

By: Estus Whitfield, Tampa Bay Times

How a Good Springs Bill Died

Once upon a time our pristine springs, lakes and streams defined Florida as a fabulous place to live and visit. But that was then and this is now.

If you have visited a spring lately, then you know that our springs and water are in serious trouble. It's hard to imagine why anyone would not want clear, free-flowing springs and abundant fresh water. It's a no-brainer, right?

Wrong.

There are tremendous demands on our water resources due to excessive pumping of groundwater by public and private utilities, agriculture, business and industry, and shameful pollution of our springs from millions of septic tanks, improperly used fertilizer, unwise land-use practices and substandard wastewater treatment plants. Yet our Legislature continues to allow those who are responsible avoid responsibility.

Think of once famous White Sulfur Springs and Kissengen Springs — they are bone-dry — and Chassahowitzka, Silver, Rainbow, Wakulla and many other springs have lost their past splendor to murky, algae-laden water and reduced flow. Ask yourself if this is the Florida you want. Then ask yourself why has this travesty gone on so long and why is it allowed to continue.

Recently, there was actually a gallant effort to protect and restore the foundation of what made Florida a unique place in the world: its springs and water resources. It began in earnest in 2012 with the "Speak Up for Silver Springs" rally. In early 2013, another call for action was sounded at the "Speak up for Wekiwa" rally at Wekiwa Springs. The Florida Conservation Coalition followed with a report and recommendations for springs protection and restoration.

Then state Sen. David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs, stepped forward and proposed significant springs legislation, SB 1576, to be considered during the 2014 session.

Sens. Charlie Dean, R-Inverness, Bill Montford, D-Tallahassee, Wilton Simpson, R-Trilby, and Alan Hays, R-Umatilla, signed on to the proposal. It was an outstanding bill that would have determined where our springs are most vulnerable to overpumping and pollution, mandated commonsense rules and projects to restore and protect them, and provided almost \$380 million in recurring funding to make it all possible.

Then enter the House of Representatives' leadership, which said "no" to springs legislation this year because next year's speaker wants to deal with it. Just be glad the Legislature doesn't control your local fire department or you might be told that your burning house can't be saved because the next shift really wants to fight the fire.

Of no surprise to those of us who have seen this movie before, when the House realized that a better excuse for inaction was needed it relegated its control of the issue to a group of business and agricultural lobbyists. These lobbyists crawl out of the crevices anytime good environmental legislation is proposed.

But don't put all the blame on the lobbyists; they are only high-paid pawns of big business, and in the case of the springs bill, the House and governor. They are simply mouthpieces for corporations and politicians who don't have the courage to do the dirty work themselves.

Among the groups that most actively worked to stop springs legislation from passing this year is the Florida Chamber of Commerce. It's hard to understand why companies like Walt Disney World, Publix, Sea World and Ron Jon Surf Shop, all of which are represented on the chamber's board of directors, would oppose a bill that aligns with the values they claim to espouse.

Unfortunately for Floridians, and the Senate sponsors who worked to build consensus on a springs bill for the better part of a year, it appears that the lobbyists and House, with the ever-silent blessing of the governor, were never negotiating in good faith as they continued to oppose the bill even after they were given everything they demanded. In the end, SB 1576 passed the Senate unanimously but was never taken up in the House and died.

So, despite a group of courageous senators, our springs and water resources continue to decline, while the House and governor and a handful of lobbyists breathe a sigh of relief. Everyone else — those who care for our natural treasures — should thank those senators who went to the wall for our springs.

At the end of the day, however, the people of Florida got hoodwinked, well-intended senators got misled and Florida's environment lost again.

But it's not over. Florida voters will have an opportunity this November to pass Amendment 1, ensuring 20 years of significant funding for protecting Florida's lands and waters, and to change the political leadership in Tallahassee. We need people who will stand tall alongside these courageous five senators for what is right.

Estus Whitfield, who lives in Tallahassee, worked in state government from 1971 to 1999 and was the principal environmental adviser to Govs. Bob Graham, Bob Martinez, Lawton Chiles and Jeb Bush. He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.

Florida Legislature: Debacle For Springs, Aquifer

Published: Tuesday, May 6, 2014 at 12:03 a.m.

Florida's state representatives and senators had a rare opportunity during the legislative session that ended Friday to take significant steps toward cleaning up the state's magnificent natural springs and protecting the valuable Floridan aquifer — the state's underground river of clean water.

The Legislature did not hold true. It caved in to special interests.

The 60-day legislative session started with such promise for saving not only our springs but, indeed, our water supply.

In an effort led by five powerful Senate committee chairmen, a bill was crafted that would have begun addressing the sources of pollution that are slowly killing the springs and also set new rules for water permitting to curb the overpumping that is draining the aquifer.

Maybe most impressive, the bill established a dedicated source of funding to ensure that cleanup of springs would not be a one-year affair, but rather a matter of ongoing state policy.

That source, a share of the state's documentary stamp revenue collected on real estate transactions, would have generated \$365 million next year. A lot could have been accomplished after years of watching the slow degradation and, in some cases, death of too many of Florida's more than 700 springs.

The public and politicians rallied around the Florida Springs and Aquifer Act. It looked as if spring and aquifer protection had a chance.

Facing obstruction from Associated Industries, the Florida Chamber of Commerce and the Florida Home Builders Association, the spring-protection bandwagon began running into roadblocks.

NEXT YEAR

None was bigger than House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel. He stated flatly that he did not want to deal with water policy this year. Wait until next year, he said.

In the end, the House, while never taking up the Senate bill on springs and the aquifer, did agree with senators to put \$30 million in the new state budget for spring restoration. Pathetic. That is \$25 million less than Gov. Rick Scott proposed.

All the while, the quality and quantity of Florida's water continues to decline. In the end, such shortsightedness will only cost more — a lot more, economically and environmentally, and to the many categories of business that rely on Florida's water for their success.

The Indian River Lagoon has been in the news over the past year because pollution from Lake

Okeechobee agricultural operations has fouled its water, killing hundreds of manatees, dolphins and other wildlife. While the state's hundreds of springs got \$30 million, the Legislature allocated \$171 million for the cleanup of the lagoon. No small factor was the fact that the lagoon sits in the district of state Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, who, as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, is the Senate's budget chief.

Five powerful senators, a unanimous vote in the Senate, widespread public support, yet no bill to protect the springs and aquifer — all because of a failure of leadership by Weatherford and Scott. Once again, special interest concerns mattered more in the state Capitol than the future of Florida's water supply.

Tampa Bay Times: *Lost chance for springs cleanup 05/05/14*

The Florida Legislature blew a historic opportunity to take a serious step in cleaning up the state's natural springs. The \$30 million lawmakers approved for next year is a token effort that will do little to slow the deterioration of these vital habitats. Lawmakers sided with developers and the fertilizer industry over public health, fishing and tourism. They ignored the impact on property values and the security of the state's drinking water supply. Instead, lawmakers cared more about political maneuvering and campaign contributions than repairing environmental damage.

