

# Growth and sprawl on the march

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Gov. Rick Scott's vision of Florida's economic future looks a lot like its past: heavily dependent on grand-scale development that creates sprawl and environmental damage but comes with no money to pay for the consequences. The Department of Transportation's revival of a six-year-old "Future Corridors" plan for major roads crossing interior Florida — along with the hiring of two prominent development executives to help make it happen — will tax water supplies, alter the character of rural Florida, and strip resources from urban transit needs.

DOT is spending \$106,000 to have two consultants interview owners of large tracts of land about their development plans and how they might dovetail with Future Corridors, the plan championed under Gov. Jeb Bush but shelved by his successor, Gov. Charlie Crist. The consultants are Billy Buzzett, the last secretary of the Department of Community Affairs, who helped Scott and the Legislature disband the agency and undo decades of growth management laws; and Chris Corr, an executive vice president for development support company AECOM. Both are former executives with the St. Joe Co., the largest private landowner in the Panhandle, where the company has scaled back its plans for development because of the real estate collapse.

Buzzett and Corr are assigned this task under the DOT contract: Conduct up to 20 interviews with major landowners to determine their development plans and what, if any, changes are needed in state laws or regulations that would lead to agreements between the state and landowners in preparation for building the new roads.

Never mind that DOT should have plenty of resources to accomplish this goal without hiring a pair of political insiders. Never mind that DOT already says the only way it can expand highways or build bridges is to slap tolls on them. The message is clear. DOT may have signed the contract, but Buzzett and Corr are really working Scott's jobs agenda. One "Future Corridors" route, between Naples and Orlando, for example, has been pitched as being able to sustain 10 more towns. And while such growth will add construction jobs in the short term, it is being pursued with even less consideration than in the past as to the environmental and quality-of-life consequences for those communities and the entire state.

This isn't wholly a surprise. As Scott's DCA secretary, Buzzett helped pass legislation in 2011 gutting what remained of Florida's growth management laws, including changing water and transportation concurrency law to make it easier and less expensive for rural landowners to develop their land.

Now it's mostly up to local communities and their elected officials to apply any modicum of restraint on developers' ambitions — the same improbable scenario that sparked the approval of the state's growth management laws in 1985. Scott no longer wanted the state to have that authority, even though it certainly didn't squelch astronomical growth during its 26 years of existence. Yet the governor isn't above deploying well-financed Tallahassee insiders into those same communities with a mission biased toward unbridled growth. Just whose interests is the governor representing?

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**Subject:** water democracy: even as supply threatens to run out, public shows little interest  
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## **Water democracy: Even as supply threatens to run out, public shows little interest**

By [Kevin Spear](#), Orlando Sentinel

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ST. CLOUD — The keepers of Central Florida's water supply, mostly technocrats and utility bosses, have labored for more than a year to identify and divide among themselves the region's last precious drops.

Last week, they put their work on public display during an open house that, according to a sign-in sheet, was attended by several dozen people representing various businesses, government agencies and environmental-advocacy groups. Only about a half dozen of those present were simply interested members of the general public.

Such is democracy when it comes to water in Florida, even as the supply threatens to run dry.

Various public-affairs experts and advocates say they worry that people's participation in local or statewide water-policy debates is often muted by complex science, specialized regulations and lack of involvement by elected officials.

"Water will never catch the public eye until it stops running out of the faucet," said [Bill Segal](#), a former Orange County commissioner and a former St. Johns River Water Management District board member.

Some water watchers think a tipping point might have been reached a little more than a week ago, however, when nearly 1,750 people turned out for a rally at Silver River State Park in [Marion County](#).

The event had been organized in response to a ranch owner's quest to pump 13 million gallons of water a day from the state's heavily stressed Floridan Aquifer. Most of that water — as much as the nearby city of Ocala uses each day

— would irrigate pastures for high-intensity cattle production at Adena Springs Ranch.

The unusually strong backlash to the ranch's water-permit request stems largely from fears that it would reduce and pollute the water flowing from the area's already-ailing Silver Springs, a well-known and popular natural attraction and tourist destination since the 1800s. Backers of the cattle ranch deny that any harm would occur to the springs or the river they create.

Where a tipping point might lead is unclear in a state where the options for public involvement in water issues are limited or daunting.

A speaker at the June 23 rally — [Lee Constantine](#), a former Republican state senator from [Altamonte Springs](#) who's now a candidate for [Seminole County](#) commissioner — said he encourages individuals and groups to join the Florida Conservation Coalition, one of the rally's organizers, as a way to have their voices heard.

Constantine, who as a state lawmaker was among only a few in the Legislature to concentrate on water issues, said turning to a local elected official to talk about water — as routinely happens when people have concerns about schools, taxes or crime — "isn't going to do any good. They can't look at the big picture of water."

In this part of the state, most of the people capable of seeing the big picture are part of the Central Florida Water Initiative.

