

ENVIRONMENT

Weeki Wachee River dredge begins again

Delayed for nearly 10 months, the \$2.1 million project will remove sediment from the river.



The dredging operators on the Weeki Wachee River shut down in July 2022 after contractor Gator Dredging struggled with meeting water quality requirements of their permits. This photo was taken by the Southwest Florida Water Management District when work caused a plume of silt in the river. [Southwest Florida Water Management District]

By **Barbara Behrendt** *Times staff*

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Nearly 10 months after the [long-awaited dredging](#) of the Weeki Wachee River stopped because of water quality issues, work is scheduled to begin again on the

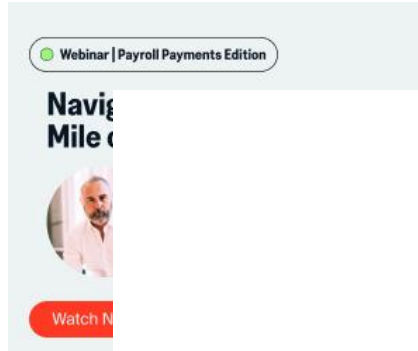
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through Friday, May 12.

“This week was chosen so the temporary closure would not conflict with spring break, and would allow the park to reopen before schools let out for the summer. The weather will determine any potential delays and the community will be notified,” according to a news release from Hernando County.

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The Weeki Wachee River Restoration project is managed by the Southwest Florida Water Management District which hired Sea & Shoreline LLC as its new contractor, a company that had responded to the original request to do the work.

“The contractor agreed to reduce their original bid price to account for work that was completed, and materials left by the previous contractor,” said Susanna Martinez Tarokh, district spokesperson. The final negotiated price is \$2,184,925 including \$150,000 in contingency to complete the project.

Sea & Shoreline will use a technique called hand dredging, also referred to as diver dredging. Divers will vacuum sediments using a flexible suction hose equipped with a specially fabricated nozzle.



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The contractor plans to use a 32-by-10-foot barge outfitted with an 8-inch pump. Divers will use air from the surface, rather than tanks of compressed air, to stay underwater and perform the dredging, Martinez Tarokh said.

Aerial drone view of kayakers as they float along the river river at Weeki Wachee State Park on Wednesday, May 4, 2022 in Weeki Wachee. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

The river will remain navigable during the project, which is expected to take about one year to complete.

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“Manatee protection measures will be in place for the project duration. Protection measures for turbidity will also be in place to protect water quality during the project,” she said. “The public is advised to use caution around the contractor’s work areas.”

In 2020, the Florida Legislature approved \$2.195 million for the river improvement project, with the water management district contributing another \$2 million. Through competitive bidding, [Gator Dredging of Clearwater](#) was awarded a \$2.13 million contract to complete the work. The original timeline had the work starting in March 2022 and ending seven months later in October.

A sign informs the public about the ongoing Weeki Wachee River Channel Restoration Project near the entrance of Roger's Park on Wednesday, May 4, 2022, in Hernando County. [DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times]

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Dredging began June 14, 2022, but just two hours after the work started, it stopped amid turbidity problems. Work resumed three days later but stopped again and did not resume until July 5. The dredge continued intermittently until July 22. At that point the water management district pulled the plug, telling the contractor that work could not continue until the water quality complied with the permit requirements.

Environmental agencies studied changes in the Weeki Wachee River in recent years. They determined the increasing public use of the river along with beach renourishment at Rogers Park and the Weeki Wachee Springs State Park have contributed to a river that has grown wider and more shallow.

Local boaters have complained the [changes have made the waterway increasingly unpassable](#) and others concerned about the long-term health of the river have attempted to get a [springs protection zone](#) enacted from Rogers Park to the state park. Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission are scheduled to discuss that idea in Miami later this month.

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