

After years of delay, pier is a go

Construction will start with the sound of piles being driven into the bay as the City Council okays \$17.6 million for the new Pier District.

BY WAVENEY ANN MOORE
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ST. PETERSBURG — A new pier will finally rise on the downtown waterfront, continuing a tradition that is more than a century old.

The City Council voted 7-1 on Thursday to appropriate \$17.6 million to begin construction of the new Pier District. Set to be finished in early 2019, it

will replace the 1970s-era inverted pyramid, which itself replaced the 1926 Million Dollar Pier.

The \$17.6 million will be used to pay for the over-water portion of the project. The first step will be to start driving piles into the bottom of Tampa Bay for the pier platform. The work could start as soon as the end of this month.

Supporters of the 26-acre

Pier District used words such as “historic” and “milestone” to describe Thursday’s moment in the decade-long slog to replace the old pier. Unlike the lengthy council meetings of the past, this pier decision was made without vitriol and bombast.

“It seems like a dream,” St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce president and CEO

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This architectural rendering shows the Pier District in detail. The City Council on Thursday approved \$17.6 million to begin construction of the project, which has a budget of \$66 million. However, it's still unclear which amenities ultimately will be included.



This rendering shows the pier structure. Construction is expected to begin at the end of June; it will take six months to drive 426 piles into Tampa Bay to build the pier platform.

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Chris Steinocher told the council of Thursday's development. Deputy Mayor Kanika Tomalin acknowledged that the project had long been "mired in the morass of uncertainty."

That may continue for some time.

That's because even as the city starts construction, no one knows what amenities may still be added to the district, or how much the final cost will exceed the current \$66 million budget.

Mayor Rick Kriseman had sought to spend another \$14 million to turn the Pier District into a "world class" destination. The money would come from tax increment financing, or TIF funds. He hoped Pinellas County would allow St. Petersburg to reallocate money once planned for a downtown transportation hub to pay for additional amenities at the new expanse.

It's uncertain whether the Pinellas County Commission will agree to that. Even the City Council has been divided on the issue and voted to spend \$4 million of the money on one of their priorities, to improve transportation and parking downtown.

Kriseman wanted all of the money to go to Pier District "enhancements." It's unknown if any of the proposed ameni-

ties will survive, including plans to spend \$1.3 million on a signature art element, \$2 million for a floating platform and \$1 million for playground equipment.

The lone holdout Thursday was City Council member Steve Kornell, who has raised objections to the project's growing budget.

"I think there are implications about spending that amount of money without knowing whether it's going to work," he said after the vote.

"I respect everybody who said to move forward, but to me, I have concerns about what we're actually getting. It's very underfunded right now. And some of the maintenance issues are long-term issues that we will have to pay for."

Kornell's lack of enthusiasm did not dampen the euphoria at City Hall.

"It's been a long time coming," council member Ed Montanari said afterward.

The first-term council member has had a front-row seat in the contentious and circuitous route to a new pier. He participated in the pier visioning process in 2006, served as vice chairman of the Pier Advisory Task Force that issued a seminal report in 2010 during former Mayor Rick Baker's tenure.

When voters rejected the first proposed pier replacement, the Lens, Montanari sat on former Mayor Bill Foster's 8/28 Alliance to figure out a new direction.

Most recently, in 2014, Montanari was drafted by Kriseman for his Pier Working Group, which jump-started the current project.

"St. Petersburg has had a pier since 1889 and I'm just very happy that we're moving the project forward with this vote today," Montanari said. "It's an exciting day."

Council member Karl Nurse, who will leave office this year because of term limits, was also pleased.

"This has really been a 10-year decision and we're finally going to start construction," he said. "I am pretty hopeful that people will say when the project is done that they're happy we built it."

The \$17.6 million the council approved Thursday is the guaranteed maximum price from Skanska USA Building — the project's construction manager — to build the pier platform.

The vote came the day after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a long-awaited permit. City officials said pile driving will start at the end of June and take six months to put in all 426.

That will also mean more noise and construction activity along the downtown waterfront. Contractors said they will place damper pads between the hammer and piles to lessen the noise. But the start of construction has already been delayed by six months as officials dealt with myriad delays.

"We have lost time on this project," said Chris Ballestra, the city's managing director of development coordination.

But delays are nothing new for the city's historic piers. After the Million Dollar Pier was demolished in 1967, the city didn't approve building a new pier until two years later. The inverted pyramid finally opened in 1975.

Kriseman, who was elected mayor in 2014, made a pledge to "have the new pier built by the end of 2015" and is now running for re-election. His opponent, former Mayor Baker, has criticized Kriseman for the delays and cost overruns in getting the new pier built.

Can anything stop the new pier now?

"Not that we're aware of," said Kriseman's spokesman Ben Kirby said, "and that's a good thing."

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