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Suspicion greets Shell Island open house

Midway through Wednesday's open house at Arnold High School John Darrah was disappointed.



PHOTO/ The News Herald
People enjoy the third annual AquaPalooza on Shell Island.

PANAMA CITY BEACH — Midway through Wednesday's open house at Arnold High School John Darrah was disappointed.

Wearing a "Friends of Shell Island" T-shirt, Darrah told representatives of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Florida Park Service that he expected a participatory meeting in which people could voice their concerns.

"People are ticked off," Darrah said before DEP spokesman Jason Mahon asked him to put his comments in writing.

The meeting, which featured enlarged blueprints of the island and stations where visitors could talk to DEP officials, was an "elaborate ruse," said Stephanie Somerset, who heads up Friends of Shell Island, which has fought for public access to the island.

Public comments are scheduled during another meeting from 9 a.m. to noon today in Arnold's auditorium, although Somerset said most people work during those hours.

Somerset and other Friends of Shell Island members stood at an advocacy booth outside the auditorium because they were told by DEP they could not set up inside, Somerset said.

When asked about the booth, Mahon referred the question to Arnold officials.

Friends of Shell Island has raised concerns about proposals outlined in a 10-year management plan for the state park, although park officials said what is being proposed will have no effect on boaters' access to the island and actually would scale back the area offshore where the park officials would have authority.

A proposal in the plan gives officials authority to manage the area 50 feet into the water around Shell Island. Gary F. Clark, deputy secretary of land and regulation for DEP, said the park currently has management authority 400 feet out into the water.

Before the open house, Friends of Shell Island and the recreational boating advocacy group Standing Watch Inc. hosted a press conference. Jim Calvin, president and CEO of Standing Watch, alleged there were conflicts of interest that would impact the development of the management plan.

“Not only are Audubon (Society) representatives engaged in/on the committee, but they are also responsible and being compensated for obtaining data, and performing ‘research’ that will be instrumental in driving park policy and pushing this plan to the limits of regulatory reach,” Calvin said in a letter to Division of Recreation and Parks Director Donald Forgione.

Somerset also said studies underway about the negative impact of human activity on bird populations on the island were skewed in an attempt to limit public access.

Biologist Jim Beers said the studies were “fatally flawed,” biased and based on casual observances.

In response to the concerns about the alleged conflicts of interest and limited access, Sine Murray, bureau chief of the Florida Park Service Office of Park Planning, said an advisory group of stakeholders must be formed as part of the management plan.

“There is no change of use patterns at Shell Island,” Murray said.

District biologist Raya Pruner had no comment on opinions about the bird study, but said it was part of long-term monitoring intended to come up with ways to improve the bird population. The study has shown there is some disturbance of bird habitats, Pruner said.

People will not be forced off the island because of the study, Pruner added.