

Riviera Beach to launch youth boating program

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Updated: 11:35 a.m. Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2012

Posted: 10:18 a.m. Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2012

After almost four years of political infighting, the much-discussed youth boating program the city's Community Redevelopment Agency has been trying to start finally found smooth sailing and is scheduled to begin Saturday.

"I'm pleased and excited we crossed that hurdle," said Councilman Shelby Lowe, a Riviera Beach native who has been pushing for the program for years. "This program will give kids an opportunity to see Riviera Beach in a different light."

The program, for youths ages 8-18, will teach kids about boating safety, swimming, fishing, snorkeling, rowing and be run by the Florida Fishing Academy, a nonprofit group that teaches at-risk youths fishing skills.

Kids will kayak to Peanut Island and sometimes go fishing on the Academy's boat, said Richard Brochu, executive director for the Florida Fishing Academy.

As the kids gain more experience, they will kayak to Munyon Island and sail on the ocean, Brochu said.

"We're trying to introduce them to something that is right in their backyards," Brochu said. "A lot of these kids don't even know that Riviera Beach has a marina."

In the first year, Brochu said he'd like to serve about 500 kids. He'd like to see that number grow as high as 2,000 in the coming years.

The program will also take center stage on the city's inaugural Marina Day on Feb. 18 at Bicentennial Park. The event will include a ceremonial kayak-launching, water rescues and a children's marine art contest.

The Florida Fishing Academy, Brochu said, has a three-year contract with the city to run the boating program. Operating it will cost about \$70,000 annually, with the city paying \$30,000 of those costs each year, Lowe said.

Brochu said the remaining funds will come from fundraisers and sponsors.

Riviera Beach has been discussing a community boating program since 2007, with the idea of getting more African-Americans interested in the city's marina industry. Talks, however, have stalled over the years.

"It's sad that folks had to miss out on this because of politics," Lowe said. "We're making a big investment in our community, and this program is essential."

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