

Loxahatchee supporters hope funding comes through

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By Kit Bradshaw

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The 13 governmental agencies and environmental interest groups that make up the Loxahatchee River Preservation Initiative have their collective fingers crossed during this state legislative session.

The initiative has requested funding of \$5.9 million for a dozen projects that either need to move to the next phase or need initial funding. This is the largest amount the initiative has requested since coming into being four years ago.

"Three years ago we asked for between \$4-5 million and received \$2.5 million," said David Brown, Jupiter's water utilities director and the chairman of the initiative. "Last year, we asked for \$4 million and received \$1 million. Obviously everyone is competing for this type of funding, so you don't always get what you ask for."



file photo

Boaters traverse the northwest fork of the federally designated Wild and Scenic Loxahatchee River. A total of \$5.9 million is requested from the state Legislature this year, with matching funds by local organizations, to enhance and protect the river.

As of Tuesday, Brown had not gotten an answer on whether the state legislature would be earmarking any money towards the river.

"Ginger Baldwin, Sen. (Ken) Pruitt's legislative assistant is going

to dig a little deeper to look where the funding is being debated, in the House or in the Senate," Brown said.

Brown told members of the Loxahatchee River Preservation Initiative at a Monday meeting that

it might take several days before Baldwin can get a definite answer, Brown said.

Any amount is gratefully received, he said. "Typically, we don't get everything we ask for," he said. "We'll be happy if we get half of it."

The initiative's programs have the backing of the local legislative delegations, led by Pruitt, who happens to be the chairman of the Florida State Senate Appropriations Committee. The programs also have the endorsement of Sen. Jeff Atwater and Reps. Joe Negron and Carl Domino.

Pat Magrogan, who represents the Friends of the Loxahatchee, which works to help preserve the river and educate the public about it, said Tuesday that both Gov. Jeb Bush and Pruitt have gone on record as supporting the river.

"Some people were laughing at us Monday about getting funding," Magrogan said. "But some laughed

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at us in the beginning and we got some funding.”

The projects on the initiative's to-do list are prioritized, with the most expensive one — known as “Phase III of the Loxahatchee Slough Restoration” — topping the list. Palm Beach County has agreed to provide \$875,000 in matching funds if the legislature antes up the other \$875,000.

In fact, this matching fund element is one of the criteria for the initiative's selection of the projects for legislative funding, Brown said.

“A few years ago, there were a lot of groups that had plans to improve the Loxahatchee River, and I attended a lot of meetings with these groups, but I got frustrated because there were all these plans and nothing was getting constructed,” Brown said.

“So I got the groups together and we decided we had to find the money to kick-start these projects,” he said. The initiative snowballed from there. The purpose was single-minded: to find the funding mechanisms for the Loxahatchee River Basin restorative projects. The initiative wanted to eliminate the pollution sources within the immediate river basin and peel back the impact of development on existing natural systems in the river.

And when the projects eventually are completed?

“We'll never really be done,” Brown said, “since there will always be new projects and maintenance. But because of all these different programs, eventually the public will have more access to these natural facilities and will see the benefits of the projects, such as an improvement with the water quality in the Loxahatchee River.”

The next meeting of the Loxahatchee River Preservation Initiative will be on Monday, May 10 at noon at the Jupiter Emergency Operations Center, 3133 Washington Street.