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FEATURED

## Deep well debate, grants highlight meeting

RICHARD TAMBORRINO Special to The Citizen  
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The Marathon City Council convened for its regular session on Tuesday, April 9, and again, resident attendance was strong and vocal as consent agenda items involving the upcoming construction start of the city's deep well, as well as the outstanding Hotel/Motel ordinance, were addressed.

City Attorney Steve Williams and City Manager George Garrett were recommending swift approval of four resolutions involving the upcoming construction of the city's deep injection well for treated wastewater — originally on the consent agenda and pulled by Councilman Kenny Matlock — because “the clock is ticking” on launching this large construction project and that federal fines would be issued if the city doesn't finish the project on time.

The city is charged with installation of a 3,500-foot-deep well at a projected cost of upwards of \$50 million by 2028, in response to a lawsuit filed by the environmental group, Friends of the Lower Keys (FOLKs), and the settlement agreement that was recently finalized.

The four consent agenda items were approved by the council.

Residents have been outspoken for months in opposing construction of the deep well on the city-owned Area 6 site off Coco Plum Drive and have largely insisted the well be positioned on Crawl Key instead.

However, for the city to consider Crawl Key, an agreement with Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority (FKAA) would have to be established, since they own the land.

In the first five minutes of the session, Garrett prefaced the council agenda by saying about the deep well project that “discussion is in the works with the Aqueduct but [the Crawl Key site] cannot happen and will not happen until we have some reasonable discussion with them.” But, based on comments from FKAA officials after the meeting, Crawl Key did not appear to be under consideration.

FKAA Executive Director Greg Veliz shared by phone on April 10 that Garrett called him the previous day — the afternoon before the council session — saying that during their “two-minute conversation” about the deep well project, Garrett told Veliz, “If anyone asks you, we’re moving towards Coco Plum.”

FKAA Director of Engineering David Hackworth was asked whether Garrett had initiated discussions with him about positioning the deep well on Crawl Key, since Hackworth leads the aqueduct’s capital projects.

“I’ve had zero contact,” he said, adding, “We offered to give Marathon the [Crawl Key] property for the well.”

Hackworth also said FKAA reviewed and approved content in the feasibility report, which favored Crawl Key.

Garrett said by phone on April 10 that the council approved Area 6 last fall. While he acknowledged city staff recommended and the feasibility study supported the Crawl Key site, he'd been unable to arrive at an agreement with FKAA on the property they own there.

FKAA has two properties on Crawl Key, one for the current small tank and pump station, and another separate site for a prospective reverse osmosis (RO) facility planned for completion by December 2027. FKAA's plans to add an RO facility on Crawl Key is unconnected to Marathon's requirement to include an RO facility as part of its settlement of the lawsuit. Hackworth said by phone this project "is awaiting the Army Corps of Engineers permit and the design work is currently 50% complete."

In other action, Ordinance 2023-15, the ongoing, contentious Hotel/Motel ordinance — unchanged in language since the last session — provoked strong input from resident Dave Perry, who insisted the 1,500-square-foot hotel room maximum not be exceeded, saying "between traffic, sewers and water pressure, there's no reason to go bigger" and that sooner or later "enough is enough."

Charter boat captain Dustin Huff contended that the way the Hotel/Motel ordinance was originally introduced by city staff as a "clean-up procedure" was inaccurate.

"If this is how these issues are introduced, it makes me feel like we need to keep a closer eye on what city staff is introducing," he said, adding, "Our best interests as citizens are not a priority."

The motion passed unanimously and appreciable applause from those in attendance followed.

In other city business, at the March 26 council workshop, 35 local non-profits made presentations to the council for a piece of the \$150,000 grant funding budget the city has established for 2024. The grant pool, absent from 2018 to 2022 following Hurricane Irma, was reinstated last year at \$110,000.

The city received \$417,000 in requests, with Grace Jones Community Center (\$13,400), the Marathon Recreation Center (\$13,000) and Hammock House (\$12,800) receiving the largest awards. Of the 35 applications, only seven were excluded, with the Conch Republic Marine Army, the United Way of Collier and the Keys and Leadership Monroe County the notable exceptions.

The recently introduced residential and commercial lighting standards ordinance was before the council and while there were only a handful of council comments, one of which was Vice Mayor Lynn Landry emphasizing that this ordinance “adds some teeth, allowing code compliance to better address lighting complaints.”

Matlock said that “many families living paycheck to paycheck will have to hire electricians” to comply, while Councilman Luis Gonzalez suggested only one year for residents to achieve compliance instead of two.

While Planning Director Brian Shea reminded the council there was “no residential lighting ordinance on the city’s books now — only commercial standards” — the city is still likely to navigate challenges in enforcing this ordinance.

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