

RIVERWATCH NEWSLETTER

Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association (CRCA)

CRCA Info-line 433-4636 (x2722)

October, 1996

Editors: John Capece & Oleg Kisselev

ANOTHER WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT?

By Jim Haggart, President

We're reading and hearing lots of discussion about creating a sixth water management district in Southwest Florida, to replace South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) in Lee and Collier counties, and parts of Charlotte, Hendry, Glades and Monroe counties. Is it a good idea?

Those advocating the change correctly point out that Lee and Collier residents pay a lot more in taxes to SFWMD than they get back in services. One local newspaper recently estimated that for every ten dollars we send to the district's headquarters in West Palm Beach, seven either stay there to nourish the bureaucracy, or are dispensed elsewhere in the district. Only three find their way back to us.

Supporters of a new district also point out that SFWMD hasn't responded properly to last year's flooding conditions in North Ft. Myers, and say that these problems would receive more effective attention if there were a locally-managed district.

If these were the only considerations, it wouldn't be hard to make up one's mind. But they aren't. On the other side of the coin, members of CRCA should consider the following:

Would local management of a new district do a better job of protecting the Caloosahatchee and the area's other natural resources? Probably not. Perhaps the most reliable indicator is the track record of the existing local public bodies which have that responsibility now, foremost among them the County Boards. In Lee County, at least, that record is undistinguished at best.

Would managers of a new district be more responsible? Although presumably they'd be appointed in Tallahassee by the Governor, they'd still be subject to the same local political and economic pressures.

Is SFWMD really responsible for fixing the problems in North Ft. Myers and south Lee County? Not if you believe that the people responsible for making the mess in the first place should also be responsible for cleaning it up. While we are certainly sympathetic with the human misfortune and economic loss which last year's flooding caused, we should bear in mind that most of those problems came about because of short-sighted zoning and land use decisions. These decisions were made by local city and county officials, not SFWMD, and can be corrected only by the same officials. You don't have to be a clairvoyant to figure out that the district is a very convenient scapegoat for these officials.

Are this area's natural resources and water management concerns really local problems, capable of local solutions? Many are not. Two of our foremost concerns about the Caloosahatchee are excellent examples: (1) artificially high, low and erratic flows in the River, and the abnormal salinity conditions which are directly related to them; and (2) water quality. The decisions most responsible for the first problem -- the artificial manipulation of the volume and timing of releases from Lake Okechobee -- are made ultimately by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at its faraway headquarters in Washington, D.C., or by its Division Engineer in Atlanta, or, at the nearest, in its District Headquarters in Jacksonville.

The actions which affect the quality of the River as it flows past Ft. Myers and into San Carlos Bay are taken throughout the whole Caloosahatchee watershed -- arguably as far away as Kissimmee and as near as Ft.

IT'S OFFICIAL...

The Internal Revenue Service has determined that CRCA is an exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. That means that your contributions to Riverwatch are *tax-deductible!*

Myers -- by urban stormwater drainage; by the natural growth and decay of vegetation, by irrigation and household water diversions; by excess fertilizers and pesticides from crops, lawns, and other managed areas; by industrial wastes seeping into canals, and by the leaching of treated municipal sewage into aquifers and streams. These issues of the River don't limit themselves to our man-made political boundaries. They must be addressed on a watershed-wide basis, and the present district is better situated to do that than the proposed new district would be.

A local newspaper recently asked me what our position was on the proposed new district. I said we were "ambivalent", which is hardly an inspiring stance for CRCA or its leader! We need to adopt a more decisive position on this issue. *Let us know what you think!* Call our hotline at 433-4636 extension 2772, and give us your opinion and your reasons for it. We'll report your input and discuss this issue again the next edition of the newsletter. [This article contains Jim Haggart's personal viewpoints. The CRCA Board of Directors has not taken an official position on the issue of a sixth water management district.]

Conservation 2020- A Lee County Referendum

What is Conservation 2020?

Conservation 2020 is a Lee County citizens organization which has been working for months to develop a plan for land acquisition in Lee County. The organization has garnered broad based support from developers, civic organizations, environmental groups, business people, students and citizens from all walks of life. The initiative is concerned with protecting and providing natural wild areas to preserve the quality of life of this area, for future generations.

Do we need to preserve more land?

Lee County is one of the fastest growing counties in the nation and in Florida, yet Dade (Miami) and Broward (Ft. Lauderdale) counties have **five to eight times** more land area preserved than Lee County does!

Nineteen counties in Florida have land acquisition programs including all of the southeast coastal counties. In turn, these counties have a high percentage of land in preservation. The west coast counties, which have historically been slower to develop, do not have land preservation programs in place. Lee

County has only 10% of its land area in preserve. Collier County which has 57% of their land in conservation has a similar ballot issue this election because they realize that if the land is not acquired now it may not be available for preservation later.

