



February 19, 2019

To: Ms. Nicole Rissler, Director, Parks, Recreation, and Natural Resources

The Board of County Commissioners

The Honorable Charles D. Hines, Chair

The Honorable Michael A. Moran, Vice-Chair

The Honorable Nancy C. Detert

The Honorable Alan Maio

The Honorable Christian Ziegler

Subject: Siesta Key Parking and Access Management

Dear Ms. Rissler and Honorable Commissioners:

On behalf of Siesta Key Association, I appreciate the opportunity to provide input for your exploration of paid parking and access management improvements on and around Siesta Key. From our perspective, the county must look at parking in the larger context of too many cars clogging area roadways today. The public safety implications and challenges for residents trying to get to and from their homes here have been discussed at length. I encourage you to focus on solutions that restore traffic on Siesta Key roads and bridges to safe and manageable levels while maintaining convenient beach access for all residents and visitors.

To properly address the situation, there are many issues that need to be studied in a systemic way. Siesta Key traffic is a complex system, and a change to any one aspect could have profound effects on many other aspects. Changes made in the past must be reviewed to assess both positive and negative effects.

For example, expanding the number of parking spaces at Siesta Beach enables more people to visit the beach, but this has no doubt made the traffic problem worse. It simply encourages more people to drive to the beach over already congested bridges and roads. In our view, adding more parking on Siesta Key is not a viable tactic.

The pushbutton on-demand crosswalks that were installed several years ago do improve pedestrian safety, but with no delay or synchronization, traffic can be stopped every few seconds as people randomly activate the signals. These backups can ripple up Stickney Point Road to US-41. I have recommended to FDOT that delays and synchronization be added, but so far there has been no indication that this is being considered. Perhaps this could be included in the items the county will address as it assumes control of Midnight Pass Road in the River Road swap.



The heavy seasonal congestion on Stickney Point Road has encouraged more people to use the north bridge on Siesta Drive, sometimes at the direction of electronic signs. As a result, traffic queues at the intersection of Osprey Drive and Siesta Drive have become unmanageable at times. Moving traffic from a divided roadway with two lanes in each direction to a road half that size through a residential neighborhood creates major safety hazards at critical intersections, such as Siesta Drive and Higel Avenue and at the blind curve at the access to Siesta Isles. Too many fatalities have already occurred at the Siesta/Higel curve, and this must be stopped. Maintaining safe and reasonable traffic flow at the north access to Siesta Key must be a prime factor in considering any potential changes.

On the plus side, the Trolley has been a great benefit in reducing intra-island traffic. It helps solve the problem of limited parking in the Village and keeps drivers who have been drinking from driving their cars. I encourage you to explore ways to expand the route to cover more of the northern end of the island and to think about creative solutions, such as installing a transfer station at the old Sheriff's facility on Siesta Key. This could be used as a hub for off-island SCAT and shuttle passengers to connect with a Trolley for Siesta Key travel and eliminate the many on-island stops currently made by the off-island buses.

As a bicycling advocate, I appreciate the proposal of biking alternatives in principle. However, as I've documented to Commissioner Maio, the segment of Midnight Pass Road between Stickney Point Road and Beach Road is quite hazardous for bikers, especially for the many visitors who are less experienced riders. The paved shoulder is irregular and sometimes narrows nearly to the point of vanishing. The sidewalks aren't much better, and mixing bikes with pedestrians and driveway traffic on these walkways creates its own safety hazards. A similar problem exists on Stickney Point Road, made worse by the higher speed limits for cars there. We all know solutions to this problem won't be easy, but I encourage you to focus on improving safety before adding any more bikes to the mix.

With regard to paid parking, the primary focus must be what you hope to achieve by imposing a fee. It would seem the most logical benefit would be to use the revenue to help fund beach maintenance and alternative transport methods, but please do not consider implementing this only at Siesta Beach as some have suggested. As the red tide crisis has proven, tourism is fragile. Adding a fee only at Siesta Beach could put the local community at a disadvantage to other county beaches that have no fee. Parking fees are best implemented on a county-wide basis rather than as a spot solution, and they must be implemented thoughtfully to avoid disenfranchising any segment of the community.

The question of free passes and discounted fees has been widely debated. Some Siesta Key groups are demanding free beach parking for Siesta Key residents, but the results of a survey of Siesta Key Association members did not advocate this. Instead, members suggested a yearly



decal for a fixed rate somewhere in the \$25-\$50 range for all county residents. I believe that most residents could afford this expense, but exceptions could be made for hardships. We should encourage residents living close to the beach to get there by means other than driving their cars, if they are able. If implemented, resident decals should be applicable at all county beaches, as is the norm in many beach communities where paid parking has been implemented.

I was pleased to see the concerns expressed by the commissioners about the intersection of Stickney Point Road and US-41. Again, solutions there won't be easy, but something needs to be done to alleviate the bottlenecks that occur there and to improve safety for pedestrians and bikers crossing these roads. If you are considering elevation-based solutions, please consider alternatives that go up, not alternatives that go under. As we all know, Sarasota gets some torrential downpours, and tunnels tend to flood. I've seen too many people literally drown in depressed underpasses around Houston TX as they go into unexpectedly deep water.

In summary, changes have been made over many years that individually have seemed beneficial to Siesta Key, yet taken together, many have made the traffic situation in this area much worse. As you review the situation in 2019 and beyond, I encourage you to take a step back and carefully rethink the overall parking and traffic situation on Siesta Key and its surroundings in a systemic, holistic way. Please do not make any changes until all the implications have been thoroughly thought through and all the "what-if" scenarios have been analyzed. I'm confident that Sarasota County Staff have the knowledge and resources to provide a detailed report on the situation as it exists today and the implications of any potential changes. It took a long time for us to get into this situation. Let's take the time that's required to work out solutions that will be truly beneficial for the long term.

We sincerely appreciate the online survey and public workshop that the County is conducting on this matter and are pleased to participate, both as an organization and as individual residents. We would appreciate any opportunity to work collaboratively with county staff and the commissioners on creative solutions that will genuinely improve the transportation situation on and around Siesta Key. Siesta Key is truly a worldwide treasure, and it merits a well thought out, world-class access management plan to ensure public safety and accessibility for both residents and visitors.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Board of Directors,

Gene Kusekoski, President  
Siesta Key Association of Sarasota, Inc.