The speed of the collapse of a bipartisan Senate bill on the springs was remarkable even for a Legislature that often acts as a subsidiary for the state's most powerful industries. The Senate proposal called for steering \$371 million a year toward a wide-ranging cleanup effort. The state would have allowed more local bans on using fertilizer on lawns and created protection zones around critical springs, removed old and leaky septic tanks, restored the flow and health of the springs and crafted long-term plans for cleaning up everything from wastewater plants to farming operations. State and local governments would have been true partners in prioritizing the cleanup and following through on restoration projects that would take years.

None of this caught the interest of House Speaker Will Weatherford or Gov. Rick Scott. Neither lifted a finger to save the Senate bill or even to accept the watered-down version that the Senate ultimately adopted by a unanimous vote. The final bill did away with the dedicated funding that is essential for addressing the springs on a statewide scale. The cleanup plans were pushed off for years. Rural counties where septic tank pollution is the worst got off the hook. And two areas of the Panhandle were relieved of the responsibility to provide local matching money for the cleanup effort. Even then the House refused to take up the bill. Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, said he wanted to leave that job to the incoming speaker.

The budget lawmakers sent to Scott still includes \$30 million for springs restoration — state money that could be leveraged against other sources that could raise tens of millions of dollars in additional funds for the cleanup effort. But that is not nearly enough money to meet the challenges, and the work would come without the broad framework for coordination that the Senate bill provided. Yet again, the state is relying on a halting approach that hinges on the generosity of future legislatures.

The Legislature's failure also sent an inconsistent message on environmental protection. While the Senate decimated its original springs bill and the House failed to act, lawmakers included about \$249 million in the budget for Everglades-related restoration projects. That will pay for cleanup work in the Indian River Lagoon and cover the state's share of elevated portions of Tamiami Trail, which will help move more water south into the lower Everglades. Spending nearly 10 times as much on the Everglades as the springs shows a lack of balance and priorities.

This Legislature and governor failed miserably to meet the expectations they set in advance of the session and the opportunities the recovering economy provides to pass a meaningful springs bill. They also tore at the fabric of a broad coalition that worked for months to craft an ambitious bill. The House had no reasonable excuse to wait, and Scott has no excuse for failing to champion even the stripped-down version of the Senate legislation. The best anyone can hope for is that this year's breakdown will inspire an even bolder attempt next year — after the November elections.

Editorial: Lost chance for springs cleanup 05/05/14 [Last modified: Monday, May 5, 2014 5:49pm]

Keith Perry: Efforts underway to protect springs

By Keith Perry

Special to The Sun

Published: Monday, May 5, 2014 at 6:01 a.m.

In government, we can all agree on the importance of our local springs and aquifer to the state of Florida. Springs serve a vital role in the health of our ecosystems as well as our local economies; they provide fresh water to our towns and agriculture and attract tourists from across the world. This is particularly true here in North Florida, which purports the title of the highest concentration of springs anywhere in the country.

I have always strongly believed that there is no natural resource more important than water. As such, I have made it my utmost responsibility, since first taking office in 2010, to do what is necessary to protect this resource.

As one of 120 House members, my voice is less than 1 percent of those heard in Tallahassee. It has therefore been essential that I establish relationships with key members of leadership to ensure House District 21 receives proper representation and maintains a strong voice on this and other important issues. Without these relationships, our district would be at a severe disadvantage to more urbanized districts with 40 times larger delegations.

Sen. Charlie Dean and I are the only representation in Tallahassee for Gilchrist and Dixie counties — an area with the greatest number of springs compared with any other district. This has compelled me to aggressively pursue the protection of our springs using a variety of approaches through the legislative process, which are clearly reflected by my record as state representative.

During my first legislative session in 2011, I supported the budget that dedicated over \$144 million to water conservation, restoration projects in the Everglades, cleanup from the BP oil spill, water quality assurance and water management lands. In 2012, I supported a budget that dedicated over \$189 million to spring restoration, the continuation of the spill cleanup, Everglades restoration and water conservation and quality assurance.

In 2013, I fought hard to ensure local water projects like Tumblin Creek and Cross City drinking water were allocated in the budget, which in its final passing reflected a 16.8 percent allocation used for natural resources, environmental and growth management. Over \$375 million was secured for water-related projects.

This year, I have continued to be a vocal advocate and fight for the funding of our local water projects, as well as funding for the springs located across North Florida. These projects include Tumblin Creek and the Archer waste water treatment, as well as \$25 million for springs restoration and \$5 million for best management practices in agriculture in springs recharge areas. As the session entered its final days, I worked to ensure these items remained in the budget.

In regards to my support of springs legislation, I feel a deep responsibility to protect our natural resources. This session I joined with Rep. Elizabeth Porter and co-sponsored the resolution for Springs Protection Awareness Month, which designates April as springs protection month in the Florida. I also co-sponsored HB 1313, as it is my desire to see a springs bill pass that will provide for comprehensive springs restoration.

In addition to legislative and budget support, I have worked hand in hand with department heads and agencies over the years to support the development of new and innovative ways to protect and preserve our springs. Specifically, I have met with the commissioner of agriculture about his new initiative relating to best management practices for agriculture. I have also been in constant contact with the Suwannee River Water Management District to support its efforts for restoration and conservation of our springs. Recent projects include the GRU aquifer recharge project and the Ichetucknee springshed water quality improvement project.

The Suwannee River Water Management District has been working with the Department of Environmental Protection to implement best management practices. They have invested \$900,000 to help farmers implement them in our area. In addition, the district has set aside \$887,000 to partner with agricultural producers, which in turn has saved an estimated 2.65 million gallons of water per day and to reduce nitrogen loads by an estimated 1,187,000 pounds per year.

These are just a few examples of the ongoing projects in our area that we are working on, together with our agriculture producers, to help protect our springs. I will continue to support efforts like these that will improve both our natural ecosystem, as well as continue to keep our economy healthy.

I want to express my appreciation for the communications I have received from many of my constituents. It is encouraging for me to hear from so many people who are not just talking about change, but getting out and doing the hard work to see this change become reality. I encourage all of my constituents to please continue to write, call or stop by my office to share your concerns, as my door is always open. My commitment to the springs initiative will not waver, and I believe that when we work together we can affect real change in our community.

Keith Perry is a Republican from Gainesville representing House District 21, which includes parts of Alachua, Dixie and Gilchrist counties.

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IN OUR OPINION

Editorial: The springs debacle

Published: Sunday, May 4, 2014 at 6:30 a.m.

