

MONDAY, JULY 21, 2008

Compiled by: South Florida Water Management District
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Lake Okeechobee: Concrete weir to hold back waters almost complete

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Construction is nearly complete on a mammoth concrete weir intended to help keep water from overwhelming Lake Okeechobee flood control structures.

The \$19 million project was an emergency measure taken to address concerns about back-to-back droughts and historically low lake levels leaving aging flood control structures vulnerable to the rush of water that summer storms can bring.

The weir being built just north of the lake in the Kissimmee River includes 2.5 million pounds of 70-foot-long steel sheets and 110 million pounds of riprap stone that will help hold back water so flood gates can handle flows to the south.

The South Florida Water Management District expects to finish the weir by August

Good' bugs preparing to battle 'bad' plants

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Okeechobee News

SFWMD approves plan to continue de-veloping bio-defenses against invasive weeds

WEST PALM BEACH — The Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management Dis-strict (SFWMD) approved a three-year agreement to continue de-veloping biological controls — in the form of tiny insects — to help safeguard natural South Florida habitats from the insidious Brazil-ian Pepper and Old World Climb-ing Fern. The District is partnering with the U.S. Department of Agricul-ture's Agricultural Research Ser-vice to identify and establish a sustained population of natural enemies, known as biological controls, to reduce the spread of the pest plants. Biological con-trols against Florida's invasives are typically moths or mites that feed on or kill the exotic weeds. The effort will benefi t Everglades restoration as well as all natural Florida lands.

"Funding biological control research represents the District's commitment to using environ-mentally friendly alternatives for invasive weed eradication," said SFWMD Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle. " The ongoing part-nership between the District and the USDA is vital to success."

The Governing Board ap-proved nearly \$1.3 million for the invasives control program, which supports ongoing research and monitors the program's impacts. Close to \$200,000 is already bud-geted, with the remainder subject to the Board's budget approv-als for fiscal years 2009 through 2011.

Brazilian Pepper, *Schinus tere-binthifolius*, is a South American shrub introduced into Florida as an ornamental plant in the 1840s. Today, it is considered one of the most noxious, widespread weeds in Florida. The peppers readily in-vade everything from fallow farm-land to hardwood hammocks and mangrove forests.

Lygodium microphyllum, the climbing fern, is equally as aggres-sive in overtaking native plants. Both invaders destroy South Flori-da's vital wildlife habitats.

The District has funded a bio-control program for *Lygodium* since 1997. To date, 16 bio-agents have been identified as potential controls. Two moths and a mite have shown the most promise so far. Researchers are also seeking natural enemies of the Brazilian Pepper. For more information invasive plant management, visit www.sfwmd.gov. For information on the two invasive plants, visit the USDA Agricultural Research Ser-vice at: www.ars.usda.gov

Ritter picked for SFWMD service center

07/20/2008

Okeechobee News

Murphy, Charles

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By Charles M. Murphy - Okeechobee News

Okeechobee News Gary Ritter was selected by the South Florida Water Man-agement District to head the Okeechobee Service Center this week.

The selection followed a seven month search to replace Benita Whalen, and Mr. Ritter didn't have far to go to change jobs. A 30-year employee of the district, he had been working as the interim director since last year.

"I was s u r p r i s e d . I'm very excited be-cause I feel like I can expand on the service we give to these com-munities," Mr. Ritter said. "It is a great op-portunity for me."

Gary Ritter has been in Okeechobee since 1978. He worked for SFWMD even before they had a service center here. He becomes the fourth person to hold the position, and the fi rst with ties and long term roots to Okeechobee. Other directors in-cluded John Morgan, Bob Brown, and Whalen.

"I think my job now will be to keep people informed as we move ahead with restoration projects. I think people are more informed today," he said.

Mr. Ritter started in the district as a water quality technician. He went on to hold various positions in research, planning, regulatory work, and land management. His most recent job was as a liaison to local governments and with the emergency management de-partments in the Lake communi-ties.

Gary Ritter graduated from Boca Raton High School in 1972, and from the University of Florida in 1977. He earned a degree in forest resources and conservation with a minor in ecology. He came to Okeechobee to work for Jim Attaway at Attaway lumber.

