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Tide turning on Laishley Park Marina

PUNTA GORDA -- City officials want to get serious in their development of the Laishley Park marinas.

The city's Community Redevelopment Agency board -- which includes City Council members, plus Jane Struges and Robert Strange -- started Wednesday to define what they want and don't want to see at the marina. The marina itself has been closed since October, when the city began its dredging project.

At a March 20 meeting, the CRA board reviewed what its consultants, Applied Technology and Management Inc. of West Palm Beach, saw for the marina's future, and the CRA board created a special advisory board to work with consultants and come up with a plan.

The advisory committee is expected to come to the CRA board with its recommendations in a month, but Bill Wolters, a member of the advisory board, asked the CRA for direction Wednesday.

"There has to be some guidance," he suggested.

Among their top concerns, CRA members agreed Wednesday that they want to see the return of commercial shrimpers, who were sent off prior to the dredging project.

"I am dedicated to bringing them back," Mayor Steve Fabian said, but he also realized his desire to expedite the shrimpers' return may not be as soon as he wants.

City attorney Robert Berntsson said the city will need approvals from the governor and Cabinet to modify its submerged lease with the state. Berntsson suggested state officials are hesitant to give their approvals until the city is more certain in its plans.

"The shrimpers were caught in a commercial exclusion," Berntsson said.

Councilwoman Marilyn Smith-Mooney said she's heard that there is private-sector interest in the possible operation and development of amenities at the marina. Smith-Mooney said she didn't want to see the city "come up short" with the marina's development.

"If people want to make proposals, let them step out and make them known," Fabian said.

That idea, however, troubled Councilman Tom Poole, who quipped, "Waltemath is back." Last year, city officials agreed to pay more than \$677,000 to get out of its 13-year agreement with New Orleans developer David Waltemath, who controlled the development of Laishley Park.

CRA members did agree any commercial development should be limited to the marina itself.

Poole also asked the CRA to allow the advisory committee to look at the entire park and not just the marina. The CRA board liked that idea.


"I think the consultants and advisory committee can come up with a plan," Councilman John Murphy suggested, while Councilman John Land said he wouldn't want to see the city lose any land that can be used by the public.

"Once you lose park land, it's gone forever," Land said.

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