

Item 9.d.
News Articles

Ex-water official right to question SWFWMD move

Wednesday, June 3, 2015 at 7:17 pm

In recent years, blows have been dealt to the state's water management districts, deflating their authority, structural depth and financial wherewithal. There's a skewed mindset in Tallahassee that matters of great local significance are adequately handled by officials far from the sources of concern.

Steps by the governor and state officials to trim the bureaucratic fat within the water districts have, in cases, been necessary and appropriate. However, Florida is on a path largely contrary to the best interest of its waters and those who care about them.

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) is huge, stretching from the northern tips of Levy and Marion counties southward through Charlotte County. To make it manageable, the district is broken into five regions, with all of Citrus, Hernando and Sumter counties in the Northern Planning Region, along with portions of Levy, Marion and Lake counties.

There are three SWFWMD service offices – one in Brooksville, another in Tampa and one in Sarasota. A movement is afoot to make Tampa the headquarters, consolidating key functions there.

Former SWFWMD executive director Emilio "Sonny" Vergara makes some good points as to why designating the Tampa facility as the principal office is suspect. He notes the decision was simply announced by the current executive director in an internal email. Vergara appropriately asks: Why no public notice? Why wasn't such a resolution on a governing board agenda? Why was there no public announcement of the plan?

Vergara brings up several valid reasons why the decision is a bad one, but looming in the background is a sense that this is a political power play, not a strategic decision to better manage SWFWMD.

State legislators representing Hernando County oppose the move based on the logical assumption that it will siphon jobs and residents/taxpayers from there to metro Tampa Bay. While water district officials may contend there's no imminent plan to relocate a majority of the Brooksville jobs to Tampa — hence no economic blow to Hernando County — Vergara notes that in recent years, numerous jobs/water district functions have been shifted southward.

While such a move wouldn't carry those ramifications for Citrus County, there are sound reasons to stick with three service offices rather a Tampa HQ with two outlying service offices — Brooksville and Sarasota.

There are unique differences between the various planning regions within SWFWMD. In the case of Citrus County, we're water-rich with a healthy aquifer, a host of freshwater springs, rivers and lakes. The central and southern areas of SWFWMD aren't freshwater rich and development interests exert great power, regardless of available natural resources to fuel growth.

Not so long ago, there were basin boards within SWFWMD consisting of local representatives addressing local concerns. Those boards were dismantled with the governor's tweaking of the water districts, wedging distance between the people and entities SWFWMD serves.

While the contention that Tampa is central, therefore a convenient meeting place, has a ring of logic for governing board members, that's not the case for many citizens and those doing business with SWFWMD.

The need to have Citrus

County's concerns well represented was initially undermined with the dissolution of the basin boards. The fact that the governor has allowed the vacancy of a Citrus/Levy/Lake/Sumter appointee to the SWFWMD governing board to linger compounds concerns about us having a voice. That leaves a lot of power in the hands of board members representing metro counties.

SWFWMD should not have an urban-centric perspective when there's such a great diversity within its region. By creating a business model that revolves around Tampa, there's ample reason to fear that the best interests of our corner of the water district will be secondary to the interests of metro Tampa Bay— which is an hour-plus drive and a world away from Citrus County.

Subject: Fwd: SJRWMD has a new director
From: Diane Salz <salz.govconsultant@gmail.com>
Date: Fri, May 22, 2015 9:18 am
To: Richard Owen <richardowen@wrwsa.org>
Cc: Nancy Smith <nsmith@wrwsa.org>

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

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Date: Fri, May 22, 2015 at 9:16 AM
Subject: SJRWMD has a new director
To: Diane Salz <salz.govconsultant@gmail.com>

The St. Johns River Water Management District has a new executive director.

She arrives on the heels of a shake-up of its leadership that left five senior positions open.

90.7's Amy Green has been following the story. She spoke with Crystal Chavez about the new executive director.

CRYSTAL: Who is she?

AMY: Ann Shortelle is executive director of the Suwannee River Water Management District. Before that she was director of water policy at the state Department of Environmental Protection.

She is highly regarded, although some environmentalists worry she is too close to the DEP.

CRYSTAL: Let's back-track a little bit. Five people left in a big shake-up. Did anyone see this coming?

AMY: It's unclear.

What we do know is that the four senior managers submitted letters of resignation the same week the water district's executive director also stepped down. He had announced his resignation in March. Two of the four announced their resignations "in lieu of termination."

Together the five had nearly a century of experience at the water district. They were involved in land management and ensuring the region's future water supply.

Many environmentalists like the St. Johns Riverkeeper believe the departures are a sign of growing state influence in regional water decisions. They believe their conservation work conflicted with the Scott administration's growth-oriented agenda, and they were forced out.

CRYSTAL: Is more state influence in regional water decisions a bad thing?

AMY: Florida's five water districts were established to remove politics from the decision-making over the state's environmental resources. At the time the arrangement was seen as unique nationally and a model.

I talked with St. Johns Riverkeeper Lisa Rinaman. She says more centralized control makes way for political influence in these decisions.