Mr. Ritter said he appreciated all the support he received from local offi cials as he attempted to interview and earn this promo-tion to service center director. He noted a number of county com-missioners and city council mem-bers made calls on his behalf.

"I feel I'm very well connected to the community, and the people in these communities really ral-lied around me, I'm really thank-ful to them," he said.

Mr. Ritter said he will have an open door policy and will be willing to listen to any concerns or suggestions the public has. "I will take time to talk to them and I think that is one of the most im-portant parts of my job."

Gary Ritter takes over just as SFWMD is attempting one of their largest projects ever, the purchase of United States Sugar Corpora-tion. At the same time the District is looking at ways to pay for the purchase, and that could mean scaling back other projects, de-laying them, or eliminating them entirely.

Mr. Ritter said Okeechobee shouldn't see much of an im-pact. He noted the district is still committed to cleaning up Lake Okeechobee. Other projects in-clude a storm water treatment area at Lakeside Ranch which has acreage in both Okeechobee and Martin Counties. The District also went through with a purchase of the Brady Ranch which connects to Lakeside Ranch.

The STA at Lakeside Ranch is expected to begin construction in 2009.

Mr. Ritter said the district still has other projects to pursue that include a revitalization and resto-ration of the Indian Prairie Canal campground in Glades County. The district funded a study to look at how that project could be done and both Glades County and the District have joined forces in pur-suing the work.

Other recent projects include a recreation area installed at the former Grassy Island Ranch north of Okeechobee on U.S. 441. Au-thorities said a lot of people have used this facility.

The District also has work planned with the Okeechobee Utility Authority which includes the east side force main which will provide additional sewer service and eliminate septic tanks in Treasure Island and other areas.

The District also installed a tail water weir at S-65E on the Kissimmee River to protect the structure during low water levels.

Projects that will be placed on the back burner are a reservoir planned on Taylor Creek and the Limkin Creek drainage project.

"I'm looking forward to the challenge," he said. "I will respond to everybody if they have a question. I will find an answer for them," he said.

SFWMD board has vacancy

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Osceola News-Gazette

There is a vacant seat on the South Florida Water Management District Board that could be filled by an individual from Osceola County.

Gov. Charlie Crist will make this appointment.

If you or anyone you know are interested in applying for this vacancy, particularly anyone with an environmental or agricultural background, fill out a gubernatorial appointments questionnaire and send it to: Daniel Olson, The Capitol Building, 7th Floor, Suite 705, Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001.

If you have any questions, call the Governor's Appointments office at 850-488-2183 or Sen. Paula Dockery's office, 850-487-5040.

GRINNIN' IN YOUR FACE

07/20/2008

Naples Daily News

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Latest news on east Bonita water management project shovels insult on top of injury
CHAD GILLIS-Naples Daily News

I'm really troubled about the latest twist in the ongoing east Bonita saga. I was an environmental reporter years ago, and actually covered the court case where South Florida Water Management District officials testified in front of a judge that every single acre of the east Bonita project was needed to protect Bonita Springs from flooding.

Residents, after finding out about the project more than a decade ago, said for years that the real intention was to sell the lands to a developer. They feared the state was using eminent domain to move them out and bring in upscale golf courses.

The residents fought the project in court and lost. Most moved. Some left the state and started new lives in places like Alabama. Others stuffed their belongings in tiny apartments miles away from the wilds of east Bonita.

Years later we find out that the district isn't going through with the entire purchase/project because it's out of money. Now Tommy Strowd, the district's assistant deputy director for Everglades restoration, is saying the land south of the Kehl Canal is not necessary to complete what the district calls Southern CREW, an addition to the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed. Strowd said that the detailed planning and engineering had not been done before the project began.

That was not the district's stance in court. Their propaganda was uttered again and again: The district needed all 4,770 acres of the land, and every family in the targeted area had to move.

That was the district's motto after the 1995 floods, and it was toed until the last week or so (The Banner ran a story on the plan changes on Wednesday, July 16).

This wreaks of the steroid scandal in Major League Baseball. It's almost surreal.