Florida lawmakers had a rare opportunity during the just completed legislative session to take significant steps toward cleaning up the state's magnificent natural springs, only once again to cave to special interests and suffer policy myopia.

The session started with such promise for saving not only our springs but, indeed, our water supply. Led by five powerful Senate committee chairman — including our own Sens. Charlie Dean and Alan Hays — a bill was crafted that would have begun addressing the sources of pollution that are slowly killing our springs and also set new rules for water permitting to curb the overpumping that is draining our aquifer.

Maybe most impressive, the bill established a dedicated source of funding to ensure that springs cleanup was not a one-year affair but rather a matter of ongoing state policy. And that source, a share of the state's documentary stamp revenues collected on real estate transactions, would have generated \$365 million next year. A lot could have been accomplished after years of watching the slow degradation and, in some cases, death of too many of Florida's 700-plus springs.

The public and politicians rallied around the Florida Springs and Aquifer Act. It looked as if springs protection had a chance.

Then, big business took notice. Led by the memberships of Associated Industries, the Florida Chamber and the Florida Home Builders Association, the springs protection bandwagon began running into roadblocks. None was bigger than House Speaker Will Weatherford, who stated flat out he did not want to deal with water policy this year. Wait till next year, he said. Why? With big businesses' big donors working behind the scenes — it is an election year, after all — the bill began being watered down. Then the funding source was removed.

In the end, the House, while never taking up the Senate springs bill, did agree with senators to put \$30 million in the new state budget for springs restoration. Pathetic. That is \$25 million less than Gov. Rick Scott proposed.

All the while, the quality and quantity of Florida's waters continues to decline. In the end, such shortsightedness will only cost more, a lot more, economically and environmentally.

A case in point. The Indian River Lagoon has been in the news a lot over the past year because pollution from Lake Okeechobee agriculture operations has fouled its water, killing hundreds of manatees, dolphins and other wildlife. While the state's hundreds of springs got \$30 million for "restoration," the Legislature allocated \$171 million for the cleanup of Indian River Lagoon. That the lagoon sits in Senate budget chairman Joe Negron's district was no small factor.

The point is, one man, Weatherford, chose to do big business' bidding rather than

the people's, and another, Scott, failed to exhibit the slightest bit of leadership on the springs issue. Scott was missing in action from day one.

Five powerful senators, a unanimous vote in the Senate, widespread public support, yet no springs protection bill — all because of a failure of leadership by Weatherford and Scott. All because, once again, special interest concerns matter more in the state capitol than the future of Florida's water supply. How sad.

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Crisafulli says springs bill died because it wasn't the right approach

The Current

Bruce Ritchie, 05/02/2014 - 09:17 PM

Rep. Steve Crisafulli, left, confers with House Speaker Will Weatherford Friday night. . Crisafulli is the incoming Speaker and says he will pursue a comprehensive water policy in 2015. Photo by Bruce Ritchie.

In the end, there was too much opposition to a Senate springs bill for it to be brought up in the House, Rep. Steve Crisafulli said after the legislative session ended Friday.

SB 1576 passed the Senate 38-0 on Wednesday but died in House messages on Friday.

"It was a bill that kept working through the process," Crisafulli, R-Merritt Island, told The Florida Current. "And quite honestly there was a lot of folks who didn't see that as being the right approach for what is right for the future."

Springs have turned green with algae because of increasing nitrogen in groundwater from a variety of sources, scientists say. SB 1576 would have required advanced sewage treatment and septic tanks in areas with polluted springs and would have tightened state laws to prevent groundwater overpumping.

The bill as filed on Feb. 28 provided an estimated \$365 million per year for springs projects. But the recurring funding was stripped from the bill on April 22 and replaced with a one-time \$30 million in the proposed 2014-15 state budget.

Business and industry groups said they support clean water but preferred to stick with the state's approach to developing cleanup plans for springs. And the lack of funding in April drew open opposition from cities and counties who said they would be on the hook for cleanups without funding from the state.

Crisafulli said he is committed to a comprehensive approach on water statewide over the next two years.

"Not just the springs, not just the Everglades, not just the Indian River Lagoon but all water policy," Crisafulli said. "That is the interest I have. That is the approach I will be taking."

Sen. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando and incoming Senate president, said senators tried to get the springs legislation put on a Department of Environmental Protection bill, HB 7171, but couldn't reach agreement.

"They (House members) didn't really have anything that matched up (as far as legislation)," Gardiner said. "At the end of the day we ran out of time."

He said the shape of legislation next year could depend on whether voters pass Amendment 1 providing nearly \$1 billion per year for environmental conservation and restoration.

The amendment would cover springs and other areas of environmental spending, Gardiner said.

Sen. David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs and one of five Senate committee chairmen backing

the bill, said legislation next year will use SB 1576 as a starting point. He said opposition arose to the bill only because of a lack of funding.

"Things of this magnitude and things that are game-changers sometimes can't be done in one year," Simmons said.

"I'm pleased we got as far as we did particularly to pass unanimously in the Senate," he said. "And I have a commitment from the Senate president and speaker designate to make this a higher priority."

Reporter Bruce Ritchie can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.

Springs bill is dead

By Aaron DeslatteTallahassee Bureau Chief

6:28 p.m. EDT, May 2, 2014

TALLAHASSEE -- It was always a long-shot. But House and Senate lawmakers trying to impose new cleanup rules for Florida's pollution-battered springs will be back at the drawing board next year.

With the session ticking down on the last day, both sides said the springs bill passed this week by the Senate would not be taken up on the House side -- and next year, they'd try again.

"The groundwork has been laid," Senate sponsor David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs.

Grinding into Friday evening, Simmons made one last lobbying push to get House Speaker-designate Steve Crisafulli, R-Merritt Island, to try to bring the bill up in his chamber.

But without ever going through a House committee, it wasn't to be.

"Too much text," Crisafulli said in an email. "However, I am committed to working on water policy over the next two years."

The Senate earlier this week passed a springs-protection plan that would force developers, farmers, local governments and septic-tank owners to cut pollution flowing into the state's most imperiled springs.

But the chamber also stripped out \$378 million that would have gone annually toward that cleanup -- relying instead on Amendment 1, a constitutional question before voters in November that could mandate an estimated \$19 billion during the next two decades for conservation projects, including buying land and cleaning up polluted waterways.

Incoming Senate President Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, said Friday that he never expected the House to take up the Senate plan this year. But both presiding officers had given notice to the development industry, agriculture, local governments and environmental groups that they would adopt springs clean-up policies during their two-year tenure.

"For us, that bill's the starting point," Gardiner said.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Diane Salz <salz.govconsultant@gmail.com>

Date: Fri, May 2, 2014 at 8:18 AM

Subject: Environmental bills are teed up but springs bill remains a question mark

To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>

Environmental bills are teed up but springs bill remains a question mark

Bruce Ritchie, 05/01/2014 - 08:14 PM

A slew of compromised bills dealing with environmental and growth management issues are ready for final adoption in the Senate on Friday.

