

Yacht Industry Demands have Fort Lauderdale City Officials Considering to Dredge the New River

Contributed by Shannon DeFries

Fort Lauderdale has often been referred to as the Venice of the Americas and one of the major Yachting Capitals of the world. The South Florida Yacht Charter industry has drawn millions of dollars of revenue into the region's economy from the creation of marine industry jobs, a world renowned boat show, and increased tourism. The yachting industry as a whole has also increased the patronage of fuel, food and supplies as well as demand for marine real estate and refit/maintenance facilities.

As the international industry has developed, Fort Lauderdale is no longer as influential a port of call as it once was and its Mecca status has become lackluster. Competing locales with heavy European influence and investment dollars such as St. Maarten, Monaco and Dubai continue to expand and thrive. Ports such as Dubai are experiencing such exponential growth that the region will soon facilitate more industry needs than Fort Lauderdale's current scope of capabilities.

This is why it is so crucial for Fort Lauderdale city officials to become in tuned to the industry's demands and respond by considering revisions to the laws that effect critical issues such as customs, construction of superior dockage facilities bridge openings and dredging the South Florida waterways.

Recently, Fort Lauderdale city officials began looking into the dredging of the New River which is a main line of access to yachting facilities such as the Lauderdale Marine Center located just off of State Road 84. The city has commissioned the Florida Inland Navigation District, a statewide agency that keeps the Intracoastal Waterway deep and navigable, to determine the project's feasibility.

The city has asked the agency to see if a 6.2-mile stretch of river, from where it meets the Intracoastal to the Interstate 595 overpass to the west, can be deepened to 14 feet. The waterway currently averages about 10 feet thanks to a dredging project three years ago. With new mega yacht builds that are larger each year, newer boats with jet drives and large sail boats with keels there is still a demand for deeper water.

The feasibility study currently being performed will determine how deep the river can be dredged and what effect that will have on the waterway's environment. Engineers will need to calculate how deep and wide the river can expand without impacting the shoreline.

The study will address additional environmental factors such as how the dredging could affect seagrass and the river bottom, as well as what should be done with the dredged material. The study is necessary to support city permit applications, a process that is estimated to take about two 2 years in total before any pumps can begin dredging the river.

Obviously, the economic benefits are encouraging the city's efforts since there is a huge need for more boats to access the boatyards and marinas within the designated stretch by being able to travel upriver. This project will create more jobs, more projects for existing marine businesses and increased channeled revenue back to the city.

The Sun-Sentinel recently quoted manager of marine facilities, Andrew Cuba, "The goal is to maintain the thriving local marine industry... It would enable the businesses that are farther up the river to enhance and maintain their levels of service." Frank Herhold, director of the Marine Industries Association of South Florida, also contributed to the Sentinel's piece commenting that about 20 facilities stand to see a wave of new business if deeper water allows more boats to get to them. "I can't stress enough the importance of dredging to the marine industry's economic health," he said. "The boats keep coming and they keep getting bigger."

The possibility of the project's completion has industry professionals forecasting a 15-20 percent increase in business. Projects being brought to facilities near I 95 won't have to be turned down because the water isn't deep enough to accommodate large hulls. The plan approved in November 2007 by the City Commission reported that the costs for the study and dredging project will be shared between the city of Fort Lauderdale and the Florida Inland Navigation District. The project's total cost is estimated to come in just under \$16 million to dredge 14 feet in the New River.