Just to set the record straight, a state agency forced many families to sell their homes (for what the residents said was well below market value) and move away from east Bonita for an eminent domain project that's now broke the bank. People who once lived in east Bonita paid taxes to a government entity that ejected them from their homes only to stop well short of completing what was called a vital flood prevention project, one that would save homes along Imperial River during the next 100-year flood.

If it sounds illogical, that's because it is.

No government agency should do this, not in a free country. The worst part is that none of the families who moved can be made whole again. The district's shame will only grow if any of those several hundred acres that can't be purchased turn into a gated community or a posh retail strip.

Maybe they'd call it "Kick Out a Cracker Pointe" in memorial of former east Bonita families.

Editorial Bonita Springs land plan spurs distrust

07/19/2008

Naples Daily News

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Government and even some citizens wonder why government can sometimes have such a bad name.

They wonder why so many people are always on the lookout for and suspicious of abuses of power.

They wonder why citizens might cringe when they hear an official say he or she is just trying to help.

Now comes a textbook example that drives home all the above.

Property owners in eastern Bonita Springs are learning, partly through the news media, that the South Florida Water Management District, which has planned or carried out eminent domain proceedings on 3,700 of 4,700 targeted acres in the past decade, now says it doesn't really need all that land.

The district funded by these same property owners property taxes wants to sell an estimated 240 acres to Lee County for environmental preservation. The district wants to cancel purchase plans after all these years on other property.

A project at first estimated to cost \$14 million has already spent twice that and is said to need \$16 million more.

The decision now that the district can use different and better engineering strategies rather than earmark all the area north of Bonita Beach Road for drainage improvements turns the traditional notion of private property rights upside down.

Government has told people what they can do with their land, which is bothersome anyway, and then changed its mind.

The people lose, and there is not a single elected official in sight to be held accountable.

And to think that it all started with good intentions preventing catastrophic flooding a la 1995.

Outrageous.

When skeptics of government authority scout for a poster child for abuse and distrust, they need look no further.

Aquifer Recharged

07/18/2008

WGCU-FM

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The National Weather Service says two and a half inches of rain fell on Fort Myers Wednesday. So far, ten inches of rainfall have been recorded this month. While rainy weather can ruin a day at the beach, water managers say everyone benefits in the end. WGCU's John Davis reports.

Down Yonder Rain, rain don

07/20/2008

Naples Daily News

STEVE HART

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Steve Hart-Naples Daily News

Wouldnt ya just know it! Plenty of rain starts pourin down from the heavens just about the time South Floridas water regulators slap year-round rules on how much water we can throw on our lawns.

Youd think the South Florida Water Management District, with as much power as it has, could coordinate better with God over the weather!

A lot of folks hate bein told they cant water their pretty lawns as much as theyd like and they get testy every time the water district tells em to cut back.

Then it starts rainin and those same folks cant understand why the water bureaucrats think there is a water shortage and they just get angrier.

Too many of em also forget to turn off their awe-to-matic sprinklers. Aint nothin funnier or is it more tragic? than to see some fancy underground remote-control pop-up-out-of-the-ground sprinkler system spewin the wet stuff in a finely controlled mist as the rain is poundin down on the same Floratam yard.

It would seem natural that folks who fret over the beauty of their lawn would have perpetual conflict with the water bureaucrats who want em to quit frettin. But it aint natural and the conflict doesnt even have to exist in the first place.

To begin with, the reason water bureaucrats slap rules and regulations on lawn-waterin is because we pour way too much drinkin water on the grass.

Nearly every utilities chief in the region will tell you that during the winter when it doesnt rain much the single biggest use of water is put to irrigatin the grass. Plus, we aint got nearly enough rain in the last

few summers and were actually believe it or not in the middle of a relative drought.

But folks forget that havin neatly trimmed, bright green lawns is about as unnatural as Florida can get. If God had wanted Florida to look like a football field he wouldve filled in the Everglades and put lime markins all over it.

No maam, pretty green lawns just aint a natural part of Florida.

Once youve put in at great expense your pretty lawn, youve got to spend buckets of money buyin fertilizers and pesticides and Lord-knows-what-all to keep it green and pretty. And then, of course, youve got to mow the dang thing all the time.

So, what do we do about this dilemma of modern Florida life?