CFWI members are drawn from the three state agencies, known as water-management districts, that control the region's water supply, and from the city and county utilities that must share the dwindling amount of water left to meet the demands of population growth.

The invitation-only group's inaugural open house Thursday was in St. Cloud, on the edge of the [Orlando](#) metropolitan area, overlooking the [Osceola County](#) city's scenic waterfront park on East Lake Tohopekaliga. Having done most of their work so far in obscurity, its members enthusiastically described tasks that, they admitted, involve cutting-edge science that often defies easy explanation.

They said they are attempting to: determine how much harm has already been caused to the region's wetlands and waterways by heavy pumping from the Floridan Aquifer; establish whether that harm is of an acceptable degree; and set a limit for how much more water, if any, can be pumped from the aquifer.

Deirdre Macnab, president of the League of Women Voters of Florida, said it's difficult for the average citizen to understand such a discussion, much less respond to it.

"This is one of our most precious resources. and we don't really know what's

happening below the surface," said Macnab, who didn't attend the open house. "We need an annual, reliable and understandable report on our water."

Robert Knight shares her frustration. Knight, a springs scientist in [Gainesville](#) and an opponent of the Adena Springs Ranch proposal, said the state's water-management districts seem intent on blunting public involvement.

"They are usually talking down to people. They give presentations that are frequently unintelligible. They go over things too fast and try to cover too much," Knight said of the districts' regular meetings. "I don't care to go to them myself."

Florida's five water-management districts are each run by a board whose members are appointed by the governor. The board responsible for east Central and North Florida, the St. Johns district, meets in Palatka, a two-hour drive from Orlando. Its staff has been honing regulations and permit procedures in relative isolation for almost four decades, mostly through times when water was still plentiful and drew little public attention.

"It's become very sophisticated — even an average lawyer wouldn't know the process," said Mary Jane Angelo, a water-law professor at the University of Florida and a former staff lawyer for the St. Johns district.

"It's also become very sophisticated scientifically," she said. "The water district has these Ph.D. scientists running these complicated models, and the permit applicants have their own experts with their own modeling and complex scientific information. So I think it is hard for the public to have meaningful input or access."

The district's procedures could also cut off public involvement in the Adena Springs Ranch application: Depending on how the agency schedules its staff recommendation and subsequent public hearing, any lawsuit filed to block the ranch's application could leave the fate of Adena Springs Ranch largely in the hands of a state judge instead.

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# Water quality war rages on

## Lawsuit could come soon

By [Fred Hiers](#)

Staff writer

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The latest administrative ruling — that Florida environmental regulators acted properly when they enacted water quality standards less stringent than those of the federal government — isn't the end of the long battle over Florida water quality.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) soon will announce whether it accepts the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (FDEP) water nutrient standards instead of its own tougher standards for regulating nitrogen and phosphorus.

If the EPA acquiesces, "we would challenge it in the federal courts. We're not just going to go away. The trend for our water bodies continue to be negative," said Florida Wildlife Federation President Manley Fuller.

"We're not just suing for the heck of it. We're going to use all the federal remedies at our disposal," Fuller said. "They (FDEP) won the last inning and now we're going into a new inning."

The "innings" in this game have been played since 1998, when the EPA ordered Florida and other states to come up with more stringent freshwater standards. Florida didn't comply, so Florida environmentalists sued the EPA to force it to develop its own water nutrient standards.

When EPA put forth such a set of rules, Florida lawmakers, utilities and businesses complained. Last year FDEP developed its own set of rules, less stringent than EPA's, and the Florida Legislature voted to approve them as the state's own guidelines.

In December, a group led by the Florida Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club filed a petition with the state Division of Administrative Hearings (DOAH) challenging the new state rules. Florida Administrative Law Judge Bram Canter ruled that FDEP acted within its authority.

Many Florida utilities and Florida water bodies wouldn't have passed EPA's standards. As far as area waterways go, pollutant levels for the Silver and Rainbow springs are three times higher than EPA's proposed limits. Troy Springs in Branford also would fail to pass muster. Popular Lake Weir routinely fails to meet the EPA's proposed total nitrogen standard, with levels sometimes reaching double what the EPA would allow.

The county's rivers don't fare much better: The Ocklawaha, Withlacoochee and Rainbow consistently surpass EPA's proposed river standards.

Fuller said FDEP's proposed rules allow for too many exceptions that would result in the standards never being adequately enforced.

FDEP Secretary Herschel Vinyard said in a statement that the judge's ruling validates his agency's effort to develop effective water quality standards that take into account Florida's unique hydrology and diversity when it comes to its fresh water bodies.

"Our rules provide a clear process for identifying waters impaired by nutrients, preventing harmful discharges, and establishing necessary reductions," Vinyard said.

But Fuller said FDEP's rules won't work.

"The problem (of nutrient pollution) is not going to go away. Even if we lose in court," he said.

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