

**Sen. Saunders to ask state to fund project to aid water flow south.**

**By EMILIE ALFINO, ealfino@breezenewspapers.com**

State Sen. Burt Saunders (R-Naples) told Sanibel City Council on Tuesday before a packed house that he plans to ask the State of Florida to fund, as a loan to the Army Corps of Engineers, an Everglades restoration project known as Mod Waters that will "unplug" the portion of the Tamiami Trail blocking the flow of water south to the Everglades.

"There's been significant disappointment in the level of funding we have received from our federal partners on this project," Saunders told city council.

He said that became abundantly clear to him when he took a helicopter tour over Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades on Sept. 29, accompanied by Sanibel Mayor Carla Johnston. He saw, he said, "what the Corps of Engineers should be doing and they're not."

Mod Waters - short for "modification of water flow" - was authorized in 1989 and has yet to be funded. The federal Water Resources Development Act legislation that authorized the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan(CERP) states that the Mod Waters project must be completed before several other CERP projects can move forward.

"Water is backed up from entering the Everglades because of the Tamiami Trail, and a major component of Everglades restoration is to restore the flow south," Saunders explained. "There's a lot of work being done in the Kissimmee River basin. There's a lot of work being done south of Lake Okeechobee. But the Corps has failed to even begin the project at the southern end, which is what needs to be done to let water ultimately flow into the Everglades."

Saunders said the \$330 million project will take four to five years to complete.

"The longer we delay, the worse the problem's going to be for us over here. It's important to what we're all trying to accomplish; that is, the restoration of the Everglades and for this area to very significantly stop the releases of water into the Caloosahatchee River, he said."

Johnston said last week's helicopter tour made evident to her one reason the problems of the Caloosahatchee River take a very low priority in the plans of the Army Corps and the South Florida Water Management District.

"The helicopter trip was interesting because it provided an opportunity to see the big picture," Johnston said. "The flyover made it painfully clear that the Caloosahatchee River is way up in the top corner off in left field, you could almost literally say, in terms of looking at the map. When they work on their projects, they're all located pretty much elsewhere in the district. It seems to be evident how out of sight and out of mind the Caloosahatchee River has been, even though we have become the spillway and the disposal site for excess water from Lake Okeechobee. I'm delighted Senator Saunders is interested in taking more

initiative in the Florida State Legislature this year. That's going to be very welcome."

In 2000, Saunders filed the legislation to start state funding of the Everglades Restoration Plan to the tune of \$100 million a year for each of 10 years. That funding doesn't expire until 2009, but Saunders is drafting a renewal of that legislation to provide another \$1 billion over the next 10 years.

"It's important to get the backup legislation into process so we'll have a continuing flow of resources to meet the state's commitment for Everglades restoration. We want to continue to let our federal partners know that the state is fully committed to continuing this project and funding it fully."

The senator took questions and listened to comments from council members and later from the public.

Vice-mayor Mick Denham told Saunders he believed special interest groups were driving the decisions being made about the water problems in Southwest Florida.

"It's getting worse," Denham said. "Most people just want to push it away as not being an issue, but I'm afraid it's the issue that bothers me most. And I don't think you can solve these [water] issues until somebody comes to grips with the special interest groups."

Saunders said all anyone can do is bring more awareness to the issue.

"There's obviously no question that special interest groups do have a significant amount of influence on what happens in Tallahassee," Saunders responded. "That's obviously no secret. Whether that can be overcome is a whole other story. What we can do, though, is bring more awareness to this issue, and that we will do. Whether that will have a positive impact or not, only time will tell."

Sanibel resident Peter Pappas offered his opinion on that topic.

"Government is a funny institution," Pappas said. "It is proactive for special interests and reactive to citizens' needs. Sometimes that proactive activity makes it impossible to serve the interests of ordinary citizens."

One group that lobbies on behalf of the environment, People United to Restore Our Rivers and Estuaries (PURRE), was out in force at the meeting. PURRE Executive Director Mary Rawl directed Saunders' attention to the people in the audience wearing PURRE buttons, just a few of the groups' 800-plus members. They constituted a large part of the standing-room-only crowd in Mackenzie Hall.

"We're doing a follow-up on the progress of the [Caloosahatchee] river," Rawl said. "Unfortunately, the river has gotten worse in the past year."

Three groups have re-nominated the river to appear again on American Rivers' list of the country's Most Endangered Rivers, according to Rawl. It ranked seventh in 2006. If it is listed in 2007, it will be

the first river to appear on the list two years in a row, Rawl said.

"The news is not good," she said.

Rawl took advantage of Tuesday's opportunity to bring water quality issues to Saunders' attention. She said all criteria by which Florida's water quality is judged are being eroded.

In addition, a variety of proposed changes to federal regulations protecting water quality will make Florida waters easier to pollute, according to Rawl. "The citizens of Florida have the same right to the conditions promised by the Clean Water Act that the citizens in the other 49 states have," Rawl said. "No other state has taken such extreme measures to avoid compliance with the Clean Water Act that we are experiencing in Florida. That is a disgrace."

PURRE will join forces with the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) to prepare briefing papers on the applicable legislation, particularly the effort to change the way water is classified, such as "drinkable" or "safe to harvest shellfish," or "fishable and swimmable." The third category may be split into five to 10 subsets, Rawl said.

"Essentially, the Caloosahatchee will be reclassified from fishable/swimmable to an industrial canal. And that is not acceptable," Rawl concluded.

Rae Ann Wessel, SCCF's Natural Resource Policy Director, said, "The proof of water quality degradation is in the fact that during the last 30 years we've had more regulation and we've had more degradation than we've had in the past. And that's documented."

Wessel explained the Impaired Waters Rule that Rawl referred to earlier. It's a federal regulation that will set Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) for various bodies of water, thereby limiting the amount of nutrients allowed to enter each body of water.

"It's a very important standard," Wessel said.

Of the changes proposed for allowable designated uses is adding additional sub-categories including "fishable/splashable" rather than "fishable/swimmable," among others.

"Are we really serious about this? Are we really going to take water quality standards and degrade them so we will be saying to the world - the Tourist Development Council will love this - that full body contact [with the water] and ingestion of fish is not recommended?" Wessel asked, "That's a great standard. That sounds like we're doing a great job."

Wessel and Rawl also warned of something new the Environmental Protection Agency is recommending: pollutant trading. Such a regulation would allow heavy polluters to trade credits with entities that aren't polluting.

"So you don't really get a net loss of pollution but you do make it look like it's not a problem," Wessel said.

SCCF will be recommending statewide public hearings on these initiatives to allow all Floridians to make comments on these proposals.

At least one person in the audience did not sound optimistic after the senator's visit.

"You feel better. The senator was here and he took notes," Pappas commented. "We are possibly losing the single greatest asset that 7 to 8 million people in South Florida have. We're not asking for anything. We're not asking to increase Social Security benefits or do more with Medicare. We are asking that we stop destroying the principal asset of half the state. It's going to take a generation to fix this because the very people who are fixing it are the ones who caused the problem in the first place.

"There aren't enough people in this room or in this part of the state who are here to protest on their own behalf the loss of this precious asset," Pappas continued. "No matter how many senators come, no matter how many congressmen come, we can't solve this because it is a Catch-22. Government operates this way: proactive to special interests and reactive to citizens. That was true yesterday, it's true today. The only question is, will it be true tomorrow?"