Well, sir, for one thing we dont need to irrigate our yards as much as we do. The yard will be just fine with 15 or 20 minutes of sprinklin once or twice a week. Heck, we dont need to irrigate during the summer at all, usually.

Second, we can be a lot smarter about the way we make our yards look pretty and, for that matter, what we mean by pretty.

Xeriscape, is a word some organization trademarked a few years back to describe plants and ground cover that grow naturally in Florida and are actually part of Florida.

Natural Florida plants long ago adjusted to the seasonal wet and dry months and prosper quite nicely under the half-a-year dry and half-a-year wet Florida climate.

What that means to homeowners is that if we plant natural Florida foliage we dont have to irrigate as much because the plants dont expect all that extra water, dont need it.

Now, I agree some folks can get carried away with their yards like the folks who covered their entire lot with rocks and concrete. Thats called, zero-scaping, not Xeriscaping.

But there are plenty of pretty plants that can decorate a yard and give it that natural Florida look without usin up somebody elses drinkin water.

It just requires a little common sense and you can find plenty of literature about Xeriscaping at just about any government office or commercial nursery.

Steve Hart is a sailor, angler, explorer, raconteur, amateur citrus-grower and semi-professional theologian who masqueraded as a Florida journalist and pundit for the last 25 years. A fifth-generation Floridian, Hart comes from solid cracker stock but revels in the changing face of 21st century Florida and its patchwork quilt of people, their cultures, traditions, shades and ideas. His book, *Tales from Down Yonder, Florida*, is available in local bookstores and on the Web at www.downyonderflorida.com.

City Budgets \$25K To Water Durrah Martin Fields

07/21/2008

Highlands Today

DOUG CARMAN

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Doug Carman - Highlands Today

AVON PARK - The city spent more money to water the Durrah Martin Complex than many people would spend on a new car, and it could end up spending even more next year just to keep the grass green.

The Avon Park City Council balked during its annual budget hearing Saturday afternoon when it saw \$25,000 budgeted to water the Durrah Martin Complex and its four baseball fields.

That didn't include any other maintenance for the park, interim recreation director Michelle Cuencas and parks foreman Larry LaFlam said.

'That's a killer,' councilman George Hall remarked as Financial Director Renee Green read the number.

LaFlam said that the baseball fields, which host Dixie League Youth Baseball games regularly, are watered at least once a week, but the South Florida Water Management District allows the city to water the fields one additional time after heavy usage.

'A lot of this is when we weren't getting a lot of rain,' LaFlam told the council.

Outside of the meeting, he estimated that the complex used from \$14,000 to \$16,000 in water each year before the drought.

Most of the water is used in the winter and spring, during the height of the youth league activity. Each time the fields are watered, LaFlam said, it's done for 30 minutes from 11 stations, with each station using two or three sprinkler heads that shoot water.

Since the baseball activity slows down during the summer and because of the recent summer rains, LaFlam said he cut the water usage in half, but the council still was jarred by the cost.

City Manager Sarah Adelt and Mayor Sharon Schuler suggested charging the leagues using the fields more money to cover the cost of the water bill.

'If they're raising money... they need to support the fields,' Schuler said.

Schuler also asked if the county was supposed to pitch in with the expense, but Green stated that the county does not cover the water usage.

LaFlam also mentioned that he could get some estimates so that it could use well water to irrigate the fields. Currently, the city's using its municipal supply, which is more expensive.

According to the proposed budget, the city will spend a total of

\$15,000 to water all of its other public parks, including Head Field, Memorial Field, Donaldson Park and Anoka's softball field.

Altogether, the park operation budget amounts to \$355,719, while its personnel cost for the 2008-2009 fiscal year amounts to \$235,123. An additional \$271,220 in grants will be spent to add a water playground to Donaldson Park and to replace most of the equipment at the Aline McWhite playground.

Doug Carman can be reached at 386-5838 or dcarman@highlandstoday.com

Reader Comments

Posted by (rnapper) on July 21, 2008 at 1:44 a.m. (Suggest removal)

By all means I would look into the cost of the well. There would be a large start up cost to do it correctly but the payoff would benefit the taxpayers many times over.

Post a comment

(Requires free registration.)

