

State sets aside \$3.6 million to improve region's waterways

By Eric Staats
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The amount is more like a sprinkle than a good soaking, but Southwest Florida is in line for more money for projects to improve water quality in its rivers, bays and estuaries.

During its 2006 session in Tallahassee, the state Legislature approved \$3.6 million to be spread over five watershed initiatives and restoration projects in Collier and Lee counties. The projects still must survive Gov. Jeb Bush's line-item veto pen.

The legislative approval compares to more than \$11.6 million that the South Florida Water Management District had requested for those projects - an \$8 million shortfall that means some local priorities will go unfunded.

In Collier County, for example, the water management district requested \$3 million. Legislators approved \$1.3 million.

"It will help, but it will certainly leave a lot of issues out there," said Gene Calvert, the county's stormwater management director.

Legislators approved \$1 million for the Lower Charlotte Harbor Watershed Initiative, \$800,000 for the Naples Bay Watershed Initiative, \$800,000 for the Estero Bay Watershed Initiative, \$500,000 for the Big Cypress Basin Watershed Initiative and \$500,000 for Caloosahatchee River Restoration.

Decisions about how to divvy up each pot of money have yet to be made.

The availability of matching funds and the status of each project will be taken into account, said Liz Abbott, lead project manager with the water management district in Fort Myers.

The final decision will be up to the water management district with input from local government officials, she said.

The Western Collier Partnership for Restoration, a group of local and federal government agencies, met in 2005 to list its priorities.

The water management district passed along the wish list in its annual request for money from the state Legislature.

Coming out on top was a project to run central sewer lines to Plantation Island, a subdivision of mobile homes surrounded by Everglades National Park and served by individual septic systems.

Everglades City would take the subdivision's wastewater, treat it and use it to boost the city's supply of reclaimed water, project engineer Russ Johnson said.

Ridding the low-lying area of septic tanks will reduce potential pollution problems from leaky systems, he said.

A 2003 estimate put the cost of the project at \$1.3 million. The Western Collier Partnership for Restoration group asked for \$250,000 for the project.

Making No. 2 on the group's list was a project to turn a grassy strip along Broad Avenue South in Naples into a park-like filter marsh to cleanse the neighborhood's runoff before it goes into Naples Bay.

Naples Natural Resources Manager Mike Bauer has billed the Broad Avenue project as a "showplace item."

The project still is in the study stage, but conceptual plans show a series of interconnected lakes, landscaped with native plants and lined with walking paths.

The legislative request included \$350,000 for the project, but the project's final cost has yet to be determined, Bauer said. An earlier version of the project, not including the filter marsh, was estimated to cost almost \$450,000.

The Broad Avenue project tied for second with a Collier County drainage project called the Lely Area Stormwater Improvement Project in East Naples.

The project is estimated to cost \$62 million and take more than five years to finish, Calvert said.

Almost \$600,000 for the project was included in the water management district request to the Legislature.

Other Collier County projects further down on the priority list – and possibly too low to get a share of the \$3 million – would plan flood control in Golden Gate Estates, restore flowways south of Immokalee and improve drainage in the Davis Triangle.

Despite the unfunded priorities, Southwest Florida water projects are getting more attention from the state Legislature in recent years, said Clarence Tears, director of the Big Cypress Basin, the local arm of the water management district.

"Over the last three years, we've done really well locally," he said.

The Naples Bay Watershed Initiative, for example, received \$1 million in 2003, \$2.1 million in 2004 and \$800,000 in 2005.

In 2006, the water management district's largest request for initiatives in Southwest Florida was \$5 million for Caloosahatchee River restoration. The budget bill headed to Bush includes only \$500,000 for that line item.

Water releases from Lake Okeechobee have been blamed for killing sea grasses and other marine life and triggering destructive algae blooms in the Caloosahatchee River.