"These decisions instead of based on sound science they actually could be more influenced by special interests who are using their relationships, using their presence in Tallahassee to influence decisions that should be made closer to the watershed."

CRYSTAL: Amy Green, now the water district is back in the news. The Orlando Sentinel reports a massive development planned for Deseret Ranch is being forwarded to the state for consideration despite environmental concerns. Is there a link between this project and the mass exodus?

AMY: I talked with Charles Lee of Audubon of Florida. He doesn't think so. He believes what happened at the St. Johns River Water Management District is part of a bigger picture.

Lee says soon after Gov. Rick Scott took office the South Florida Water Management District, Southwest Florida Water Management District and Suwannee River Water Management District all experienced similar turnover.

"What's now happened is the St. Johns district has been swept or purged in the same way that the other districts were earlier."

That means four of the state's five water districts all have undergone this turnover. Lee says the Northwest Florida Water Management District has experienced similar change but is less active because it receives less funding.

CRYSTAL: What does the governor's office say about these claims by environmentalists that they're playing politics with the water districts.

AMY: The governor's office didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Here's state Department of Environmental Protection spokeswoman Lauren Engel disputing any state influence in the turnover at the St. Johns River Water Management District.

"The St. Johns River Water Management District executive director has sole authority over their hiring decisions."

The water district's acting executive director issued a statement saying it wouldn't be productive to elaborate on the departures.

CRYSTAL: So, Amy Green, how does this affect me?

AMY: The St. Johns River Water Management District is like a gatekeeper to your drinking water.

One of the things the water district does is grant water use permits. The water district controls who gets to draw from your drinking water supply and how much.

This is important because as you know the region is growing fast, straining the water supply.

Subject: Fw: CFWI public meetings and permitting tip
From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Date: Tue, May 26, 2015 11:31 am
To: Richard Owen <richardowen@wrwsa.org>
Cc: Nancy Smith <nsmith@wrwsa.org>

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: Water News <waternews@sjrwmd.com>
To: disalz@yahoo.com
Sent: Tuesday, May 26, 2015 11:24 AM
Subject: CFWI public meetings and permitting tip

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St. Johns River Water Management District **Water News**

News, meetings
and notices

May 26, 2015

Public meetings next week to discuss CFWI planning documents

Two public meetings are scheduled for next week to provide an opportunity for the public to learn about and comment on the Central Florida Water Initiative (CFWI) draft 2035 Water Resources Protection and Water Supply Strategies Plan (Solutions Plan) and minor changes to the draft 2015 Regional Water Supply Plan. The two draft documents will set a path forward for meeting water supply needs in central Florida for the next 20 years.

The meetings will include presentations and CFWI experts will be available to answer questions and receive public input.

Date: Monday, June 1, 2015
Time: 4:30-6:30 p.m.
Location: Chain of Lakes Complex, 210 Cypress Gardens Blvd. SW, Winter Haven

Date: Thursday, June 4, 2015
Time: 4:30-6:30 p.m.
Location: City Hall, 300 W Plant Street, Winter Garden

CFWI is a collaborative effort among the St. Johns, South Florida and Southwest Florida water management districts, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, regional

Connect with us



Upcoming meetings

For a listing of upcoming meeting dates, times and locations, visit:

- [Governing Board meetings and agendas](#)
- [Other District meetings and notices](#)

Lobbyist registration requirements

Contacts

District staff contacts for:

- [Local governments](#)
- [Public and media](#)

[How to contact your local government](#)

About us

public water supply utilities and other stakeholders to develop a unified process to address central Florida's current and long-term water supply needs. The CFWI planning area includes Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole and southern Lake counties.

When finalized, the Solutions Plan will provide detailed information about water conservation; specific water supply project options and partnerships with water users; a financial assessment of the project options; management and implementation strategies.

The draft plans are available at cfwiwater.com. Comments can be provided online or by mail and email. Details are available on the website. The comment period will close on July 31, 2015.

For more information, please visit cfwiwater.com.

The St. Johns River Water Management District is a regional agency of the state of Florida whose mission is to protect and ensure the sustainable use of water resources. The District is responsible for managing groundwater and surface water resources in all or part of 18 counties in northeast and east-central Florida.

floridaswater.com

Permitting tip

Transfer of environmental resource permits

The transfer of an environmental resource permit (ERP) typically falls into one or both of the following categories: an ownership transfer or transfer to the operation and maintenance entity.

All ERPs contain language requiring that (1) within 30 days of a change in ownership, the St. Johns River Water Management District must be notified of the change and the permit transferred to the new owner and, (2) within 30 days of receipt of the as-built certification, the permittee must submit a "Request for Transfer of Environmental Resource Permit to the Perpetual Operation Entity."

The District will need the following information:
Ownership transfers:

1. Request from current permittee/owner to transfer the permit to a new owner
2. Acceptance of the transfer by the new owner
3. Copy of the instrument effectuating the transfer (i.e., deed)

Transfer to perpetual operation entity:

1. Form 62-330.310(2). Request for Transfer of Environmental Resource Permit to the Perpetual Operation Entity. Complete the form and submit with the required information. The form is available on the [District's website](#).

Please contact your local [service center](#) with any questions.