But a question mark still surrounds the biggest pending environmental legislation, the springs bill. SB 1576 passed the Senate on Wednesday by a 38-0 vote but the House companion was never heard in committee.

House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, said Thursday he had not had time to talk with House committee chairmen about the legislation and he was a bit more adamant about the challenge it faces heading into the final day of session.

"I don't know," Weatherford said when asked if it will come up on Friday, the final day of the legislative session. "We'll see."

Springs have become choked with algae and slime because of increasing nitrogen in groundwater. Supporters say the weakened SB 1576 would protect springs from incompatible uses and future over-pumping.

"It's got as good a shot as any bill that's coming over from the Senate," Weatherford said. But he added that House rules require a two-thirds vote to bring up a bill that had not been heard in House committees.

"We'll see if the two-thirds vote exists for it," he said.

Bills that are teed up to pass in the Senate include:

- SB 1126, a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission bill. An amendment to roll back a ban on local ordinances restricting where boats can anchor was voted down.
- HB 7023, an economic development bill. It was rewritten on Thursday to remove a three-year ban on local traffic concurrency and impact fees. An amendment to add the language was withdrawn on Wednesday.
- HB 7093, which eliminates the Department of Environmental Protection's petroleum contamination cleanup "pre-approval" program except for projects where savings to the state can be documented.
- HB 7089, which ratifies the site cleanup competitive bidding rules implemented by DEP in 2013.

- HB 791, a costal development bill requested by DEP. It now includes language that state park officials objected to that would prohibit new concessions in some smaller parks. The bill language minus the concession language also is on HB 7093.

Not looking so good are HB 1113 and SB 1160, which would extend by two years a Jan. 1, 2015, ban on the land application of septic tank waste so that a study can be conducted. Those bills are on the calendars of their respective chambers but haven't made it to third reading.

Reporter Bruce Ritchie can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.

SENATE SENDS SPRINGS PLAN TO HOUSE

By JIM TURNER
THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, April 30, 2014 Without a surge of once-envisioned money, members of the Florida Senate hope they can tee up new policies to help protect the state's natural springs before the legislative session ends Friday.

The push comes after funding for the springs, located throughout central and northern Florida, came out of legislative budget talks far below the amounts earmarked for the Indian River Lagoon and the Everglades.

The Senate on Wednesday unanimously approved a measure (SB 1576) that, in part, seeks to control the amounts of fertilizers allowed into waterways, redirect waste water, replace septic systems at no charge to homeowners and have the Department of Environmental Protection rank the needs of the various critical springs projects.

"I think it's imperative that we try to do the right thing, to do all that we can reasonably do, to make these springs healthy and to help other people enjoy them as they come to Florida and as they live here," said Sen. Alan Hays, a Umatilla Republican who is one of five senators pushing the proposal.

But without a companion bill in the House, the proposal still needs the support of two-thirds of House members just to get brought up on the floor during the next two days.

Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, said Wednesday he'll huddle with House leaders, including Rep. Steve Crisafulli, a Merritt Island Republican who is slated to become speaker in November, and "see if they think it's a good bill."

Weatherford has expressed skepticism about the Senate proposal, which has undergone several recent changes.

The most notable alteration came last week when a proposal was stripped from the plan to use existing revenue, estimated at up to \$378 million a year, from a tax on real estate transactions to fund the springs improvements.

Prior to the session, Weatherford suggested that water-policy issues may have to wait until the 2015 session.

However, Sen. David Simmons, an Altamonte Springs Republican who is also part of the group of five senators, remained optimistic that the policy proposal will get House support by the end of the week.

Also, Simmons said people shouldn't look down on the more than \$30 million allocated in the budget for springs next year. The House and Senate are slated to vote on the fiscal 2014-15 budget Friday.

"We have received a significant sum of money compared to prior years," Simmons said. "It's not what we wanted, but it is significant."

The amount is \$20 million less than Gov. Rick Scott requested.

Janet Bowman of The Nature Conservancy, called Senate Appropriations Chairman Joe Negron's handling of the Indian River Lagoon funding "brilliant," adding that she expects disappointment from springs proponents.

"There have been expectations raised," Bowman said in reference to the springs funding sought by the five senators.

The springs money is far less than that \$171.9 million being allocated for the Everglades and Indian River Lagoon.

Negron, R-Stuart, lined up the money by chairing a select committee that was initially focused on improving water quality in the St. Lucie River estuary, which last summer was inundated with nutrient-heavy waters released from nearby Lake Okeechobee.

Among the South Florida water projects in the budget are \$32 million for water restoration projects in the Everglades; \$20 million for muck removal from the Indian River Lagoon; and \$1 million for seagrass and oyster restoration efforts in the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries.

The funding for South Florida waterways grows to \$231.9 million with the addition of \$60 million during the next two years in transportation funding to bridge a portion of the Tamiami Trail in Miami-Dade County. Lifting the road is expected to help shift the flow of water in the Everglades to the south.

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4/30/14

The Florida Current

Springs bill clears Senate with fate in House uncertain

Bruce Ritchie, 04/30/2014 - 05:37 PM

A springs bill passed the Senate on Wednesday with the looming question of what will happen to it in the House?

Springs, which provide cooling relief to summer bathers and winter homes for manatees, have become covered with slime because of increasing nitrogen in groundwater, scientists say.

SB 1576 provides \$30 million for springs projects, establishes a more restrictive standard for protection against over-pumping and requires planning to upgrade or replace septic tanks.

"Our springs are some of the most beautiful gifts from the good Lord anybody could possibly have," said Sen. Alan Hays, R-Umatilla and bill co-sponsor.

"I think it's imperative we try to do the right thing to do all that we can reasonably to do to make these springs healthy and to help other people enjoy them as they come to Florida or if they live here all the time," he said.

But the House companion bill, HB 1313, hasn't been heard in committee. Some environmentalists and newspaper editorials have criticized House Speaker Will Weatherford for inaction.

House leaders have pointed to an array of water issues across the state that need attention the next couple of years. Weatherford said Wednesday that he looks forward to reviewing the bill now that it's passed the Senate.

On the last two days of session, the House can only take up a bill from the Senate with a two-thirds vote to suspend the rules, Weatherford said.

"So it does create a little bit of a logistical hurdle on that front," he said. "Like I said I haven't had a chance to see that bill so we'll take a look at it and see if it's a good one."

SB 1576, which passed the Senate 38-0, is disappointing somewhat to environmentalists. The bill originally provided an estimated \$378 million per year for springs projects.

