

KEYSWEEKLY

FIXING THE FLOODING? SOMBRERO BOULEVARD WORKSHOP SET FOR TUESDAY

By **Alex Rickert** - June 20, 2024



A disabled Mustang sits in a fully-flooded Sombbrero Boulevard during a historic rain event on May 20. CONTRIBUTED

Marathon's next monthly city council workshop, set for Tuesday, June 25 at 5:30 p.m., will take a second, more formal stab at addressing resident ire over chronic flooding plaguing

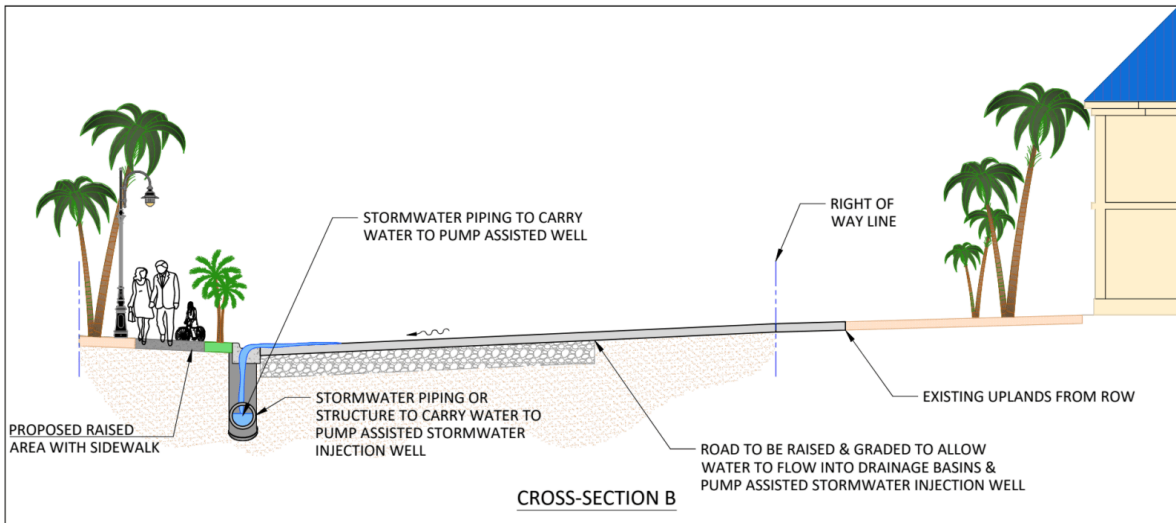
the east end of Sombrero Boulevard.

An “informal” meeting was scheduled for June 7 to address locals’ concerns about the road, which in recent years has seen both lanes flooded after both moderate and severe rain events, along with three disabled vehicles within the past month. That meeting, however, was adjourned by City Attorney Steve Williams and City Manager George Garrett mere minutes after it began due to the unexpected presence of a court reporter.

“This was the city’s effort to have a friendly, voluntary effort to work with everyone in the neighborhood,” Williams told the dozens gathered that evening. “Now we’re just creating evidence for someone else that we don’t need to be creating, and it can only be used against us. ... We will have a formal meeting, and we’ll have the experts here doing the talking.”

Following numerous complaints received about the road through a variety of channels, the Weekly sat down with city staff ahead of Tuesday’s session to relay concerns and attempt to separate fact from fiction about the causes, history and potential remedies for the floods.

Except where directly quoted, the following answers were summarized from city agenda documents, previous council meetings, press releases, resident concerns voiced to the Weekly, and an extensive interview with Garrett, Williams and Planning Director Brian Shea.



A south-to-north cross section of proposed improvements to Sombrero Boulevard, including a raised sidewalk with lighting as well as drainage channels leading to active pumping stations. WEILER ENGINEERING/Contributed

Keys Weekly: How does the current drainage system on Sombrero Boulevard work?

As it currently stands, drainage of the area happens with the use of two gravity-fed injection wells – one at the corner of Sombrero Boulevard and 53rd Street, and one on the north side of the boulevard between the row of condominiums and Skipjack Resort. Drains on the south side of the road flow to these two injection wells, which until recently would only flow as quickly as gravity allowed.



Trending **REIMAGINING THE SEVEN MILE BRIDGE: FDOT SEEKS INPUT ON REPLACEMENT BRIDGE**

KW: What is being done currently to address flooding events?

Currently, the output from a four-inch, 450-gallon-per-minute pump is inserted down the injection well next to Skipjack. A balloon-like apparatus seals off the well so that water can be forcibly pumped down the well without backflow, accelerating drainage of the area.

KW: Why has the situation become so much worse in recent years?