- * Keep it clean
- * Respect others
- * Don't hate
- * Don't use language you wouldn't use with your mom
- * Use 'Report Inappropriate Comments' link when necessary
- * See Member Agreement for details

Captain to address FSFA meeting

07/20/2008

Florida Today

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Recreational use permits online

Hikers, campers and horseback riders can now apply online for recreational use for activities on more than a dozen sites managed by the South Florida Water Management District.

The online application allows users to reserve space in areas including Hickory Hammock in Highlands County, Micco Landing in Okeechobee County and KICCO Wildlife Management Area in Osceola County. More than 271,000 acres of District lands from Orange to Miami-Dade counties are open for recreation.

Limited numbers of special use licenses are available for specific activities at each site. Licenses are limited when necessary to coordinate with district land management activities.

To access applications, visit www.sfwmd.gov/sul

More details about recreational opportunities on district lands are available online and in our Recreational Guide. Go to www.sfwmd.gov, and click on 'Recreation.'

Singer Islanders may see tax hike

07/18/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Cooper, William

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William Cooper-Palm Beach Post

RIVIERA BEACH The city council tentatively approved a budget Friday where mainland homeowners could see an 18 percent drop in taxes while residents on Singer Island, with pricier homes, may face an increase.

The council voted 4-1, with Councilwoman Lynne Hubbard dissenting, to boost the tax rate by 3.8 percent. Hubbard wanted her colleagues to pass a lower rate for the sake of taxpayers.

Budget at a glance

Proposed budget: \$58.5 million, up 9.2 percent

Proposed tax rate: \$8.75 per \$1,000 taxable property value, up 3.8 percent.

Proposed property tax income: \$35 million, up 4 percent. (A portion, about \$2.4 million, will go to the city's Community Redevelopment Agency.)

Personnel: The city would provide a 2 percent cost of living increase for employees and cut three vacant positions; a police commander, a code enforcement officer and a city planner. Two positions will be added; a project manager for community development and an accounting technician, working for both the finance and purchasing departments.

Public hearings: Sept. 3. and Sept. 17.

'Unless I'm missing something, there's really not much value in increasing the millage and putting the burden on the residents at this time,' Hubbard said.

Instead, the council approved a tax rate of \$8.75 for every \$1,000 in taxable property value over the current rate of \$8.43 per \$1,000. The higher rate raises about \$1.2 million in additional revenue, said Karen Hoskins, the city's assistant finance director.

City Manager Bill Wilkins proposed a budget that eliminates three vacant positions: a police commander, code enforcement officer and city planner. But it calls for no layoffs and keeps intact a 2 percent cost of living raise.

The city's budget will grow from \$53.6 million to \$58.5 million, according to Wilkins' proposal. The 9.2 percent increase comes from savings and fees.

Last year, the council overrode the state imposed tax cap and generated \$2 million more in revenue.

For property owners, the tax picture shapes up this way: The owner of a \$125,000 home, less the new \$50,000 homestead exemption, will pay about \$689 in taxes. That's about an 18 percent reduction over last year's \$843.

However, owners whose homes are worth over \$386,000, such as many of those on Singer Island, will likely see a tax increase. Property values rose slightly, going from 3.9 billion in 2007 to \$4 billion in 2008. The 2 percent increase is a result of new construction in the city, but it's far less than the double-digit increases Riviera Beach has experienced over the past five years.

The council also learned that its marina is running a \$200,000 deficit. The loss is due to fewer wet slip and dry storage customers as well as boaters buying less fuel.

The city is looking to increase revenue by renegotiating its franchise agreement with Florida Power & Light, initiating a bond issue to replace its aging storm water system and possibly creating a beach taxing district on Singer Island to pay for dune renourishment.

The city is also considering raising water rates by 17 percent. Water revenues dropped 23 percent partly because of the restrictions imposed by the South Florida Water Management District.

Meanwhile, Councilman Shelby Lowe said the board has ample time to lower the tax rate at subsequent budget hearings. It would be a mistake to approve a rate that leaves the council little room to make changes, he said.

'We need to have a little bit of a cushion to be on the safe side,' Lowe said.

Two Port Of PB Commission Incumbents Facing Challengers

07/19/2008

Town-Crier Newspapers, The

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Two of three incumbent Port of Palm Beach commissioners face challengers this year in partisan races for their seats.

