

Editorial

Lee County needs own water power

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The chances of Lee County getting its own water management board probably are nil, but it makes sense to keep pushing the idea, at least for symbolic effect.

The legislative request renews for a new generation of leaders in Tallahassee our complaint that we are still, despite recent improvements, not getting the financial and policy attention we deserve here from the South Florida Water Management District.

We are part of a vast system run by the district, including the Kissimmee River system north of Lake Okeechobee, the lake itself, the Caloosahatchee River, the huge agricultural areas south of the lake, the populous east coast cities, what's left of the Everglades and Florida Bay at the southern tip of the state.

Southwest Florida has been a place to dump excess and polluted water from Lake Okeechobee, water that can't be moved south in its natural fashion because an enormous agribusiness industry was planted square in the middle of the old flow way.

But the whole system is interconnected. Pollution from the Kissimmee and the lake obviously affect us.

That's the biggest problem at the moment, one of enormous consequence for our tourist economy and coastal environment.

Even with a basin board as a sub district with some powers, we would need the cooperation of the larger district and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers both in managing lake water and — perhaps even more importantly — in restoring some of the southward flow of excess water from the lake.

Advocates of a separate basin board realize all that, but they are convinced that a basin board —similar to the one set up for Collier County —could get Lee County a better deal from the district.

Lee County commissioners voted unanimously recently to seek legislation creating a board to represent Lee County, and perhaps Glades and Hendry counties as well.

The county claims Lee will pay \$52 million to the district this year and get only \$3.5 million in projects that benefit Lee.

The district strenuously protests this analysis, saying that projects inside and outside the county costing \$133 million will benefit the county this year. Undoubtedly, the \$3.5 million figure under represents the benefit, but we're not convinced the return is fair yet.

A separate basin board would not solve all our problems, but it would guarantee Lee County official representation in West Palm. Right now we don't even have a representative on the district board.

We need a place at the table. Urge county commissioners to push the idea, and urge our leaders in Tallahassee to respond.