KEYSWEEKLY

WILLIAMS GETS THE CITY MANAGER NOD AS MARATHON CITY COUNCIL HEARS INSURANCE AND DEEP WELL UPDATES

By **Alex Rickert** - August 13, 2026

Marathon City Hall

The city of Marathon's search for a new city manager – and new attorney – appears headed for a pair of internal hires, with support from the city council on Aug. 11.

No formal vote was taken Tuesday night, as the item was listed on the agenda solely for discussion. But following the withdrawal of the city's two remaining finalists – City Clerk Diane Clavier and St. Lucie County deputy administrator Mayte Santamaria – last week, council members said it was time to move forward and hire interim manager/City Attorney Steve Williams for the permanent post.

They directed staff to prepare a proposed employment contract for consideration in September, including legal review by a third-party firm.

Vice Mayor Debbie Struyf, Mayor Lynny Del Gaizo and councilman Kenny Matlock reiterated their support for Williams after nearly a five-month search.

"Steve grew into the position," said Del Gaizo. "He was not looking, but he was interviewing without knowing it."

"There's no perfect candidate. There's no perfect employee," Matlock said. "But I'm comfortable with Steve."

Councilman Lynn Landry said hiring Williams would "solve one problem and create another," as Williams could not continue permanently as both city manager and attorney. At the council's direction, Williams said he would ask Assistant City Attorney Alli Heller if she would be interested in filling his post.

"I cannot begin to tell you how competent, able and wonderful I think she would be, but that's her decision," Williams said. He said that the city could also enlist the help of

Islamorada-based law firm Vernis and Bowling, previously used by Marathon when Williams was away or did not have an assistant.

Roof problems with Citizens

Earlier in the evening, Fair Insurance Rates in Monroe (FIRM) president Mel Montagne delivered a dash of good news – along with a stern warning – about property insurance for Middle Keys homeowners.

Citizens Property Insurance's 2026 rates, effective July 1, include a 5.7% decrease for Monroe County wind-only homeowners policies and a 6.3% decrease for wind-only condo unit-owner policies, he said.

But Montagne asked Marathon officials to address a more immediate problem involving roof permits and Citizens nonrenewals.

Citizens can decline to renew coverage when a roof fails to meet its age or condition standards, he said, and may only agree to continue a policy with specific documentation proving a homeowner fully replaced the roof instead of applying a coating.

Policyholders must provide a roofing contract with paid-in-full receipts or a finalized building permit with photos, he said. But in some cases, language in Marathon's permits doesn't match what Citizens requires, creating a disconnect when homeowners try to prove the required work is complete.

"My request is simply that the city continue working toward clearer, more consistent permit language and documentation practices that reflect the scope of the work performed," Montagne said.

Complicating the renewal requirements, he added, was another avenue through which Citizens could follow through on its state-mandated depopulation efforts. What was intended as the state insurer of last resort has already dropped from a peak of 1.41 million policies to roughly 278,000. But in the Keys, where building standards are sky-high and insurance premiums are even higher, the state-run company is almost always the most affordable option.

"I don't think any of us here are stupid – we realize what Citizens is trying to achieve," he said.

The issue will be among those discussed when Citizens leadership comes to Marathon for an Aug. 25 town hall, which Montagne urged any and all homeowners from the Keys to attend. A community forum runs from 1:30 to 4 p.m.

Deep well project on track

Council members also received an extensive update on Marathon's $70 million deep injection well from engineer Steve Suggs.

Pipeline installation for the project is well underway through the center of the city along U.S. 1. Later this month, the active work area will shift from between 105th and 115th Street to between 83rd and 72nd Street, before moving closer to Marathon Community Park and finishing by October, Suggs said.

Another phase of pipeline construction through Grassy Key is awaiting approval from the Florida Department of Transportation for a shifted traffic pattern, but should begin in the later months of the year. Crews will pause work for periods of heavy highway traffic, including Labor Day weekend, Key West's Fantasy Fest and Thanksgiving through the start of the new year.

A federal court settlement mandates completion of the deep well by the end of 2028. While Suggs said he was confident that construction was on track in an "already tight" timeline, wastewater facility and holding tank construction following the pipeline drilling will be a major factor in the project's pacing. A second drill rig is expected to accelerate pipeline drilling, while equipment lead times for the project's later phases may push Marathon closer to its deadline.

Only two contractors in Florida are capable of building the deep disposal well itself, which will pump Marathon's treated wastewater 3,600 feet below the surface from a facility on Avenue I off Coco Plum Drive. Suggs said he hoped to receive the permit for the well by October or November of this year.

If expected grant funding and state appropriations come through, Suggs said, they would cover nearly half of the expected $70 million cost. Added to a $10 million bank line of credit and low-interest loans through the State Revolving Fund, the city would still be left with a $13.2 million gap to fill.

Once complete, the new well would be able to handle all wastewater for currently-constructed and approved future development in Marathon, plus a connection to Duck Key's homes if needed. Connecting to Key Colony Beach's sewer system, Suggs said, would have added significant costs and an increased pipeline size.

Stewardship squabbles over?

Though approved on consent and not discussed, Resolution 2026-74 lays the framework to resolve a 2025 squabble among Keys municipalities over how to divide millions in annual funding from the Florida Keys Stewardship Act.

Last year, Monroe County and Key West squared off with smaller Keys jurisdictions and utilities over how to split the $20 million awarded for water quality improvement projects in Florida's 2025-26 state budget – a continuation of an appropriation in place since 2016.

After an original agreement to split funds expired, Keys municipalities were left to apply for individual project funding through a state-run portal, leading to a new agreement proposal signed by Marathon, Key Colony Beach, Islamorada, the Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority and the Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District for a dead-even split of the money among all parties. Both larger governments rejected the split, instead proposing a division of funds based on each jurisdiction's population or the costs of critical upcoming projects.

If signed by all parties, the new agreement would lay out a five-year split, awarding $5 million annually to Monroe County, $3 million to FKAA and Key West, $2.5 million to Marathon, Islamorada and Key Largo Wastewater, and $1.5 million to Key Colony Beach. A one-time appropriation of $1.8 million would go to the city of Layton in 2027-28, deducted from Key West's annual award. The agreement also lays out percentages for unspent funds in any given year to be distributed to other jurisdictions, with a similar relative distribution.

In other news:

- From a total of nearly $276,000 in requested funds, the council awarded its budgeted total of $99,988 to 35 Middle Keys nonprofits, led by an $8,850 award to Grace Jones Community Center. Recipients largely mirrored prior years, with roughly a dozen local daycares, youth recreation and social service providers earning awards of $3,000 to $5,000.
- Local captains Diego Cordova and John Callion asked the city to consider reopening parking spaces available at the Harbor Drive boat ramp, closed for years after long trucks and trailers in the spaces blocked the road and created traffic hazards.

ALEX RICKERT

Alex Rickert made the perfectly natural career progression from dolphin trainer to newspaper editor in 2021 after freelancing for Keys Weekly while working full time at Dolphin Research Center. A resident of Marathon since 2015, he fell in love with the Florida Keys community by helping multiple organizations and friends rebuild in the wake of Hurricane Irma. An avid runner, actor, and spearfisherman, he spends as much of his time outside of work on or under the sea having civil disagreements with sharks.