Although they expected that amount to be revised downward, environmentalists didn't expect only the one-time funding of \$30 million provided in the 2014-15 state budget agreement reached during the conference committee process. Gov. Rick Scott had requested \$55 million for springs.

The bill also faces opposition from home-builders and business groups. The Florida Association of Counties, the Florida League of Cities and the Florida Stormwater Association voiced opposition last week after the recurring funding was stripped from the bill.

The Florida Stormwater Association, which represents city and county stormwater utilities, says the bill places responsibility for septic tank pollution on local governments but prevents them from requiring property owners to pay any costs.

"It needs quite a few fixes to make it workable," said Kurt Spitzer, executive director of the Florida Stormwater Association.

Environmental group representatives say despite the disappointing funding, the bill still contains some good language, including listing prohibited uses near springs.

"The bill that passed today off the Senate floor is certainly a good step in protecting springs," said Stephanie Kunkel, lobbyist for Clean Water Action and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

"I don't think anybody agrees it is a final product," she said. "We'll have to see what happens next year and the year after."

Reporter Bruce Ritchie can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.

Tampa Bay Times

Wednesday, April 30, 2014

By Craig Pittman

Two weeks ago, when springs advocates expressed concern about how much money the Legislature might put in the budget for saving Florida's ailing springs, Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Joe Negron told them not to worry.

Gov. Rick Scott had requested \$55 million, the House had proposed spending \$50 million and the Senate had suggested \$20 million, noted Negron, R-Stuart. The final number would be "somewhere in the middle," he promised.

But when House and Senate leaders unveiled their joint budget proposal Monday, the figure for springs restoration was the lowest of the three: \$20 million.

Meanwhile the Senate is slated to vote today on SB 1676, which lays out a series of steps on how to restore the springs. But environmental groups complain that the Senate version has been all but gutted, while the House version, HB1313, hasn't gotten a committee hearing and House Speaker Will Weatherford has expressed doubts about the whole thing.

After a promising start, disappointed springs advocates "have about folded up the tent for this year," said Estus Whitfield of the Florida Conservation Coalition.

The hostility to helping the springs, given their depth of support, is both surprising and frustrating to environmentalists. Audubon of Florida executive director Eric Draper said he gets why legislators might snub environmentalist wishes but couldn't understand why they would also undercut Scott's re-election bid.

Last year Whitfield's group, led by former Sen. Bob Graham, delivered 15,000 signatures on a petition demanding action on saving the springs. The Legislature doled out \$10 million for a problem that the state's water management districts have estimated could cost \$122 million, just for starters.

This year, hundreds of people, including some elected officials, rallied at the Capitol Building to show their support for springs restoration. Given that the state was expecting a budget surplus, Scott was proposing \$55 million and lawmakers faced an election year, their hopes were high.

A coalition of powerful senators drafted a bill that called for designating protection zones around 38 of the state's most prominent springs, cutting the flow of pollution from runoff and septic tanks, and safeguarding their continued flow with limits on pumping. The bill also proposed earmarking \$378 million a year from documentary stamp taxes to pay for septic tank upgrades and sewer line hookups near springs.

But the bill hit opposition from a cadre of business groups, including the Association of Florida Community Developers, the Florida Home Builders Association, the Florida Fertilizer and Agrichemical Association and the Florida Chamber of Commerce.

By the time the bill won the approval of Negron's committee last week, it has lost nearly all its funding as well as some of its stronger regulatory provisions. The loss of funding prompted the Florida Association of Counties and the Florida League of Cities to oppose it too, arguing the state would be requiring their clients to fix the springs without giving them any money to help.

"It is getting watered down to the extent that it may not be worth the effort," Whitfield said. The bill is to the point where "if something, anything passes there will be cries of victory, mission accomplished, and bill signing ceremonies. At this point I would not be disappointed if nothing passed."

Gov. Jeb Bush initiated an effort to save Florida's springs in 2000, convening a panel of experts to recommend what should be done. The Legislature passed only one of its recommendations, then repealed it shortly thereafter. Scott's administration dismantled the initiative in 2011.

Craig Pittman can be reached at craig@tampabay.com or follow him on Twitter at @craigtimes.

The Florida Current

Weatherford deflects criticism of House inaction on springs while movement underway on other bills

Bruce Ritchie, 04/28/2014 - 07:28 PM

When asked about the House delay in taking up a springs bill, Speaker Will Weatherford said, "'Does the springs bill have a chance in the Senate?' I think is the better question."
File photo by Bill Cotterell.

A Senate bill that supporters say would strengthen springs protection is on the Senate calendar for Wednesday while House Speaker Will Weatherford is continuing to deflect criticism of his chamber for not acting on the House companion.

Meanwhile, efforts are underway to get other bills related to water passed with the end of the legislative session looming on Friday.

SB 1576 dealing with springs gained opposition from the Florida Association of Counties and the Florida League of Cities on April 22 when \$365 million a year in recurring funding for springs projects was removed from the bill. Environmental groups support the legislation.

Springs restoration will get \$30 million under a deal with Senate and House budget negotiators, said Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart and Senate budget chief.

On Monday, Weatherford continued to point to uncertainty in the Senate rather than his chamber affecting the fate of the springs bill. Some environmentalists have criticized the House for not acting on the companion bill, HB 1313.

"'Does the springs bill have a chance in the Senate?' I think is the better question," he said.

Weatherford continued, "The time that I've had conversations with senators there was a lot of disagreement within the Senate about what a Senate springs bill should look like."

Meanwhile, negotiations are ongoing towards resolving differences between House and Senate bills dealing with water utilities, said Rep. David Santiago, R-Deltona and sponsor of the House bill.

SB 272 by Sen. Wilton Simpson, R-Trilby, passed the Senate 37-0 on Monday. The bill would allow water utility customers to petition the Public Service Commission to revoke the operating certificate of water utilities because of complaints about odor and taste.

The Florida Rural Water Association and the National Association of Water Companies oppose the bill. Instead, they support HB 357, which is more closely aligned with recommendations of a study committee established by the Legislature in 2012. That bill allows the PSC to consider odor and taste issues during rate-setting.

HB 357 was temporarily passed on second reading in the House on April 28 so that negotiations could continue to determine which bill would be taken up in the House, Santiago said Monday.

"Part of the strategy is to look at what is more palatable to be passed and signed into (law),"

Santiago said. "So everything is open right now."

But Rep. Richard Corcoran, R-Land O' Lakes, said he expects an amendment substituting Simpson's bill for the Santiago bill. "I think it will pass just like it did over here with overwhelming support from both parties," Corcoran said.

And Rep. Katie Edwards, D-Sunrise, said she is working to get her HB 1113 delaying a Jan. 1, 2015, ban on the land application of septic tank waste amended to a Senate bill.

