

Water district rep faces tough questions from Sanibel & Captiva Republican Club.

Sally McPherson of the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) made a brief presentation Sept. 7 to the Sanibel & Captiva Republican Club and then took questions she admitted she had been dreading.

With good reason. The first question started this way: "Everyone agrees that the management of Lake Okeechobee has been a dismal failure," and they got tougher from there.

The club required members to submit their questions in advance. Club President Paul Reynolds read them to McPherson, who's been with the SFWMD for 18 years. No cross-talk was allowed to avoid turning the meeting into a debate. Reynolds told the audience at the beginning of the meeting, "Sally's a cheerful person and I am personally going to see that she leaves this meeting in that same condition."

McPherson called her presentation, "Water Management 101: A Civics Lesson" and attempted to explain the workings of a water management district.

"If you understand the nature of the beast of water management, you can learn to work within the framework to achieve your goals," she said.

Water management districts were created by legislation and are unique to Florida. The SFWMD reports to the governor, who appoints its nine board members and oversees its budget, and to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The SFWMD is the largest and oldest of the five water management districts in the state and is the local sponsor of Army Corps of Engineers' projects. It covers 16 counties that are home to half of Florida's population. Its 1,800-square-mile territory includes 1,800 miles of canals and rivers that would stretch from Sanibel to Maine, McPherson said, as well as more than 400 structures and 40 major pumping stations. Its 1,700 employees try to do their jobs based on sound science, good planning and an excellent work ethic, according to McPherson.

The district is responsible for water supply and allocation and for protecting Florida's water quality and natural systems, as well as for flood protection.

These interests often compete and conflict, McPherson said.

The people listening to her presentation obviously were aware of that fact, as shown by their questions. They also didn't seem to think the SFWMD was doing its job.

First they asked why the district is building reservoirs to store Lake Okeechobee water rather than cleaning up the lake. McPherson said the reservoirs -- A-1 and C43 among them -- will allow the district to store water. But the C43 West reservoir is being built without a treatment area to clean the water. McPherson said she didn't know why it was designed that way but said the water in C43 will be monitored to see whether "just sitting there" is effective at reducing the pollution.

"The idea that we're going to take nasty polluted water and incubate it in the hot Florida sun and look at it in a year and see if it possibly gets any better, well of

course it's not going to get better," Reynolds said.

McPherson suggested the people of Sanibel and Captiva start lobbying for state-owned land in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) to be turned over for public use so water can be stored there. Several times, she advocated lobbying the governor and his cabinet.

"We work for the governor," she said. It would take lobbying to get EAA land turned over, or to change the SFWMD governing board and state-level policies.

"Sally, that's a cop-out," Brown interjected.

Why not send the water south and at least spread the adversity being experienced by Southwest Florida?

"We are sending some," McPherson answered, but she said the canals to take water south don't have adequate carrying capacity even though they are in good working order and are operating as designed.

There also is legislation preventing much water from going south, McPherson explained. The 1994 Everglades Forever Act -- the result of a lawsuit settlement -- requires water going south to have lower phosphorus levels than Lake Okeechobee water, according to McPherson explained. "Sanibel doesn't have that."

"I don't want to say your only recourse is to sue," she added. "We do not set the regulation schedule for the lake. That is 100 percent Army Corps of Engineers."

Later in the meeting, Mike Valiquette questioned that statement. Valiquette is the chairman of People United to Restore our Rivers and Estuaries (PURRE) and vice-chairman of the Sanibel Planning Commission.

"The fact of the matter is, when the Army Corps needs to lower the lake, they don't care where they put [the water]. They go to the district and say, 'Where do you want it?' and the district tells them where to send it. You can't blame the Corps for the direction [water is sent]. You can only blame the Corps for the amount," Valiquette said.

The discussion was interrupted by a question from a little boy -- Trevor Seliger, son of the vice-chairman of the Lee County Republican Party, Shawn Selliger.

"What causes red tide?" he asked.

"I wish I knew," McPherson answered. "Red tide is a plant. Plants need nutrients to thrive. Once it gets to the coast where there are a lot of nutrients, it gets worse."

"You're one of the first people willing to recognize the fact that nutrients make red tide worse," Brown told McPherson. "None of the so-called experts will even recognize that the nutrients play any role in making red tide worse."

"My scientists said, Sally, it's a plant. If you feed it, it's going to grow," McPherson told Brown.

Brown said red tide and the polluted water pouring down the Caloosahatchee

towards Sanibel will cause diseases comparable to those caused by the infamous Love Canal in New York. "And when they do, shame on the people who are supposed to be the watchdogs on this, the Army Corps of Engineers and the district, because they're the ones who were responsible."

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter declared a federal emergency at Love Canal, a former chemical landfill that became a 15-acre neighborhood of the city of Niagara Falls, New York.

McPherson said the state of Florida would share that responsibility with the district and the Army Corps. "Laws can be changed. Health Department codes can be changed," she added. "All you have to do is have the political will and elected officials who are willing."

But members of the audience told her while it might be that simple, it wasn't that easy.

"Unfortunately we've got to hit them over the head with a two-by-four to get their attention," Brown said.

"Clearly, the solution is political, it is legislative," Reynolds admitted. "However, that's a card that we don't currently hold. We have half the population of the east coast, and the entrenched political connections of the agricultural industry in this state are legendary."

"It's a very, very powerful lobby," McPherson agreed.

"It would be wonderful if we could face this issue legislatively, but most of us in here, we're conservative Republicans. We're the people in power, we're the people in authority," Reynolds said. "Jeb Bush is the head of our party, and all nine members of this current board, our governor and the head of our party appointed."

"Take it up with the governor," McPherson told him.

Valiquette pointed the finger at the sugar industry. "The district can say what a wonderful job it's doing, and the Corps can say what a wonderful job it's doing, but the bottom line is, five days after Hurricane Charley went across the state of Florida, the sugar fields were bone dry," he said. "They had no problem getting the water away from the sugar fields and dumping it on other people around the state. That can't go on. It's time for the sugar people to back off, use their lands. I'm not saying take it all. Let us get the property that isn't being farmed. They've destroyed a third of their property with mismanagement of their own growing fields. A lot of people don't know that. They've farmed it so it's down to limestone."

Valiquette said there are close to 300,000 acres available that nobody wants to talk about. "They want to sell that land for development."

Finally, Valiquette said the water-management practices of the SFWMD and the Army Corps of Engineers are destroying half of the state.

"And until you stop doing it, we're going to be having meetings like this forever until there's no tourism, no business, no property value," he promised. "Five years from now, we'll be having the same discussion because that's about the time the C43

reservoir's going to come on line. And that's the only thing that you're doing. That's your solution."

McPherson is a member of the SFWMD's Intergovernmental & Community Outreach Department and works out of its Lower West Coast Service Center on McGregor Boulevard in Ft. Myers.

"I wish other people were as dedicated to stewardship of our environment and put their actions where their values are as Sanibel does," she said. "If more communities would do as Sanibel does, our state would be a better place."