

Commissioners want to pull county out of water district

By Charlie Whitehead
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Lee County commissioners will ask the state Legislature to allow the county to withdraw from the South Florida Water Management District and create a Caloosahatchee Basin Board.

Monday, frustrated and angry commissioners agreed unanimously to push for the move. Commissioner Tammy Hall argued against the move, saying she feels progress has been made since she came on the board two years ago, and Commissioner Frank Mann, himself a former district board member as well as a state legislator, said he feels the proposal has little chance of passing. Both went along with the idea to express their own continuing frustrations with the district.

Chairman Bob Janes said working with the district is no use.

"It hasn't worked," he said. "I'm absolutely and categorically furious that they won't even talk about treatment for water coming down the Caloosahatchee. I've about had it with the conciliatory approach. They do it their way and their way period."

Judah was angered by recent comments by district board member Bubba Wade, a U.S. Sugar vice president, who said agriculture in the Everglades Agricultural Area is a public use and should be allowed to use public lands. Judah feels the district and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manage the district for the benefit of ag interests to the detriment of coastal environments. "It's not in our best interests to have him on the governing board and it's not in our best interests to continue to try to get along with them," he said.

The local legislative delegation will hold local hearings on Dec. 18. New Commissioner Brian Bigelow, who ran on a platform of fighting the district, said having the county be part of the district is a "sick relationship." "It's very clear to me it's us versus them," he said. Locals have blamed polluted releases from Lake Okeechobee for harmful algae blooms that have devastated estuaries.

The management of the lake alternately sends too much or too little water down the river, causing nutrient imbalances in the wet season and saltwater intrusion in the dry season.

Judah has campaigned to restore flows south of the lake through the EAA. He points to the \$53 million the district collected from Lee taxpayers and to \$3 million worth of projects budgeted here. "That's \$53 million primarily used to drain and irrigate sugar cane fields," he said. "They're using Lee County taxpayers' money to destroy the estuaries."

"That mindset is pervasive at the district and in the Corps of Engineers and industry in the EAA," he said. "They feel it's their inalienable right to use public lands for their own private gain." Bigelow said working with the district is a losing battle.

"This is not premature," he said. "I'm terribly afraid the day has come and gone that we can turn back the damage." Mann said the county request has little chance of legislative approval, and doubted withdrawing would solve the county's problems.

"The major problem I have here is the ill you describe has nothing to do with the cure you prescribe," he said. "Policy decisions will continue to be made by the water management district governing board." Judah said at least the district wouldn't be using Lee County money to benefit sugar growers at the county's expense.

"It's so blatantly obvious," he said. "Yes, I'm emotional. Yes, I'm passionate. I'd submit everybody in this community should be."