Eight-year Group 1 incumbent Wayne Richards, a Democrat, will face Republican Thomas McCracken in November.

Longtime Group 2 incumbent George Mastics, a Democrat, is being challenged by fellow Democrat Charles Bantel in the Aug. 26 primary election. Since no other candidates have filed, the primary will decide the winner and will be open to all voters, not just Democrats.

Group 3 incumbent Jean Enright, a Democrat, is unopposed.

The port district includes The Acreage, Loxahatchee Groves and Royal Palm Beach. Voters in those areas get to vote for port commissioners. Although set up as a special taxing authority, the port has not levied a property tax since 1975.

Group 1 incumbent Richards, an attorney, lives in Bayhill Estates near The Acreage. First elected in 2000, he recalled being a "minority of one" on the commission the first few years, with fresh ideas that hit a brick wall. "I was viewed as an outsider and an upstart," he said. One of the major tenets of the port is to reinvest five percent of its revenue into port improvements to encourage cargo and passenger activity. Richards found that much of that money was in questionable areas such as marketing salaries. "The money was not in areas calculated to increase revenue," he said. Another challenge for the port is that Peanut Island and the Palm Beach Inlet limit the size of ships it can accommodate. Despite those limitations, Richards said he and port staff are about to reach an agreement with a yet-to-be-named cruise operator that would conduct cruises from the port to the Bahamas. He said he expects an announcement to be made in the next three to four weeks. "We have met with harbor pilots who agree the ship would have adequate navigability. It would be a tremendous plus for the county," Richards said. Over the last five years, Richards said he has spearheaded beneficial visits with officials at the port's major trading partners to stimulate commerce. The first was to Freeport and Nassau in the Bahamas, which get 50 to 60 percent of their food from the Port of Palm Beach via Tropical Shipping. The following year port officials went to the Dominican Republic, the port's second biggest trader, and then to Trinidad and Tobago. "These trade missions are about meeting with counterparts, utilizing local chambers of commerce there and meshing them with us," Richards said. "They have been very successful." Under his chairmanship last year, Richards said the commission retained a labor firm to design criteria to analyze the effectiveness of the port director as well as the port.

A new director, Manuel Almira, started on Monday. Almira was previously marketing director for Port Everglades. "He was my number-one choice," Richards said. "He understands the industry. He knows cargo carriers and cruise operators. He's a sharp guy with a

proven track record. "He said former director Lori Baer took some heat during her tenure when she raised the possibility of taxation to make up for revenue shortfalls. "I want to increase revenue," Richards said. "But I don't want to have to assess taxes. We need to go out there and get business and not tax residents." "The increased security measures required since 2001 have taken a tremendous bite out of port revenue, Richards said. The commission is currently working on a budget of \$12.5 million to \$13 million with \$5 million on security, he said. "It has taken time and effort for the board to come around and realize we need to make more revenue," he said. "The board is fairly uniform against taxes. I'm a Democrat, but I am very fiscally conservative. I understand the value of hard work. My record reflects that. The future looks very good for the port." Richards said that while depreciation has made the port's books show a loss, it is actually operating in the black.

But challenger McCracken, 60, a North Palm Beach resident who works as a financial manager for the South Florida Water Management District, said the port is in a bad situation. It has been showing a loss the past five years and expects to lose up to \$3 million in the coming year. "Something has to change drastically," he said. McCracken said the port would benefit from his background in financial management. Holding a master's degree in business administration, he was budget director for Rinker Materials for several years until he went on to hold various financial management jobs 21 years ago with the SFWMD.

Originally from Indiana, he has lived in the area since 1962 and attended Lake Worth High School, Palm Beach Junior College and Florida Atlantic University. He said his interest in the port stems from an interest in overall business management perspectives.

Besides his employment with Rinker and the SFWMD, McCracken volunteered as treasurer with Habitat for Humanity of for 12 years, starting at a time when the organization had not filed a tax return in two years and was piling up IRS penalties. He worked three years at improving its financial standing, and after five years the organization finally received a clean financial bill of health.

