

October 2021 NEWS

Islamorada Community Alliance

P.O. Box 1507

Tavernier, FL 33070

info@Islamorada.org

Islamorada.org



Islamorada Headline News for October

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Our Mission:

To provide Islamorada residents with information about events occurring in our community that will impact our quality of life, preservation of our native ecosystems, land development, lawful and transparent governance.



The Fills: “It’s a Road, Not a Park”

Once again residents and taxpayers are being asked to help solve the problems on the section of highway between Upper and Lower Matecumbe to protect the fragile environment there, improve public safety, deal with the trash and traffic issue seen over the years. And whose money is it? [\(Page 2\)](#)



Approach of Total Buildout:

The Building Permit Allocation System (BPAS) will be out of allocations in 2023. At virtually every council meeting Councilman Henry Rosenthal brings up the subject and his comments seem to be greeted with total disinterest by the rest of the Council. Who should we listen to? [\(Page 3\)](#)



Vacation Rental Enforcement:

Council passed a resolution to increase the annual fee for Vacation Rentals, to contract with Deckard Technologies for software support for compliance monitoring, and to add licensed properties to the Village GIS system. [\(Page 4\)](#)



Veterans Key For Sale:


Veterans Key (Scout Key), on the bayside, south of the Boy Scout SeaBase, is for sale. Surely not another pedestrian bridge to worry about! The ad for the island says an easement was granted by the State of Florida to connect US1 to the property. [\(Page 3\)](#)




Alligator Light—Our Pride and Joy

At the September 30 Council Meeting, Carolyn Wightman, chairman of the Village Parks and Recreation Committee gave a report about the Annual Swim and the status of the lighthouse ownership including a wonderful video. [\(See page 5\)](#)

The Fills: “It’s a road, not a park!”




For at least a decade now, the plan for the Fills has been the subject of repeated discussions, meetings, workshops, clean-ups and plans that never got implemented. Just traffic issues, accidents, including fatalities, trash, trash and more trash, environmental concerns, and much local frustration. And Islamorada taxpayers are footing the bills to date!




After finally deciding to lease the property from the state to allow better control, last July the prior Village Council discussed a wish list created by the Village staff for potential improvements at the roadway between Upper and Lower Matecumbe, though no vote or action was taken.

In January 2021 the staff put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) to find a contractor to create a Fills Master Plan, itemizing the 14 suggestions from the July 2020 wish list.




In April the Council selected CPH to do the master plan. According to the RFP the final master plan was to be submitted to the Village Council for their approval by May 31, 2021, but an actual agreement with CPH for the RFP services was not signed until July 6, 2021.

And here we are, October 2021 beginning a “community-driven master planning process” facilitated by CPH and expected to take until April 2022. But first there are plans for three community workshops, three days of one on one stakeholders meetings, a community survey, then the presentation to council with approval of final concept and budget, and more.




The first public workshop held by CPH was held October 6. Perhaps 15 members of the public attended. The workshop was not televised, no microphones, no recording, no seating provided and limited advanced notice. Two members of the council sat in the back of the room. CPH arrived 20 minutes late for their own meeting.

Several members of the public spoke up about their frustration with the process. Clearly the residents want action, not talk. Several others followed, questioning why we keep trying to turn the side of the highway into a recreational park for “day trippers” who have a long history of abusing the area and leaving major amounts of trash when they leave.



Village Manager, Greg Oravec, appeared from the back of the room to try to calm the nerves. His effort to provide the community with a professionally created plan for the Fills is a noble effort. With the long history of frustration with the traffic, trash and trouble on the Fills, many residents are concerned about how to keep the community involved and energized to assure the end result is what so many have worked towards for at least a decade.



How many times has it been said about the once scenic Fills: “It’s a road, not a park!”

[Click here for more background about the Fills.](#)

[Click here to see some comments from a social media post.](#)

[Click here for council comments when campaigning for office.](#)

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Veterans Key For Sale:

Veterans Key (Scout Key) on the bayside of Islamorada, south of the Boy Scout SeaBase and across U.S.1 from Anne's Beach, is for sale. The ad for the island says an easement was granted by the State of Florida to connect US1 to the property. Another pedestrian bridge to fight?



From the ad for the island—

“... this untouched private island has a total of 29 acres. Veterans Key is 2.5 acres of high ground located at the tip of Lower Matecumbe Key and conveniently is only 850 feet from US1. An easement was granted by the State of Florida to connect US1 to the property if desired (see survey). It has 2 docks and is surrounded by navigable water.”

The property is listed for sale for \$1.9 million.

According to the Property Appraiser's website, the larger parcel of submerged land has a market value of \$2,650 for 26.5 acres. It was sold to the current owner on 3/1/1982 for \$45.

