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Workshop uses Islamorada as platform for floating roads, homes

By Brian Bowden Free Press Staff

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CONTRIBUTED

ISLAMORADA — Residents likely won't see floating roads and homes in the Florida Keys anytime soon, but at a Southeast Florida Regional Climate Compact workshop held last fall to brainstorm possible responses to sea level rise, those ideas were floated for a Lower Matecumbe Key of the future.

At the four-day Resilient Redesign Workshop, scientists, planners, architecture school students and government officials met to discuss the future of some of South Florida's most vulnerable communities and to propose creative ideas on how to save them from future flooding. One Monroe County study predicted in 2014 that local sea levels would rise 3 to 7 inches by 2030.

Islamorada's Lower Matecumbe Key near Sea Oats Beach was the focus for the Florida Keys portion of the workshop. It included the beach, a bayside neighborhood in that same vicinity, a large area of green space and the soon-to-be developed private Parmelee Key property.

One idea showed installing wide, floating "roads" that could handle lightweight vehicles and pedestrians. They are set up like typical streets and connect to homes also floating on the same platform. A pilot program for how they work was tested at a town in Italy, according to the compact.

Another idea showed three-story homes built on pontoon-like foundations at Parmelee Key. According to the diagram, the home's bottom story would sit underneath the water during its "resting position" and have the ability to rise during times of prolonged flooding.

These ideas don't hold much water with village officials, though.

"It's completely conceptual and not realistic [for the area]," Islamorada Manager Seth Lawless said. "So I doubt it will ever happen."

Islamorada Environmental Resources Program Manager Susan Sprunt, who attended the workshop, agreed.

"It was just thinking of out-of-the-box ideas," she said. "This [proposal] is if nothing was limiting [such as development restrictions, regulatory issues, funding and other factors]."

The Nature Conservancy's South Florida director, Chris Bergh, who also represented the Keys at the workshop, said Lower Matecumbe was chosen because of its low-lying geography. The conservancy also owns easements on Sea Oats Beach.

"The area represented all of the design challenges [the compact was looking for]," Bergh said.

He mentioned a previous workshop — the compact holds them annually — that focused on Key West.

Aside from floating roads and homes, the workshop also discussed implementing natural shoreline protection and restoration treatments at Sea Oats Beach. One idea showed the installation of multiple rock barriers just offshore there to protect the beach and U.S. 1 from storm surges.

"It's all feasible [the floating roads and homes], but maybe just a bit futuristic," Bergh said. "These workshops are meant to be outside the box, though."

Proposals for dealing with rising waters in Miami's Arch Creek and Shorecrest neighborhoods were also discussed at the workshop. Participants discussed the possibility of relocating the Shorecrest neighborhood, a proposal that recently garnered coverage in national newspapers. The full presentation can be viewed at southeastfloridaclimatecompact.org. Bergh said a final report from the workshop is expected to be released by the compact soon.

The compact was formed in 2010 to foster sustainability and climate resilience on a regional scale. It is made up of representatives from Monroe, Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

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