Legislators: Lake O will be a state priority

Local officials tell Lee's legislative delegation improving water quality is their top concern and chief funding need.

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Lee County has another ally in the battle to control excessive releases from Lake Okeechobee, and this one should have some power to change things.

Florida's Senate president is very interested in the issue of water quality, local legislators said Monday during a Lee County legislative delegation meeting in Fort Myers.

That's good news for Lee County, where four of county officials' top five funding priorities focus on improving water quality.

Three county commissioners delivered to local legislators the county's priorities, which total $2.25 million in funding from the state to clean up local creeks. Commissioner Ray Judah also asked legislators to allow the county to set up its own basin board rather than continue to get what he said is an unfair return on its contributions to the South Florida Water Management District.

This year the county has contributed $53 million to the district and will only see $3.5 million returned to Lee for water projects, Judah said.

A separate basin board would allow all of the county's money, along with dollars from other counties within the Caloosahatchee River basin, to go to projects that directly affect the area's water quality, Judah said. One example would be the construction of a filtration marsh at a planned reservoir in Hendry County, which is expected to hold excess water from the Okeechobee River.

"We can certainly put that money to good use in terms of treatment and storage," Judah said.

Water-quality issues will not fall on deaf ears during the coming session, said Sen. Burt Saunders, R-Naples.

"Cleaning up that water is a top priority for the Senate president," Saunders said. "I think you are going to see some real progress in the next two years."

As one of the chairmen of the Joint Legislative Committee on Everglades Oversight, Sen. Dave Aronberg, D-Greenacres, said he will make sure the issue of polluted releases from Lake Okeechobee is at the top of the committee's agenda.

"I don't think the water release issue was previously on the legislature's agenda," Aronberg said. "I think that is going to change."

The shift in focus is in part due to the west coast's efforts to bring the issue to the forefront, Commissioner Bob Janes said.

"I think the legislature is becoming more aware of the nature and depth of the problem," Janes said.

Excessive releases of polluted water from Lake Okeechobee over the past few years have contributed to the death of the area's seagrasses and fisheries. The fresh-water releases, high in nitrogen and phosphorus, feed algae blooms, including red tide, some scientists believe.

"Our whole economy is based on tourism," Janes said. "If they come here and smell dirty beaches, we lose that."

At the same time county leaders pressure the state for help with lake releases, they are working to fix local issues with pollution in creeks, which contribute to water-quality problems in Estero Bay, the Caloosahatchee River and the Gulf of Mexico.

The county is asking for $2.25 million from the state to go toward about $8 million in planned improvements to the Powell Creek, Mulloch Creek, Popash Creek, and the Caloosahatchee Creeks Preserve.

"We have to make sure we're not contributing to the problem," Janes said.

The state, through the Department of Environmental Protection, has made water-quality issues a high priority. Next year, the DEP will release pollution limits for rivers and creeks, which the county must meet.

"By partnering with the state, the county can get a bigger bang for its buck," said Kurt Harclerode, operations manager for Lee County Natural Resources.

Bonita Springs is also interested in the topic.

During the city's presentation, Councilman Ben Nelson asked legislators to pass fertilizer regulations. The regulations would allow only slow-released fertilizers, which are less harmful to the environment, to be sold in stores.

"We believe it is something to do to avoid spending big money on water-quality projects," Nelson said.

Lee County also asked for $3.6 million from the state for a behavioral triage center, which would support a diversion program to keep people who commit minor crimes from overcrowding the county's courts and jails, Janes said.

"We want to try to keep people out of the court system and out of jail," said Janes, who said every dollar spent on treatment saves the county $7 later.

More than 40 other groups, representing public and private interests, also requested action from legislators.

Don Eslick, chairman of the Estero Council of Community Leaders, asked for funding to help
complete the widening of the last section of U.S. 41 in Estero.

Bill Merwin, president of Florida Gulf Coast University asked for a $16 million increase in state funding to help his institution deal with growth. FGCU has 8,300 students enrolled this year and expects 9,500 to enroll next year. With that kind of growth, the university will serve 25,000 students in 10 years, Merwin said.

Of the legislative budget request, $4.6 million will support the employment of about 50 new professors, he said.

Merwin also asked the state to continue to support a matching funds program for capital improvements by providing $7.5 million for buildings and infrastructure.

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