

## **Guest commentary: Water district working to clear ATV riding hurdles**

Clarence Tears / Naples / Director, Big Cypress Basin

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Recent coverage of an ongoing effort to provide a safe and cost-effective site for all-terrain vehicle riders has not told the whole story of the South Florida Water Management District's history with Collier County.

In 2003, as part of the massive undertaking by the district and state to restore 55,000 acres of wetlands in Picayune Strand, Collier County required compensation for the acquisition of roads in the area. At that time, the district agreed to find an appropriate ATV site and invest \$1 million a year for 20 years to help maintain the county's local flood control system. To fulfill the agreement, the district's Big Cypress Basin has to date evaluated more than 20 alternative sites and invested \$7 million in the flood-control system, which alone is more than the value of the roads the state acquired seven years ago.

In 2007, Collier County amended the original agreement and accepted an ATV recreation site at Lake Trafford, with a commitment from the district to conduct any necessary environmental remediation once the restoration of the lake was complete.

The restoration was delayed in 2007 because of the drought; however, it has since recommenced and is expected to be completed in early 2011.

Additionally, the district's Big Cypress Basin committed \$585,000 for a boat-ramp facility. The district met these terms, which the county acknowledged in a letter dated Dec. 29, 2008, stating that the 2007 agreement was in full force and effect. It was only a few months after accepting these funds that the county then filed a lawsuit questioning the validity of the 2007 agreement.

The district recently rejected a first offer by Collier County to settle this litigation because of an open-ended, multimillion-dollar price tag for a 370-acre site in Hendry County with no appraisals or rationale for an established value. While the district wants to fulfill its commitment, it must do so with fiscal prudence and through the wise investment of taxpayer dollars, especially in tough economic times.

We continue to pursue opportunities to resolve this issue and are encouraged by the county's new willingness to entertain opportunities adjacent to Collier County.

Ultimately, we should focus on the returns the restoration of Picayune Strand is bringing to Southwest Florida. Not only is wildlife returning to the 13,000 acres of habitat already restored, but the state and its federal partners are also investing

several hundred million dollars into the local community to complete the restoration.

Over the long term, Collier environment, economy and quality of life are the beneficiaries.



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