Also on April 28, SB 536 providing for a study of reclaimed water passed the House 113-0 and now is headed to the governor. Environmental groups had opposed the bill earlier in the session when it appeared to broaden the definition of reclaimed water to include floodwaters and other water they said is needed to replenish natural systems but later supported it after the definition was revised.

Reporter Bruce Ritchie can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.

OTHER VOICES

Scott, House must join Senate to protect Florida's springs

By Bob Graham

Special to the Star-Banner

Published: Sunday, April 27, 2014 at 6:30 a.m.

Let's look back in time to the early 1970s, when Florida's population was 7.5 million and growing rapidly. After Florida's lands and waters were polluted and altered for decades to make way for development, our environment was in trouble: Water quality and flow were threatened; and critical natural areas were on the verge of being lost forever.

We were fortunate when Gov. Reubin Askew took office in 1971 to have a governor who prioritized Florida's environment and provided the leadership necessary to move environmental legislation forward. Askew challenged the Legislature to set up a regulatory system and funding to protect Florida's natural resources and guide its growth.

We were equally fortunate to have leaders in both chambers of the Legislature and on both sides of the aisle with the foresight and courage to meet that challenge. In 1972, Florida passed the most comprehensive set of environmental conservation and protection laws in the nation, including legislation to protect Florida's waters, purchase environmentally sensitive lands, protect critical areas and set limits on development. Throughout the heyday of Florida growth and economic prosperity, these laws added an element of environmental protection as Florida's economy boomed as never before or since.

Unfortunately, our government is failing to build upon the foundation laid down in the 1970s and 1980s to protect Florida's environment. To the contrary, in 2011, water-management districts suffered draconian cuts to their budgets and staffs; Florida's state growth-management agency was abolished; land-acquisition funding was cut to only a small fraction of historic levels; and the Florida Springs Initiative was defunded.

Now let's come back to 2014. Florida has a population of more than 19 million, and the dire problems facing our waters from the Panhandle to the Keys have gotten worse. Many of Florida's iconic springs still do not have basic protection; springs are dying from too little flow and too many nutrients; rivers are covered in algal mats; and estuaries and coastal waters are suffering staggering losses of marine life and birds. Now when our waters need strong environmental protections the most, we no longer have them.

But this year we have a bipartisan group of senators who have spent much of the past six months working with stakeholders from every viewpoint to create significant springs legislation that could pass the Legislature this year. The Senate has demonstrated its commitment to this goal by passing Senate Bill 1576 unanimously through its first three committee stops.

commitment to this goal by passing Senate Bill 1576 unanimously through its first three committee stops.

Despite its progress in the Senate, the Florida House of Representatives has refused to even allow the bill to be heard in a single committee so far this session. It is clear that House leaders are listening to special-interest lobbyists, telling them to weaken and kill the bill, instead of heeding the residents of Florida, their Senate colleagues, conservation groups and newspaper editorial boards who have urged the House to take up the Senate version of the bill and pass springs legislation this session.

Equally concerning is Gov. Rick Scott's silence on this important legislation that would do so much to protect Florida's springs. If Scott followed the example of previous Florida governors to protect Florida's environment, he would bring House and Senate leaders together to make sure strong springs legislation is signed into law this year.

Although no single law can completely solve the problems facing Florida's waters, the Senate bill, which includes deadlines and common-sense regulations, will significantly enhance the state of our springs. However, the challenge lies in the House. Time is short. The House must take up the Senate bill, protect it from weakening and from extraneous amendments, and pass it.

The question is: Do this House and governor have the foresight and fortitude to stand up for Florida's springs?

My dear friend and predecessor Gov. Reubin Askew gave the 1972 Legislature the following piece of advice on the opening-day session. His words are truer today than ever.

"Your own elections are pressing down upon you telling you to try and slip through this session as quickly and as quietly and with as little action as possible ... I ask you to do your best to put aside those thoughts ... and work instead to come up with real answers to our toughest problems today ... And it begins with the environment, as indeed it must, if any of our other efforts are to have meaning for tomorrow."

Bob Graham is founder and chairman of the Florida Conservation Coalition. He was Florida's governor from 1979-86 and a U.S. senator from 1987-2005.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Diane Salz <salz.govconsultant@gmail.com>

Date: Thu, Apr 24, 2014 at 11:08 AM

Subject: SENATORS ADVISED TO PREPARE FOR PASSAGE OF WATER AND LAND AMENDMENT

To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>

SENATORS ADVISED TO PREPARE FOR PASSAGE OF WATER AND LAND AMENDMENT

By JIM TURNER
THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, April 23, 2014.....The next Senate president is advising natural springs advocates in his chamber to start planning for an influx of voter-approved money for water and land conservation next year.

Sen. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, doesn't support the Florida Water and Land Conservation Amendment that goes before voters this November, and says it's not the right way to put a budget together. But he said Wednesday that the polling he's seen indicates the measure could be approved.

"There is a very good chance that Amendment 1 potentially passes," Gardiner said. "That potentially starts the discussion on how to do springs, how to do the cleanup. How do you do the land acquisition? So, what I've asked the senators (to do) is to be building for the anticipation that it is going to pass."

The approval of Amendment 1 is expected to create a pot of cash for lawmakers to designate for land conservation and management across the state by setting aside 33 percent of the revenues from the state's documentary stamp tax, paid when real estate is sold, for 20 years. The money would have to be used to acquire conservation and recreation lands, manage existing lands, protect lands that are critical for water supply and restore degraded natural systems.

The proposal could generate \$10 billion over its life, according to supporters of the amendment.

Like all constitutional amendments, the proposal requires approval by 60 percent of voters to pass.

Gardiner made the remarks after talking with five state senators that had hoped to use the tax on real-estate transactions in the next fiscal year, starting July 1, to protect the threatened natural springs throughout Central and North Florida.

Until Tuesday, the five senators' measure (SB 1579) sought to shift an estimated \$378 million a year from the tax into springs restoration and protection. But the funding was removed as they try to advance the measure knowing that there is little appetite in the House to approve such a funding level.

Instead, the springs are expected to get somewhere between the \$22.8 million that has been

proposed by the Senate in its budget and the \$45 million the House has offered in its spending plan.

Senate President Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, said Wednesday "we have to meld them together."

Gov. Rick Scott has recommended \$55 million, up from the \$10 million that lawmakers set aside for springs last year.

-END-

4/23/14

On Thursday, April 24, 2014 9:18 AM, Diane Salz

<salz.govconsultant@gmail.com> wrote:

House, Senate environmental negotiators can't agree on most major spending items

Bruce Ritchie, 04/23/2014 - 09:12 PM

House and Senate budget negotiators on agriculture and environmental spending concluded their talks on Wednesday without a resolution of most major spending issues.

The differences between the chambers on issues including agricultural water programs, springs restoration, water projects and Everglades and Lake Okeechobee will now be resolved by the full budget conference committees.

