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## Still waiting

Local rollout of COVID vaccine plods on. 4A

## Ancient connections

Jewish center dedicates antiquities collection. 1B



# Sargassum solution may be as compost

BY THERESA JAVA  
Free Press Staff

FLORIDA KEYS — Adding weeds to landscaping or vegetable plots might sound crazy to gardeners, but it just might be a cost-effective solution to ridding clogged shorelines of sargassum weed.

Scientists are evaluating the viability of using

sargassum weed, actually a brown macro algae that washes up seasonally, as compost for gardens.

Florida Sea Grant and the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences are looking for a green solution to removing sargassum, which could also reduce costs for coastal counties and municipalities that have to haul away the

stinky seaweed.

In normal quantities, sargassum seaweed provides essential protection for oceanic creatures, but since 2011, the volume of the macro algae has exploded. In 2019, the sargassum blanketed the Keys' coastline and sat dormant in canals.

The economic impact to Monroe County from a severe sargassum year is

estimated at \$20 million, according to analysts.

Sargassum has been repurposed in the past in other countries and states for a variety of uses, but recent studies from Mexico and Texas have given rise to concerns after elevated arsenic levels were found in sargassum samples.



File photo by KEVIN WADLOW/Free Press

A personal watercraft rider wades through sargassum weed at Tavernier's Harry Harris Park in 2019.

See SARGASSUM, 3A

# A bridge too far



Rendering

The newly seated Islamorada Village Council is seeking alternatives to the pedestrian bridge planned for U.S. 1 on Plantation Key.

## Islamorada seeks alternatives to pedestrian overpass

BY JILL ZIMA BORSKI  
Free Press Staff

ISLAMORADA — The Islamorada Village Council will ask the governor to intervene to halt a pedestrian bridge being built across U.S. 1 at Founders Park by the Florida Department of Transportation.

The fixed-span elevated crosswalk, approved by previous councils and funded by the state, is scheduled for completion in early 2022 at a cost of \$4.68 million.

A majority of speakers were opposed to the pedestrian overpass during last Thursday's virtual Zoom council meeting. Islamorada resident Van Cadenhead, however, said the project has been discussed publicly

since 2014 and would enhance safety.

Councilman Henry Rosenthal said the project negatively affects community character and mediation may be necessary between the parties if his research into FDOT case law is pertinent. Mayor Buddy Pinder agreed the bridge negatively affects community character and said he was pleased with hearing from so many residents. He added nobody has been killed by crossing U.S. 1 at Founders Park.

Councilmen David Webb and Mark Gregg voiced concern over fiduciary responsibilities and consequences of seeking to halt the project.

The council agreed to approach the governor through a letter signed by Pinder asking for a re-evaluation of the project and alternative safety

options such as a marked crosswalk, stoplight-on-demand or tunnel. The draft letter will be shared with council prior to transmission to the governor.

Webb said many residents told him they would change their minds and accept the project if a substantial monetary liability was imposed on Islamorada by asking FDOT to back out of contracts.

In other action, the council steered the proposed development of village-owned lots on Plantation Key for affordable or workforce housing to the achievable housing committee for its recommendation on housing options. The committee was praised for its past work.

See BRIDGE, 6A

# Deer status in limbo, group says

BY THERESA JAVA  
Free Press Staff

BIG PINE KEY — A federal effort to remove Key deer from the endangered species list has been in a holding pattern since first being proposed in 2019, and that's a good thing, says a local advocacy group.

"Key deer are in stuck in the middle of the canal in a boat, and they're not moving up or down in terms of protection," said citizen scientist and Key Deer Protection Alliance president Vivian Beck.

Her group promotes habitat protection and public education to help the petite deer that remain



Contributed

A Key deer buck beds down in a residential garden.

listed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

"It's partially because of COVID and the transition between presidential

See DEER, 3A

# More derelict vessels targeted for removal

BY THERESA JAVA  
Free Press Staff

KEY LARGO — Approval of a grant agreement between the county and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission that would cover about \$24,000 of the estimated total cost of \$31,900 to remove two derelict vessels from

Lake Surprise is expected at this week's Monroe County Commission meeting.

The \$24,069 is the remaining amount available in FWC's fiscal year 2019-20 budget for this grant program.

The remaining \$7,831 in project costs will be

See REMOVAL, 6A

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## INDEX

Business & Real Estate ..... 11A  
Classifieds..... 11B

Crossword..... 9B  
Horoscope ..... 9B

Opinion ..... 11A  
Sports & Recreation..... 8-9B

Tides..... 8B  
TV Guide..... 7B

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