McCracken is a retired Army sergeant major who spent 34 years in the service counting both active duty and reserves, including active duty in the Pentagon between March 2005 and August 2006 during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He also served temporary duty in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

McCracken said the port is not reaching its fullest business potential by getting the tenants it should. He alleges the sitting commissioners are entrenched and the commission needs a turnover. "There's three lawyers [on the board] and one on staff, and they are not in legal trouble," he said. "They need some businesspeople." Although the incumbents point proudly to the fact that it does not levy taxes, McCracken asks, "What do they do when they're bankrupt?" clarifying that government organizations do not actually declare bankruptcy, but will declare a financial crisis and the need to levy a tax.

Group 2 incumbent Mastics paints a glowing record of commercial growth over the 12 years he has served on the commission as well as a gleaming future, but challenger Charles Bantel doesn't agree with that assessment.

Mastics has served as commission chairman three times. In his three terms he said he has seen the port triple in revenue. "The port has

not taxed property owners in 33 years," he said. "We're self-supporting. We don't tax, and we're proud of that." He also points with pride to the \$34 million, half-mile Skypass Bridge over the port area, which took less than a year to build, he said. "The genius of it is that prior to 9/11 people on U.S. 1 had to drive through the port," he said. "We put in a new office and terminal and enlarged Slip No. 1. Now we have three slips." Mastics said the port is now working on the southernmost Slip 3 to make it bigger and deeper to accommodate larger vessels. There is also a plan in place for an access road so trucks can come in off State Road 710 more easily. Meanwhile, a new \$10 million warehouse is almost finished, he said.

Mastics noted that a conference Tuesday discussed plans for an inland inter-modal port complex of about 5,000 acres that will involve residents of Pahokee, South Bay and the Glades - a plant that Mastics said is perfect in light of the South Florida Water Management District making effort to acquire thousands of acres of land currently used for growing sugar cane.

The project would include 55 miles of railroad track and possibly incorporate land connections to Port Manatee in Tampa as well as other ports, he said.

Mastics said it is an exciting time to be at the port, despite the increased economic challenges posed by federal security requirements, which he characterized as an unfunded mandate. Mastics' challenger Bantel is an electrician by trade and became interested in port operations because of his knowledge of and work with maritime navigation systems.

Bantel, who unsuccessfully ran for the West Palm Beach City Commission last year, said he is concerned about local people getting jobs at the port and feels some of the laborers are not fully documented, possibly creating a dangerous situation on the work site because they are afraid to refuse to perform tasks that might be considered dangerous.

Bantel said he is troubled that the port commissioners all have full-time jobs and do not put in the time that should be devoted to board work. Because of their jobs, commissioners sometimes have trouble agreeing on a meeting date, he said. "The Port of Palm Beach is unable to report a correct meeting date. You have to call and find out," he said. "They try for the third Thursday, but they haven't met that mark in months." The state transportation and inland port system that has been proposed is nothing more than talk, Bantel said. "They've talked about that since 1982, and they are still talking," he said. "They don't have a location for the inland port. That's still up in the air." He said another troublesome development is that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has indicated it may no longer dredge the port because of budget cuts, which would further limit the number of vessels that could use the port. Maintaining the inlet and waterways is a part of the port's duty, Bantel said.

None of the sitting commissioners own a yacht, which he feels limits their understanding of the industry. "It seems like they are oblivious to the waterfront needs they control," Bantel said.

U.S. Sugar Co. hires Palm-City based GCY Inc. for survey of Everglades property area

07/19/2008

Jupiter Courier

ZACHARY FAGENSON Correspondent

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ZACHARY FAGENSON-Stuart News

PALM CITY While details of negotiations between the state and U.S. Sugar Co. to purchase 187,000 acres of the Everglades are still under wraps, the sugar giant has hired a Martin County surveying and mapping firm to accurately establish the boundaries of the company's holdings.

Over the next four months, Palm-City based GCY Inc. will undertake the monumental task of mapping out 58 percent of U.S. Sugar's Everglades property, almost 108,000 acres of the state's swamplands.

This is just one step in helping to restore the battered wetlands, said Chappy Young, president and founder of GCY Inc.

