




August 6, 2020

TO: Mayor Jerry Demings  
FROM: Commissioner Betsy VanderLey, District 1   
SUBJECT: Commissioner's Report Request – Bird Island

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Please allow this memo to serve as my request for a Commissioners Report to be scheduled to discuss potential action steps to address the unwanted activity at Egret Island (aka Bird Island) on Lake Butler.

**Issue**

Bird Island is an island on Lake Butler that is owned by the Florida Audubon Society. This island, inhabited by protected wildlife, regularly draws a significant number of boats to its shores. The boaters anchor at the shoreline and proceed to trespass on the island using it for a multitude of unwanted and illicit activities. They are disturbing the wildlife and leaving behind mounds of trash in their wake. This trespassing activity is accompanied by underage drinking, loud music, and dangerous interactions between water craft and swimmers. There have been a number of reported incidents related to this behavior including an underage person who was taken to the hospital for alcohol poisoning and at least one death of a swimmer interacting with a water craft.

**Challenges and Actions to Date**

- FWC patrols – FWC has very limited resources to patrol a very large area. However, I have been in contact with them and they are doing what they can to curtail the behavior. They are limited to State waters.
- Posted signage – Working with our EPD and with permission of the Audubon Society we have placed no trespassing signs on the island that, unfortunately, are largely being ignored. Additionally, at my request OCSO has received blanket permission to trespass anyone they catch on the island. However, OCSO has to catch the culprits in the act in order to trespass them.
- Collaboration with the Town of Windermere – I have spoken with the Town of Windermere asking them to keep a close eye on their boat ramp as it is the closest to the island and is often a launching point for swimmers to swim across boating channels to reach the island, thereby creating a dangerous situation with high speed water vehicles not seeing a swimmer until too late in many cases.
- OSCO – I have met with marine patrols and asked them to watch the area closely, and have worked with both private citizens and the navigation board to discuss funding additional patrols.

**Potential Solutions to Discuss**

The reason the island is so attractive to a party is that it offers an area deep enough for boats to anchor and shallow enough to walk between vessels. I am asking that we discuss an ordinance that would allow us to post signage that would move the boats further off shore thereby removing access to the island and the ability to walk between boats, thus deterring these unsafe conditions.

I thank you in advance for your consideration of this request.

cc: Board of County Commissioners  
Byron Brooks, County Administrator  
Cheryl Gillespie, Agenda Development Supervisor

**COMMISSIONER BETSY VANDERLEY, DISTRICT 1**

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