium on artificial reef construction that has lasted for more than seven years.

Greg Radlinski, Chief of the Environmental & Land Use Division of the General Counsel's Office, said there are several legal issues involving artificial reef permits. Local, state and federal agencies are involved in the permitting process. Issues include ownership, oversight, liability and even the paths of migratory whales.

Permits are issued to place the reefs on sovereign submerged lands, he said. Reefs can't be permitted in shipping channels or in an area where a shipping channel might be rerouted in order to avoid interference with whale migration patterns. The City could also be held liable for the actions of other parties including people who might view an artificial reef as a good place to push refuse over the side of their boat.

"It's our property, so we're liable. We have to make sure people don't dump refrigerators. There will be provisions in the permits that require monthly monitoring of the sites," said Radlinski.

Concrete is already being molded into reef balls, said White, and the only thing he believes will delay the development of new artificial reefs off Jacksonville's coast is the calendar.

"I think we'll be ready permit-wise within 60 days, but that would put us in late January or early February. That's not good weather for reef-building. But when the weather clears by spring, we'll be able to get started again," he said.

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