

Water district cleans own house after ex-staffer works for violator

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District water managers are working on an agreement that would force a company involved in the unauthorized excavation of district land to restore the property and pay fines and penalties.

The district also tightened its ethics policy after an investigation found the former head of the agency's west coast office became a consultant to Ronto Group Inc. (the company involved in the excavation) and other firms after leaving her post.

The case involves the excavation of up to 25,000 truckloads of fill by Ronto from 121.7 acres at the east end of Bonita Beach Road.

The dirt could be worth up to \$1.8 million wholesale and \$10 million retail.

South Florida Water Management District General Counsel Sheryl Wood said she is working with her staff on the consent order.

The issue should go before the district's governing board in January, she said.

Wood said the district may ask outside attorneys for advice should Ronto reject the agreement. The board in October gave approval to hire outside attorneys.

Ronto President Jim Reinders could not be reached for comment Tuesday. In a previously prepared statement, he said, "our actions have been entirely proper."

District Inspector General John Williams' investigation determined the excavation was the result of slipshod practices in the west coast office.

Ronto had no valid authorization, permits or contract to do the work, although the company was given the nod by local water management officials with no authority to approve the project.

The project involved digging four ponds eight to 10 acres in size and from eight to 12 feet deep to provide a habitat for fish and water fowl.

Yet the only plans that could be found were sketches made on aerial photographs, Williams said.

He said he found one pond was 14 feet deep, which had no environmental value, and work had started on a second pond when the district halted the project.

Ronto, the investigation found, did the work to ease the effects of the firm's adjacent development and for fill needed to build Bonita Beach Road Extension.

Agency officials issued a stop-work order Aug. 22 after Lee County attorneys told them about the excavation.

Williams said Jacque Rippe, who was director of the southwest office, told investigators the project had significant public benefit because the fill went into building roads to be turned over to the county.

Williams' investigation also found that Rippe acted as a consultant for Ronto.

Under agency policy, no former employee for two years shall represent for pay a person or business before the district on matters the former employee was personally and substantially involved with, Wood said.

That includes any proceedings before the district board or personal communications with the district staff or advisory board members, including filing documents or writing letters on behalf of the client, the policy states.

Rippe said she doesn't believe she violated the policy. She said Ronto asked her about information concerning south Lee County because of her experience there.

Rippe said she did not represent them before the district board.

She did appear before the board on behalf of a Hendry County farm earlier this year, Wood said.

At that meeting, Chip Merriam, deputy executive director for water resources, said he told Rippe to review the policy.

"I suggested she go back and review it to keep herself out of any potential conflicts," he said.

Rippe said she did and believes she did nothing that was in conflict with the policy.

This is the first time problems with the policy have surfaced since it was adopted in 1997, Wood said.

As a result, contact between former employees and staff is being closely monitored (including appearances before the board) to avoid potential conflicts, she said.

If problems persist, Wood said the agency may ask the Legislature to adopt civil penalties to encourage compliance.