The island itself is listed by the Property Appraiser as 2.6 acres of SPOIL ISLAND with a market value of \$2,080 and was sold to the current owner 3/1/1982 for \$56,000.

No taxes have ever been billed or paid for either parcel.

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Our Opinion: Buildout (2023)

There is regular concern expressed in Islamorada about total buildout, when no more residential building allocations are available. Councilman Henry Rosenthal brings it up regularly, suggesting it is time to act. “Let’s enact a three month moratorium on building permits while we come up with some ideas.” And the other members of council treat the suggestion as if they think Henry has lost his mind!

Total buildout is just around the corner. Isn't it time to stop ignoring it, time to listen to Henry and do something to address the potentially huge challenge that is coming in just months?

Councilman Rosenthal isn't letting up. Perhaps we should all listen. On October 14, representatives from the county will be addressing the council—at Henry's suggestion. Monroe County developed a “White Paper” with a multitude of ideas to help with the impact of buildout. They reduced the number of ROGO allocations awarded each year to extend the buildout date to 2026—giving them a little more time to address some useful remedies.

[Click here to see the Monroe County White Paper](#)

Shouldn't our lobbyists be working with the legislature to make sure Florida doesn't abandon us and remove the allocation restrictions and tell us to issue as many permits as we want! And think about what that would do to our limited infrastructure—our fragile environment, limited potable water, two lanes in, two lanes out, continual bumper to bumper traffic, no housing that is actually affordable to the workforce, buses bringing employees from the mainland stuck in traffic.

One suggestion—Let's all listen to Henry!



Vacation Rental Enforcement

It appears clear that many residents of Islamorada consider affordable housing and the traffic to be extremely significant problems for the community. Both are dramatically impacted by **vacation rentals, both legal and illegal.**

Shocking statistics uncovered: At the September 2, 2021 Council meeting, a presentation was made by Deckard Technologies, a company that provides software services to municipalities to help monitor short term rentals. Facts available through their “Rentalscape” system indicated 1161 rental properties in the Village are advertised and booked online through services like AirBnB, VRBO. They monitor bookings daily and found Islamorada short term rentals are generating \$22 million of annual revenue. Many are likely not paying the required bed tax. Total licensed in the Village:260.

Since the Vacation Rental ordinance established an annual license fee in 2007 at \$1000 per year, it has never been changed. The Achievable Housing Committee recommended an increase:\$2500/year plus \$500 for each bedroom over two.

From Village code: “Funds collected by the application fee shall be used for code compliance related to vacation rental uses, with any excess funds to be used to further **affordable housing programs.** For purposes of this section **code compliance shall also include all activities required to process the applications, inspections, and prosecutions.**”

The annual fees pay for the administration of the vacation rental program and the annual comprehensive life safety inspection of every unit. Fees are intended to cover the cost associated with having a code enforcement officer assure that the rules are followed by those with licenses as well as verifying that there are no unlicensed short term rentals.

In recent years, vacation rentals have become an extremely lucrative business, some homes renting for **\$2000 to \$3000 per night.** Over the last seven years, the Village expenses to operate the vacation rental program has exceeded the annual fees collected by over \$221,000. Not a dime has been contributed to affordable housing projects as initially anticipated. Should the local taxpayers have to pay \$221,000 to subsidize vacation rental expenses?

The vacation rental industry has dramatically impacted availability of long term rental housing, especially affordable workforce housing. We are in crisis mode, with nearly every business up and down the Keys having “Help Wanted” signs out while workers can’t find homes. Isn’t it rational to expect vacation rental fees to contribute towards the affordable housing they affect.

On September 30 the Council voted to do several things:

1. Raise the annual fee from \$1000 to \$1325, far less than the recommendation. Councilman Gregg suggested an additional increase of \$500 to fund affordable housing projects. There was support from Rosenthal, but no third vote.

2. Contract with Deckard Technologies to utilize their “Rentalscape” software that will provide insight and intelligence to monitor the local short-term rental market to aid our code compliance efforts. Rentalscape will cost the Village approximately \$25,000 per year.

GIS Maps updated: And now you can go to the GIS system on the Village website, under Department menu, Planning, to see what homes have vacation rental licenses. [Click here to learn how.](#) The Village is asking the public to review this new feature to assure its accuracy.

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Alligator Light—Islamorada’s Pride and Joy

As reported in the September newsletter, Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, announced that the Friends of the Pool, Inc., headed by “Lighthouse Larry” Herlth and Rob Dixon, will be granted ownership of Alligator Reef Light. A video about the groups long running efforts to save the lighthouse was played at the Council meeting.