"We have made significant progress but we have several items that are still unresolved," Sen. Alan Hays, R-Umatilla and chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on General Government, said at the final meeting of the budget conference committee for agricultural and natural resources spending.

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Among the issues to be resolved by the House and Senate budget chairmen after the Senate's second offer:

-- Local water projects: The Senate offered \$73.9 million compared to the House offer of \$56.6 million.

-- Springs restoration: The Senate offered \$24.3 million compared to the House offer of \$50 million.

-- Indian River Lagoon and Lake Okeechobee: Neither chamber offered to move from their adopted budgets: Senate proposes \$157.8 million while the House proposes \$125 million.

-- Conservation lands: The House proposes \$22.5 million in new revenue while the Senate proposes no new revenue. Both include \$40 million from non-conservation land sales.

-- Beach restoration: The Senate offered \$49 million while the House offered \$33.9 million.

-- Agricultural water programs: The Senate offered \$2.5 million compared to a House offer of \$27.3 million.

Rep. Ben Albritton, R-Wauchula, said the big stuff was bumped up to the budget chairman.

"We couldn't find common ground," he said. "I mean, it really is as simple as we just couldn't come to an agreement on a funding level for those items."

The Everglades and Lake Okeechobee spending is a priority to Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart and the Senate's chief budget negotiator. Albritton rejected the question of whether the House was not as committed to dealing with those issues after heavy rains last summer flushed polluted water into the

downstream Indian River Lagoon and Caloosahatchee rivers.

"This is a comprehensive approach to a lot of big ticket items," Albritton said. "We'll just have to see where it goes."

Reporter Bruce Ritchie can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.

The Florida Current

New springs bill language revises language objectionable to ag groups, home builders

Bruce Ritchie, 04/21/2014 - 05:24 PM

A proposed rewrite of a Senate springs bill filed on Monday would provide \$55 million for projects and would revise language that raised concerns with homebuilders and agricultural groups.

SB 1576 is scheduled to be heard Tuesday by the Senate Committee on Appropriations during an all day meeting in which more than 50 bills are on the agenda.

Springs across the state have become covered with slimy algae as nitrogen in groundwater has increased. Sources of nitrogen include lawn and agricultural fertilizer, stockyards, septic tanks, dirty stormwater runoff and sewage plant discharges.

Environmentalists offered a mixed response to the proposed new bill language. A representative of the Florida Cattlemen's Association said the language was better and that the group is not supporting or opposing the bill because it still is being worked on.

SB 1576 had provided \$365 million for springs from a documentary stamp tax on real estate transactions. Gov. Rick Scott requested \$55 million for springs in the fiscal year 2014-15 state budget while the House has proposed \$50 million and the Senate has proposed \$30 million.

The proposed strike-all amendment to the bill would adjust the amount for springs from 36.9 percent to 5.4 percent of the documentary stamp tax revenue going to the general fund.

The bill establishes 39 first "outstanding" Florida springs and places requirements on those that are designated as "impaired" for nutrients.

The Florida Home Builders Association had opposed the bill because the group said it imposed a ban on septic tanks in those impaired spring areas.

The new proposed bill language would remove a July 1, 2015 date for implementing a requirement for advanced septic systems in those springs areas. Now the requirement would depend on designation of those improved systems by the Florida Department of Health.

The proposed new language also removes a prohibition on new stockyards and slaughterhouses within those springs areas. Requirements that existing agricultural operations implement "best management practices" also would be removed.

Instead, the bill now says new agricultural operation are prohibited if they do not implement "best management practices" or achieve other pollution reduction measures.

The proposed new bill language also requires the establishment of pollution limits called "total maximum daily loads" within 15 years of the adoption of action plans to reduce pollution.

The proposed new language is not as rigorous as the prior version but "moves the ball forward" for springs protection, said Janet Bowman of The Nature Conservancy's state chapter.

"We are hopeful the committee will pass the bill," she said, "and the House will recognize the importance of working on a meaningful springs bill prior to the end of session."

Sam Ard, director of governmental affairs at the Florida Cattlemen's Association said the bill "is just not soup yet."

"Until the springsheds are defined no one knows where the restrictions will be or how they'll work," he said. "We're not supporting the legislation, but since it is not a final product and changes are still being made, we are not against it either."

Reporter Bruce Ritchie can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.

SENATE REMOVES LONG-TERM FUNDING FROM AMBITIOUS SPRINGS PLAN

By JIM TURNER
THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, April 22, 2014The Senate has drained a recurring pool of money from a measure intended to provide long term protection and management of the state's endangered natural springs.

The Senate sponsors of an ambitious springs proposal (SB 1576) on Tuesday stripped out a part of the plan designed to shift existing revenue from a tax on real estate transactions, estimated at up to \$378 million a year, to the protection of waterways in Central and North Florida.

Instead, any money to help the springs in the next fiscal year will depend upon on-going budget negotiations between the House and Senate.

The Senate has proposed \$20 million for springs protections in its agriculture funding package. The House has countered with \$50 million.

"We're going to meet somewhere in the middle," Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Joe Negrón, R-Stuart, said before the committee signed off on the measure Tuesday.

Gov. Rick Scott has recommended \$55 million, up from the \$10 million that lawmakers set aside for springs last year.

Altamonte Springs Republican David Simmons, one of the sponsors of the Senate plan, said the bill still remains the "blueprint" for solving Florida's water crisis.

"This is a placeholder, this gets us started so we can begin the negotiations with the House of Representatives," Simmons said. "We will get that dedicated source of funding."

The funding source was considered a long-shot to begin with because the House has been chilly toward the fiscal proposal as well as some of the policy requirements in the Senate bill.

The Senate plan would require local governments within the state's most-prominent springs zones to enact ordinances dealing with fertilizers; require wastewater treatment plants to reduce the amount of nitrogen released in treated water; make state and local governments cover the cost of connecting residential properties to sewer systems where older septic systems are impacting area waters; and force agricultural operations to follow "best-management practices."

The senators behind the bill had spent months crafting their measure and removing the funding from the springs restoration plan drew concerns Tuesday from local government and business groups.

"Sixty percent of these first magnitude springs are in rural areas of critical economic concern," said Florida Association of Counties lobbyist Stephen James. "These are counties that are struggling

badly. Populations are low. They're low income...And we're going to say now with these amendments, we're going to have these series of regulatory obligations for you, and we're going to have a timeline for you to achieve these things, and there is going to be no money."

Beyond what lawmakers earmark for the springs this year, future money flowing to springs projects could depend on Florida voters who will decide in November on a proposed constitutional amendment that would set aside funding for land conservation.

