

## Lee joins effort urging that voters elect Water Management boards

By Charlie Whitehead

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The South Florida Water Management District will collect more than \$125 million in property taxes from the citizens of Lee and Collier counties during fiscal 2007. The property tax rate helps drive a \$1.3 billion budget and was set by Kevin McCarty, Irela Bague, Miya Burt-Stewart, Alice Carlson, Michael Collins, Nicolas Gutierrez, Lennart Lindahl, Harkley Thornton and Bubba Wade.

Don't bother checking your sample ballot. You didn't vote for any of them.

That, say Lee and Collier county commissioners, is just not right. Any public body that collects property taxes and handles that much taxpayer money - the district also borrowed \$1.8 billion for Everglades restoration projects this year - should be elected, not appointed. Lee commissioners unanimously added their voices to Collier's on Tuesday, urging the rest of the state's cities and counties to throw out the "tyranny" of the unelected water management district boards.

The board seats in Florida's five water management districts are filled by governor's appointment. There was an aborted effort during the 2006 legislative session to change that, but a bill calling for elected boards never saw the light of day.

"Our country's Founding Fathers firmly believed that taxation without adequate representation amounts to tyranny," said Collier Commission Chairman Frank Halas in a letter his Lee counterparts received this week.

Governor's appointees, Halas says, can become bound to special interests.

"Elected officials are generally accountable to a larger, diverse constituency," he says. "Financial accountability is almost always better served through elected representatives, who must regularly justify their decisions to spend tax dollars before the voters."

Lee commission Chairwoman Tammy Hall has worked closely with the district, but agrees.

"There's way too much money, and the accountability needs to be there," she said. "What was millions is now billions."

In the 2005 tax year, the South Florida Water Management District collected about \$101 million from Lee and Collier. Even though the tax rates did not change, the proceeds, driven by increases in assessed values, jumped by 25 percent.

Lee County, like the rest of the district, is in the Okeechobee Basin, and pays a rate of just less than 70 cents for every \$1,000 of taxable

property value. Collier is in the Big Cypress Basin, and pays a rate of just less than 53 cents.

A home with a taxable value of \$200,000 pays \$139.40 in Lee County. The same home would pay \$105.30 in Collier.

State Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, herself a former South Florida Water Management District board member, said increased accountability is needed, but she'd stop short of supporting an elected board.

"And here's the reason," she said. "The worst thing we could have on that board would be to have nine attorneys who don't know anything about water, or the environment, or biology, or people who were there for political reasons."

Lee Commissioner Ray Judah said those reasons are exactly why the board should be elected.

"That's exactly what's occurring today. Those today are there strictly for political reasons," he said.

Judah points specifically at U.S. Sugar Vice President Bubba Wade, appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush in 2005.

Williams says agriculture should be represented on the board, however.

"Like it or not we've got to have an ag representative on there," she said. "By having members elected it takes away the certainty of a cross-section of all the competing interests. We've got to have them all."

Hall says she's worked cooperatively with the district in her two years on the board, but there's a lack of public trust and confidence in the district.

"Even for the good things they do, they just get pounded on by the media and by the people," she said.

Having board members directly accountable to voters would help change that, she said.

"There is certainly a difference between appointed and elected. We have to make sure people have confidence in the decisions that are being made. Maybe an elected board will do that," Williams said.

She said she does want increase accountability. She says she'd like to see each district's proposed budget and tax rate go to House and Senate appropriations chairs for a review before they go on to the governor.

"At least then there are elected officials looking at it," she said.

She does understand people are frustrated with the district, and there is an accountability problem.

"People don't feel like anyone is listening and they don't have anyone to fire," Williams said.

That said, she still believes the positions should be appointed and not elected.

"It is truly taxation without representation," she said. "But I think that's a much more prudent way to get representation with taxation."