Click here to watch: [LIGHTHOUSE LARRY from Candace Barbot on Vimeo](#)

The local group has a huge undertaking ahead as they will be organizing fund-raising efforts to begin the job of restoring the iconic light on Islamorada’s horizon.



Carolyn also reported about an exciting local sporting event, when hundreds of swimmers from all over visited Islamorada on Sept. 11 for a swim to Alligator Lighthouse and back.

Coral Shores junior swimmer Corley Smith placed fifth overall in the annual Swim, an 8 mile open-water challenge. Corley finished in 3 hours, 30 minutes for a second-place finish among solo females. She was just behind top female finisher Brooke Bennett, 41, of Clearwater. Bennett is a three time Olympic gold medal winner! Corley’s dad, Cale Smith, was her kayak escort.

Flood Insurance Rates

What you need to know

Risk Rating 2.0: FEMA is changing the way it views flood risk and prices flood insurance. According to FEMA, the National Flood Insurance Program’s new rating methodology, Risk Rating 2.0, will deliver rates that are easier to understand and better reflect a property’s unique flood risk. Rates will now be developed on a structure-by-structure basis, offering a more individualized picture of the risk.

But FIRM (Fair Insurance Rates for Monroe), a local Keys organization that was created to ensure fair insurance rates for Monroe County and the Florida Keys, worries that the new system may be devastating to coastal communities like Monroe County. Their research suggests that flood insurance rate increases here could range from \$100 to \$9,000 annually if and when Risk Rating 2.0 is implemented. ([Click here](#) to learn about and join FIRM)

FEMA’S Community Rating System (CRS) was created to encourage communities to establish a program that encourages floodplain management activities that exceed the minimum National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) requirements. This program provides communities with discounts to flood insurance rates.

Flood insurance premium reductions for policyholders are determined by a community’s CRS Class and can be anywhere from five percent to as much as 45 percent for an insured building.

Islamorada has a rating of 5, providing a 25% discount to property owners on their flood insurance premiums. Monroe County recently completed numerous efforts to reduce their rating from 5 to 3. After April 1, 2022, property owners in Unincorporated Monroe will get a 35% discount. The County estimates the 35% reduction will save property owners a combined \$7.5 million per year in Unincorporated Monroe. **Let’s encourage the Village to work diligently to help our property owners with insurance costs by lowering our rating!** ([Click here to read what the County did](#))

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Traffic Proposals

Everyone seems to be talking, and writing, about traffic problems in Islamorada and all of the Florida Keys. But where is the action? Is it just too late? The cat seems to be out of the bag—we live in a gorgeous island community with summer all year long! And TDC (Tourist Development Council) continues to spend tens of millions to attract more tourists (about \$35 million this year, county-wide).

A 635 page draft **U.S. 1 Transportation Master Plan**, was prepared for Monroe County Planning and Environmental Resources by transportation consultant, Aecom Technical Services, Inc, September 2021.

The lengthy report has extensive research, ideas, and recommendations for short term, mid-term and long term ideas to address transportation concerns along US 1.

One suggestion that seems totally impractical— **7.2.3 Upper Matecumbe Bridge**

“A bypass bridge may be considered to reduce traffic congestion on US 1 in Upper Matecumbe between the Snake Creek Bridge and Tea Table Key. A potential bridge location is shown in **Figure 7-3.**” [\(Click here for the plan, bridge on page 93\)](#)

Florida Keys Transportation Coordination Committee was organized in 2019 and is made up of six representative, one from each municipality and one from the County Commission. The committee is to study and research traffic issues and create formal recommendations for the governing bodies of the five municipalities and the County Commission. Councilman Pete Bacheler is Islamorada’s representative, replacing Deb Gillis.

The committee met in September and passed a resolution making 11 proposals that the County will forward to the Florida Department of Transportation.

The only item specific to Islamorada:

3. Request a study by FDOT, in coordination with the Village of Islamorada, to evaluate the need for turn-lane improvements at the intersection of High Point Road and U.S. 1. Request the Village of Islamorada consider modifying existing vehicle travel lanes on High Point Road to include a left-turn only lane and a right-turn only lane for vehicles exiting High Point Road. Request FDOT conduct a study to develop a center turn lane at the intersection of High Point Road and U.S. 1.

In addition, Councilman Bacheler requested that FDOT install a low guard rail in front of Sea Oats Beach and additional signage at Anne’s Beach. Islamorada resident, Jill Zima-Borski, suggested that FDOT should be asked to eliminate the weigh station on Plantation Key and convert the property to a rest area. [\(Click here to see story from Free Press\)](#)



Figure 7-3: Potential Upper Matecumbe Bypass Bridge