The Florida Water and Land Conservation Amendment seeks to set aside 33 percent of the state's documentary stamp tax revenues --- fees already paid when real estate is sold --- for 20 years to acquire conservation and recreation lands, manage existing lands, protect lands that are critical for water supply and restore degraded natural systems. Like all constitutional amendments, the proposal requires approval by 60 percent of voters to pass.

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4/22/14

County, water managers disagree on future sources

By [Bill Thompson](#)

Staff writer

Published: Wednesday, April 16, 2014 at 5:15 p.m.

Marion County's first step to finding water for the next generation and beyond could be to argue with state regulators about how much groundwater might be available.

A county-hired consultant thinks a recent assessment of the groundwater available for the next 20 years is flawed, and he believes St. Johns River Water Management District hydrologists will admit as much once they evaluate his data.

If that fails, however, there is Plan B, and even Plan C.

Devo Seereeram, an Orlando-based consultant with more than 30 years of experience in plotting water supplies with computer modeling, suggests the county should dig deeper wells to tap new reserves hundreds of feet below the earth's surface — or plant dozens of new wells in the largest water recharge area in North Central Florida, the Ocala National Forest.

Seereeram told the County Commission at a workshop Tuesday that the Lower Floridan Aquifer is an underutilized source of potable water, a reservoir with both scientific and political appeal.

And beyond that, he added, the aquifer beneath the expansive vacant lands within the forest could yield up to 20 million gallons of water a day — or roughly 90 percent of what the community will need by 2035.

That water, Seereeram said, could be harvested by sinking 100 strategically placed “sipping” wells throughout the forest.

Commissioners expressed interest in Seereeram's ideas, but took no formal action at this point.

For now, the board has instructed county staffers to work with him in further relaying the county's position on St. Johns' long-range water plan.

Water managers released the draft of the 2035 supply plan three months ago, detailing their efforts to combat the pending shortage.

According to the document, St. Johns' 18-county region — including Marion County east of Interstate 75 — would need an additional 314 million gallons of water a day within two decades. That's 26 percent above current consumption districtwide.

Greater pumping of the aquifer would supply only about one-fifth of the district's future need, officials projected.

The rest must be found through a combination of conservation and use of recycled, surface and ocean waters.

Compared to current usage, Marion County would need another 22 million gallons a day by 2035, or an additional 45 percent, the St. Johns report said.

Yet district hydrologists maintained the county could get there through conservation and recycled supplies.

The district had backtracked on one key source that had created an uproar a decade ago — the Ocklawaha River.

St. Johns' scientists in January expressed doubt that the river would ever be needed to supply drinking water locally, and if so, the output would remain in Marion County.

On Wednesday, Seereeram opened the commission's 90-minute session by explaining how St. Johns had erred.

He focused only on St. Johns, saying projections by the Southwest Florida Water management District, which has jurisdiction over water usage west of I-75, would be included in future reports.

Seereeram pointed out, for example, that St. Johns had lumped Marion County into a localized subregion that included Volusia and northern Lake counties.

Volusia, he said, was a "separate island" waterwise, with no connectivity to the aquifer serving Marion County.

Seereeram maintained that the direction of the aquifer's flow indicated that Marion instead should be aligned with the "virgin territory" of eastern Alachua County and with western Putnam County.

Another problem with that analysis, Seereeram suggested, was that the drain in Volusia, whose water supply is already "challenged," was leading water managers to look at the problem across the subregion without considering Marion County individually.

He didn't blame the district for that. That, Seereeram said, was St. Johns' mission.

But proceeding as they did prevented water managers from looking at the "microscopic details" that will aid Marion County in meeting its water needs, he added.

The county, he noted, was fortunate because of its "very abundant" water supplies, exceeded in the region only by Lake County.

The consultant also argued that St. Johns had overestimated the water available from the Ocklawaha River.

State projections that showed the river could produce up to 30 million gallons a day were off by as much as half, if not by two-thirds, Seereeram said.

Drawing more than that would create adverse effects downstream, he added.

Seereeram also highlighted a St. Johns finding that he described as “weird”: some of the worst effects on wetlands from water withdrawals would appear in areas east of the Ocklawaha River, in the middle of the Ocala National Forest.

Seereeram said he found that puzzling because there are very few district-sanctioned wells east of the river, compared to west of it.

He attributed that to widespread irrigation for agriculture in northern Lake County, something the district did not seem to account for.

Lastly, he noted that St. Johns had recently released four separate reports on water bodies and supply in Marion County and they all seemed to conflict.

“This bears no resemblance to reality,” Seereeram said of the district’s analysis in the 20-year projections, which he characterized as “mathematical noise.”

To counteract that, the consultant said, Marion County ought to propose three alternatives that he developed.

In contrast to the district’s approach, pumping the Ocklawaha River would be the last-ditch maneuver.

Rather, he said, the county should argue for locating wells west of the river to utilize the Lower Floridan Aquifer — a supply sitting 600 feet below the earth’s crust, and even reaching to depths of 1,500 feet.

That is usable water that flows from Georgia, and a rock layer segregates it from the Upper Floridan Aquifer, the main source of local drinking water, Seereeram said.

Beyond the practical and scientific benefits, Seereeram said, geology enhances the political appeal of such a move.

“If we are not pulling water out of that part of the aquifer,” he said of the upper resource, “we are not impacting the flow into Silver Springs.”

“You are sitting in a pretty good spot to mine the lower aquifer,” he added. “And the springs people are not going to be mad at us.”

As an alternative, the Ocala National Forest stands ready, Seereeram said.

The county should propose a network of 100 new wells, introduced incrementally, spread 1,000 feet apart and each capable of pumping 200,000 gallons a day, he recommended.

He described them as “sipping wells” that would not affect the other water bodies within the forest.

“When we stick the straw in the milkshake, we’re not sucking on that straw too hard. . . . We’re just sipping on the milkshake,” Seereeram said.

When Commissioner Kathy Bryant questioned his opinion that it was “almost invisible intensity” on the area water reserves, Seereeram added, “A hundred of them 1,000 feet a part — nothing gets safer than that.”

Most users, he said, plant wells 500 feet from each other and pump up to 1 million gallons daily.

Seereeram said the “100-well plan” would use the upper aquifer.

If it met with blowback, then the county could react by proposing using the lower aquifer in the forest, he said.

The drawback of tapping the lower aquifer, however, is the cost.

A Lower Floridan well could cost upward of \$1 million, compared to \$150,000 for one in the upper aquifer, according at Seereeram.

And County Administrator Lee Niblock noted that finding sufficient parcels for the wells would be a challenge. And Commissioner Stan McClain pointed out that a distribution system was needed.

“Nobody can quarrel with us,” Seereeram offered.

“The Ocala National Forest has excellent water and no wells,” he said.

“Politically, I want to go forward with a plan with no chinks in the armor.”

Contact Bill Thompson at 867-4117 or at bill.thompson@ocala.com

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