Informed voters should be familiar with the key facts and myths about this initiative. **Myth 1** - Government will take people's property. No. The initiative is a *willing seller* program which gives land owners options for managing their property. **Myth 2** - If the public purchases land for conservation it will reduce the county's tax base. Not true. Public purchases of land for conservation as permanent "greenspace" have consistently demonstrated that surrounding property values rapidly increase and offset the tax loss from the land purchased. Additional income and jobs generated by eco-tourism are linked to the availability of public "greenspace". Conservation lands equal tourism which equals income. **Myth 3** - It will cause taxes to be increased. No. The purchase of conservation lands in Lee County avoids the needs of taxpayers-dollars to be spent building roads, and providing emergency services, schools, water and sewer services to outlying areas. **Myth 4** - The preserve lands are just for birds and bugs. Not so. Conservation lands provide extremely valuable functions such as water retention, treatment, flood control, shoreline stabilization, habitat for rare and unique plant communities, wildlife, and passive recreation.

What does the referendum say?

Do you approve Lee County purchasing and managing conservation lands critical for water supply, flood protection, open space, wildlife habitat and passive recreation by the county levying an ad valorem tax of up to 0.5 (1/2) mil annually for a period not to exceed 7 years; pursuant to Ordinance 96-12?

Yes = For No = Against

Months of intensive research was conducted by the group to examine funding options for the initiative. In the end, the Lee County Commission was unwilling to place the initiative on the ballot with any other funding mechanism. The ad valorem tax has unique advantages over a sales tax. First, it allows a portion of the proceeds to be set aside for management and maintenance of the acquired lands. Second, it does not require complicated negotiations between the County and Cities regarding distributions of the collected taxes. Third, it will not require additional personnel to manage or file reports of sales tax receipts to the State. Fourth, it will raise the money needed in 7 years instead of 20, which will assure

that more land can be acquired at today's costs with matching funds from programs which may not be available in the future.

What does this mean to me?

- ♦ Preservation of wild and natural areas for future generations
- ♦ Public Safety - hurricane evacuation
- ♦ Surface and groundwater storage and management
- ♦ Increased Flood protection
- ♦ Investment in maintaining property values and protected species diversity

If you would like more information?

- ♦ Call: 482-0403
- ♦ Schedule a speaker for your civic, professional or homeowner group.

Get the facts before you go to the polls. Call 482-0403 to schedule a speaker.

If you would like to get involved:

- ♦ Donate your time or money to the Conservation 2020 Effort

Call 482-0403 or mail donations to: PO Box 07278, Ft. Myers, FL 33919

Oxbows & Riverlore

Exciting things have been happening on the Caloosahatchee! Projects committee member Charles Foster and Technical Committee co-chairs Rae Ann Scholle and John Capece have been hard at work developing a historical/ecological/natural resources river cruise series. The series will be designed to educate the public about this important resource and how its history connects us to the past.

The brochure we have been developing for the series includes information about the creation of the Caloosahatchee valley, oxbows of the Caloosahatchee, water quality of the Caloosahatchee, and an explanation of how various features of the landscape came to be called by the names we use today.

It is our hope that by promoting an understanding of the history of the Caloosahatchee we can commit more individuals to its protection.

Financial support for this initial series has been provided by a FACEE grant administered by the Calusa Nature Center & Planetarium (CNCP). University of Florida-IFAS has provided technical information and handouts relating to river water quality and watershed land uses. We look forward to continued cooperation between CRCA, UF-IFAS and CNCP in providing this river cruise series to our members and the public.

In this issue of RIVERWATCH we offer our readers an excerpt from the brochure which explains the creation of the Caloosahatchee valley we know today.

Legacy of the Caloosahatchee

By Charles Edgar Foster & Rae Ann Scholle

The features of the Caloosahatchee basin we know today were formed by Pliocene and Pleistocene sediments deposited by fluctuating sea levels over one million years ago. As sea levels receded, a mainland emerged with a series of lakes connected by wet prairies in a shallow valley which stretched between an inland sea and a gulf. From a tiny lake in the center of the valley, a water fall fed a tortuously crooked river which flowed to the gulf.

Archaeological records indicate the first humans inhabited this region over ten thousand years ago. The lush flora and fauna of the valley provided an ample supply of food, clothing and shelter for the original inhabitants.

The earliest written accounts of this region were supplied by the Spanish explorers who arrived in the early 1500's. They named the inhabitants the *Calusa* and the *Mayaimi*; the waterway, *River of the Calusa*, the inland

You Can Help to Make Your Riverwatch Newsletter More Interesting!

If you have any novel ideas of how to improve the Newsletter, or interesting information or materials that you think may be included in the next issue, please share it with us by sending it to:

PO Box 08004, Ft. Myers, FL 33908, or call our hotline at 433-4636 (x2722)

Attention Members!

The University of Florida/IFAS and South Florida Water Management District are preparing their first cooperative research study on the Caloosahatchee. Riverwatch has been designated a Non-peer Review entity which requires that our membership review research proposals and plans. To do this we need to create a diverse panel of our members to review and comment on projects and proposals. We need non-technical as well as technical participation. This will be an ongoing process which will require a few hours a month. We need your participation. If you are interested in serving please call Rae Ann Scholle at: 941-731-6602

sea the *Mayaimi Lagoon* (Big Water) and the peninsula, *Florida* for the variety of flora found here. Many of their names remain in use today.

