

New Smyrna Beach City Commission Meeting Sept. 8, 2020

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1. City Commissioners voted 4-1, with Commissioner Jake Sachs dissenting, to approve construction of a dune walkover at 1373 N. Atlantic Ave. Some officials expressed concern, though, whether they should continue allowing the structures.

They asked how it would look if walkways extended to the beach from each oceanfront property, and indicated they need a definitive answer about the environmental effects of dune walkovers.

The Commission agreed to delve into the issue at a Dec. 10 strategic planning session. "I don't see in this particular case how we can deny this, so I'll vote for approval," Vice Mayor Michael Kolody commented. "I would like staff to look into some possible changes to protect not just the integrity of the dunes, but the appearance of the dunes. If we had a provision that limited the number of walkovers within a distance of an existing public access, or perhaps that dune walkovers should be placed on a common lot line ... that would cut the number of walkovers in half."

The closest beach access to the walkover approved Sept. 8 is Beachway Avenue, about 100 feet away.

"I'd echo what the Vice Mayor said," Mayor Russ Owen added. "I have some concerns about these ... We have had an environmental expert say the walkways are less impact on the dunes than a walkway, but I support further study for that."

At the same time, Owen pointed to an aerial photo on a large screen, showing the property with the proposed walkway, as well as the surrounding area. "You see that trail beat through the dunes. What we're approving today in theory prohibits that ... which, I think the environmentalists, the experts, would tell us is worse than a dune walkover."

Commissioner Sachs also posed a question. "When you go down to the beach and see many of the walkovers broken away from storms ... How can we keep approving these when they're just going to get destroyed by storms? I think we should at least look at what dune walkovers do to these coastal systems."

Commissioner Jason McQuirk countered that an elevated boardwalk measuring a mile and a half long was built in Smyrna Dunes Park specifically to protect the dune system. He suggested the walkover issue was too intensive to task staff members with it now, when they're already working on so many projects. Commissioner Randy Hartman echoed that concern and supported discussing the topic at the Dec. 10 meeting.

Commissioners have voted to approve a number of dune walkovers this year. The boardwalks usually extend more than 200 feet across the dunes to the beach, east of the city's Coastal Construction Setback Line (CCSL). The Commission had heard previously from environmental experts who said once the temporary disturbance of building the walkover is finished and the area is restored with native vegetation, the boardwalk then protects the dunes from foot traffic going back and forth to the beach.

Assistant City Manager Brian Fields said staff member reviewed the city's requirements for dune walkovers and found they are the strictest in Volusia County. "We are the only city that requires dune walkovers to come to the City Commission for approval," he said.

