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Federal grants can help Pinellas beach property owners install turtle-friendly lighting

By JOHN GUERRA, Tampa Bay Newspapers
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This baby loggerhead must find its way to the water after hatching in the sand above the tide line. Bright lighting on homes, condos and other beachfront property can confuse these youngsters, leading them away from the water.

Photo by RICK HERREN, SEA TURTLE CONSERVANCY

REDINGTON SHORES — If you own beachfront property in Redington Shores, you have probably received a letter from town officials urging you to install sea turtle-friendly lighting or pay a fine.

Redington Shores, Madeira Beach, Indian Shores, and other Pinellas County beaches also have turtle-light ordinances, designed to reduce bright lighting that confuses egg-laying turtles and, subsequently, the hatchlings. Towns also ban flashlights on the beach and adopt other rules to minimize the effect lighting has on the creatures, which lay eggs in the sand and leave them to nature's whims. Loggerheads are the most common sea turtle that nests in Pinellas County, and females generally nest from early May through August.

Owners of large condo buildings, resorts and other homeowners, however, quickly learn that bringing their property's lighting into compliance can be expensive. That's why Redington Shores Commissioner Michael Robinson asked the Sea Turtle Conservancy to speak to beach property owners at a Dec. 10 town hall meeting. The conservancy runs a lighting retrofit grant program that helps property owners pay for the special lighting.



The grants are funded via the \$2.44 billion National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund. The fund was created from billions of dollars in fees and court settlements BP and other companies paid following the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion of April 2010. The devastation killed 11 workers and pumped more than 130 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The Benefit Fund also pays for protecting shorebird nesting sites and other projects.

“I said, ‘We’ve got to do something here,’” said Robinson, who is also the president of the LaVistana condo association. “I started searching for a solution. When I learned what the Sea Turtle Conservancy does, I was blown away by what they offer.”

He then sent the letter inviting beach property owners to hear the conservancy's pitch at the town hall.

Conservancy Lighting Program Manager Rachel Tighe and her staff described their lighting retrofit grant program at the town hall.

"We went out on the beach, evaluated, and looked up and down the coast," Tighe said of the Redington Shores area. "We saw a lot of visible light that isn't sea turtle-friendly."

Conservancy Project Specialist Cypres Ferran outlined the steps of the lighting retrofit program.

The conservancy seeks out beach property owners who have been cited, are located next to dark stretches of beach, are adjacent to park or protected lands, and are willing to take part in the program.

They perform two site visits, one during the day, during which they walk the property and learn the location of the lighting. During a subsequent nighttime evaluation, the property owner turns on all exterior lights, parking lot, balcony lights — all of them. Using light spectrometers, the conservancy measures light output on the beach.

Staff returns to the office and writes up a plan for replacing the lights, including which bulbs to use, and the best location for lighting. They review it with the property owner, meeting property owners' preferences when possible.

Once the property owner agrees to the new lighting and where it will be installed, they sign a contract with the conservancy. After that, the conservancy pays "100 percent of the cost of the fixtures and lighting," Ferran said.

The lighting survey is designed to improve safety, security, and ability to see on the property as well as protect turtles, Ferran said.

The definition of turtle-appropriate lighting technology has changed over time, Tighe said. Low-sodium lights, which give out a yellowish glow, are being phased out and replaced with light-emitting diode (LED) technology.

“We use all LED, it’s the only way to achieve sea turtle-friendly lighting,” she said. “It’s about wavelength, not color. Using the electromagnetic spectrum, you want to install the longer wavelengths of 560 nanometers or longer (orange to red lights on the visible spectrum). Those are the ones that turtles are aversive to or don’t see.”

Karen Kangari helps manage The Shores condominium across the street from Redington Shores Town Hall. After Robinson sent her a letter, she began working with the conservancy to install turtle-safe lighting. She wants to replace balcony lights, parking lot lights, and lights around the beachside pool.

“We were notified that we were out of compliance by the town and that we need to look into our lighting,” Kangari said. “It was suggested that we take advantage of the Sea Turtle Conservancy and the grants that are available to us. The conservancy has evaluated us, given us a proposal, we have the pricing and the cost, and we already have approval for the grant.”



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Unfortunately, Kangari said, she hit a roadblock: Duke Energy has balked at allowing her to install turtle-friendly bulbs in their poles on her property.

“We have (up to) six lights that are owned by Duke Energy,” Kangari said. “They said they

aren't going to help us be in compliance."

"We already got approval for the grant; we just haven't been able to execute because of Duke," Kangari said. "We started a couple of months ago but got a six-month extension because of Duke. If we can, we'll just have Duke take their poles back and put our own poles in with the appropriate lighting."

Other property owners expressed frustration at what they consider Duke's unwillingness to switch to turtle lighting on the poles Duke owns on their property.

Duke spokesperson Ana Gibbs said the energy company will contact Redington Shores property owners to discuss turtle lighting. According to Gibbs, the energy company has a history of turtle conservancy. For instance, Duke installed turtle-friendly lighting on Clearwater beach and is a corporate sponsor of the sea turtle rescue operation at Clearwater Marine Aquarium. Duke's website has a feature story about "Kreacher," the loggerhead turtle, which was released from Clearwater Marine Aquarium with a radio tracking antenna attached to its shell.

In the meantime, Robinson and Redington Shores Mayor MaryBeth Henderson hoped more people will contact the conservancy about the grant program.

"We sent a notice to all Redington Shores beachfront property owners, advising them of this meeting," Robinson said. "We want them to avail themselves of this grant program."

Beach property owners can contact the conservancy at 352-373-6441 or email Tighe at rachel@conserveturtles.org.