The Seminole, who were southeastern Creek Indians, fled to this area from Alabama and Georgia in the mid 1700's. Like the Spanish, the Seminole left a legacy of many place names. The *Mayaimi Lagoon* became *Lake Okeechobee*, and the river became the *Caloosahatchee*. The name *Florida* survived.

After the Civil War in the 1860's, homestead opportunities attracted many southerners and squatters to the region. Settlements were built as far south as the *Caloosahatchee*.

Twenty years later in 1881, Florida Governor William Bloxham persuaded Philadelphia toolmaker and developer, Hamilton Disston, to purchase four million acres of South Florida at twenty five cents per acre for development. The one million dollars the state received from the purchase was used to clear title for the sale of state land.

Hamilton Disston's first project in southwest Florida was to drain the land around Lake Okeechobee. He enlisted the expertise of cattlemen Jacob Summerlin and Capt. Francis Asbry Hendry to survey a route from Lake Flirt through wetlands connecting Lakes Lettuce, Bonnett and Hicpochee. At the east end of Lake Hicpochee the route followed an existing Paleo or Mayaimi Indian canal to Lake Okeechobee.

In September 1881, Hamilton Disston brought a dredge into downtown Ft. Myers to begin dredging a 48 ft. canal from Ft. Thompson (1 1/4 miles east of LaBelle) to Lake Okeechobee. The first step in the dredging was to dynamite a natural waterfall between Lake Flirt and the *Caloosahatchee*.

Despite these drainage efforts the powerful hurricanes of 1926 and 1928 caused significant flooding and loss of life at Moore Haven and Clewiston. Demand for relief from the repeated flooding reached Washington in the midst of an economic depression. The Army Corps of Engineers worked with the Flood Control District, now known as the South Florida Water Management District, to improve the regions flood control.

After the 1928 hurricane President Hoover, an engineer by training, visited the area to view the devastation and recommended assistance to prevent future flooding. In 1930, Congress appropriated money to construct the Hoover Dike around Lake Okeechobee.

As part of the flood control project, the St. Lucie River and *Caloosahatchee* were dredged and channelized creating the Cross-State Ship Channel. This channel, now known as the *Okeechobee Waterway* or *C-43 Canal*, links the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean.

The 1930's dredging of the *Caloosahatchee* straightened and deepened the channel without disrupting existing bridge crossings. The dredging included construction of a series of canals, locks and pumping stations designed to remove excess water from surrounding lands.

In the mid-1950's the channel created in the previous dredging was enlarged to a width of 250 feet and depth of 8 feet. Bridge crossings were either replaced or relocated.

Construction of the W.P. Franklin Lock and Dam, originally known as the Olga Lock, began in 1962, approximately twenty five miles upstream from the Gulf, near Olga. The main purpose of the dam was to assure a fresh water supply for much of Lee County and to prevent salt water intrusion upstream.

The dredging and construction of canals, locks and pumping stations created the world's single most sophisticated plumbing system. A system which was built specifically to redirect the natural flow of water, radically changed the historic sheet flow patterns of the southern peninsula and Everglades region.

Changes in the *Caloosahatchee* over the past 100 years were promoted to suit the immediate priorities and needs of Florida's expanding population.

The challenge for us today is to develop a vision which balances human needs while protecting and promoting the resources and natural beauty of the whole system for future generations.

FROM THE PRESIDENT:

MEET YOUR DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS

Riverwatch welcomes the following new members of the Board of Directors, who have been elected by the membership to serve until the annual meeting in 1997:

Susan Beckman, Executive Director, Calusa Nature Center & Planetarium.

Steve Boutelle, Senior Environmental Planner, Lee County Division of Natural Resources Management.

John Cassani, Resource Manager, Lee County Hyacinth Control District.

Peggy Hellenbach, Environmental Specialist, Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Keith Kibbey, Director, Lee County Environmental Labs.

Mike McCartney, Partner, American Marine Construction.

Walter Stephens, Former Director, Lee County Department of Natural Resources Management.

As you can see, the new Directors bring a wealth of diverse skills and experience to the Board. Special thanks are due to *Rae Ann Scholle*, who served as chair of the Nominating Committee.

The following persons were elected to serve another one-year term on the Board of Directors:

Pam Bowman, Planning Technician, Cape Coral Department of Community Development. Pam chairs our Projects and Events Committee.

Jim Haggart, Attorney. Jim is President of CRCA.

Butch Jones, Glades County Commissioner.

Bill McGrath, Retired. Bill is Treasurer of CRCA.

Laura O'Brien, Environmental Education Teacher, Lee County Public Schools.

Rae Ann Scholle, President, Ecosystem Specialists, Inc. Rae Ann co-chairs the CRCA Technical Committee.

Laura Wewerka, Naturalist, Calusa Nature Center & Planetarium. Laura is Secretary of CRCA.

RIVERWATCH

Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association

P.O. Box 08004

Ft. Myers, FL 33908



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