Historically, stormwater flowed from the higher-elevation north side of the road, condominium parking lots and Skipjack Resort toward the south side and onto the Florida Keys Country Club (golf course) property. In the past, the water flowed onto the golf course unimpeded. In early 2022, construction of a berm along the golf course's north edge in the early stages of the property's ongoing redevelopment – which was required in order for the property to retain its own stormwater – caused the water from the street to collect and rise, ultimately covering the road.

King tides and historic rain events have contributed to incidents of severe flooding, including three events with more than seven inches of cumulative rain since November of 2023. The most recent storm in late May saw more than eight inches of cumulative rainfall, during which the city's pumps moved an estimated 1 million gallons of stormwater in draining the road.

KW: The Weekly has received concerns that no permit was issued to build the berm. Is there a permit?

Yes. The berm is a component of the property's redevelopment agreement in place since 2014. The specific permit number containing the berm is P-2016-0754.



Trending

TOURIST ARRESTED FOR STEALING CASH FROM TIP JAR IN KEY WEST, POLICE SAID

KW: The Weekly received reports and concerns that city staff have previously worked on the berm, which is on private property. Have staff members ever performed repairs to the berm?

No. But we recognized that the berm had broken through during the Memorial Day rain event, and we sandbagged it to prevent water from coming off the golf course from our side of the public right-of-way.

KW: Knowing that this berm would be constructed in 2022 and impede the usual flow of the water, why was a plan not put in place earlier to address the increased stormwater buildup that would eventually flood the road?

"Nobody anticipated how much water was coming off of those condos (on the north side of the road) and Skipjack," said Garrett. "There's only one source of that water; it used to flow onto the golf course, and now it doesn't. ... This also goes back to original plans that were approved back in 2014."

Garrett added that when the area first began to have more significant stormwater problems after the berm's construction, city staff originally believed the buildup was due to an error made during a recent fix to the drainage system that caused an obstruction in piping crossing under Sombrero Boulevard and leading to the drainage well.

"We didn't recognize that it was a problem with the berm as much as we recognized that we made a fix," Garrett said. "We thought it was a problem that in part was our issue because of that construction project."

KW: In previous city council meetings, Public Works Director Carlos Solis stated that the boulevard's injection wells do not have backflow preventers because they slow drainage and can easily become clogged. Given that the problematic area on Sombrero Boulevard is nearly at sea level, and king tides are recognized as a complicating factor, what is the plan to address concerns that residents will drive, or already have driven, through salt water?

In general, there are no backflow preventers in our stormwater wells around the city. Is it possible that salt water can come up through the wells at times? Yes, and there are other locations around the city where it happens – namely, 92nd Street and near Sombrero Beach. In a place with low elevations, you have the potential for king tides to have an

influence. We have gone out during rain events and tested the water, and have not been able to find salt water.



The salt water issue has not been addressed on that road yet. We have sought out grants to address that issue in other parts of town, and we continue to seek public input on problematic areas as part of our vulnerability assessment. That analysis allows us to apply for more grant funding.

KW: What is the plan currently in place to address the issue, and what will it cost?

Plans currently in the design phase would install a raised area with a sidewalk and lighting along the south edge of Sombrero Boulevard. A piping system or other similar structure between the road and raised sidewalk area would collect and divert stormwater flowing south off the road to injection wells, which will be fitted with three automated pumps to actively pump the water down the wells – essentially a more permanent, upgraded version of the temporary system currently in place. Early estimates of the new pumps' capacities are roughly 1,200 gallons per minute each, which could theoretically clear a storm similar to the one we experienced this past Memorial Day in four to six hours. Estimated costs are currently north of \$1 million.

KW: What is the timeline for this project?

As currently scheduled, the city anticipates designs to be finished by the end of July, when the project will be put out to bid. Bid evaluation is scheduled to take place in September, with the award scheduled for approval at the city council's Sept. 10 meeting. Construction is anticipated to begin in mid-October 2024, with an estimated completion date between June and October 2025.

KW: What will be done in the meantime before the project is complete?

The four-inch pump currently in place will remain there, ready to begin pumping at the start of any rain event. The city plans to acquire a second backup portable pump system in case of the first pump's failure. During more significant rain events, the city will close the

south (eastbound) lane of Sombrero Boulevard, where water depths are higher, and create a one-way alternating traffic pattern in the shallower areas, directed by city employees.



KW: Residents are frustrated that it has taken so long to address the problem since the berm was constructed. Why has it taken from early 2022 until 2024 for a plan to take shape?

"Last year, we didn't think we had a problem," said Garrett. "And if there was an issue, it had to do with the actual (drainage) system itself. ... It didn't come to council as much, and council tends to be our bellwether. ... This year, there's no question."

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.