'This project is a continuation of the cleanup of the Everglades and I'm pleased to be a part of it,' he said. 'We know that because of what U.S. Sugar and the state are doing, the Everglades will reap some rewards in the very near future.'

Because of the nature of the deal, Young was unable to disclose the cost of the project as well as what his firm has been specifically contracted to do.

On June 24, U.S. Sugar announced the sale of its Everglades holdings to the South Florida Water Management District for \$1.75 billion.

Now, the two parties must reach an agreement after the 75-day negotiating period ends in mid-September, according to Randy Smith, spokesman for the South Florida Water Management District.

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Clewiston's Namesake Would Favor Restoration, Grandson Says

07/20/2008

Tampa Tribune - Online

PHILIP MORGAN

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PHILIP MORGAN-TAMPA TRIBUNE

TAMPA - The state's plan to buy 187,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. worries the residents of Clewiston, whose town near Lake Okeechobee grew up with the sugar industry and is threatened by the loss of its main industry.

But the late Alonzo Clewis, the Tampa businessman who helped establish the town, would have been in favor of the state's Everglades restoration effort. His grandson believes. 'He would have been all for it,' says G. Blaine Howell, 81, of Tampa, explaining that Clewis would have been dismayed over the decades of damage to the Everglades. 'He loved the land.' Though he made a fortune as a banker, Clewis loved farming. He became intrigued when he heard that rich farmland was available southwest of the lake at a place called Sand Point. According to family lore, he saw Seminoles growing sugar cane and figured they knew best what would grow in the area.

Clewis sold thousands of acres to a group that would become the U.S. Sugar Corp.

In 1919, Marian Horowitz O'Brien, a wealthy developer and the first mayor of Moore Haven, approached Clewis with a plan to create a town. O'Brien, her husband, and Clewis formed a company to develop Sand Point and another company to bring the railroad from Moore Haven. The first locomotive arrived in the newly named Clewiston on Labor Day 1921.

At that time, Clewis was president of Exchange Bank of Tampa. Born in Georgia in 1864 and orphaned at age 12, he came to Tampa in 1888 and worked for a real estate abstract company. In 1890, he started an insurance agency. A few years later, he bought two abstract companies and merged them into Tampa Abstract Co. He also founded Tampa Building and Loan Association.

Among his acquisitions was Myrtle Hill Cemetery. Howell says that when someone asked him why he bought a cemetery, he answered, 'There are two things in life that are certain, death and taxes, and I haven't figured out how to tax people.'

Sorrowful demise of sweet sugar

07/20/2008

Weekly Gleaner

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Welcome to 'America's Sweetest Town' - born, built and raised on sugar, a true workingman's community in the sweaty heartland of the Florida Everglades.

The Sugarland Highway slices through palm tree-lined downtown Clewiston, past the Cuttin Up Barber Shop, the Common Grounds coffee shop and the American flags flapping atop businesses and light poles.

The annual Sugar Festival draws thousands.

Cars sport bumper stickers reading 'Sugar: Just 15 calories a spoonful.' And Sugar Realty offers 'the sweetest deal in town.' But with the announcement that Clewiston's dominant employer, US Sugar Corp, will likely go out of business in six years, many residents and workers are pondering life in a company town without a company and wondering how the community will survive.

Sale

Nearly 80 years after it formed here during the Great Depression, United States Sugar plans to sell some 300 square miles (777 square kilometres) around Clewiston to the state, which wants the land as part of its plan to clean up the Everglades wetlands. Agriculture, like sugar and citrus, has long stymied restoration efforts, blocking water flow and adding pollutants from fertilisers to the ecosystem.

The sale of the largest US producer of cane sugar means 1,700 workers will be left jobless, not to mention the spin-off effects on Clewiston businesses that depend on them as customers. US Sugar is the heart of Clewiston, literally - the town is built around the company's two-storey red-brick headquarters, and the mill is just down the road.

News of shutdown

News of the shutdown landed 'somewhere between getting punched in the stomach and food poisoning,' said Greg Thompson, 38, who has been with the company for 20 years and is head of the local sugar union. 'Everyone felt like the breath had been knocked out of them,' Thompson said. It is not all bad news for the workers, though.

Under the \$1.75 billion deal, hourly employees will get a year's pay as severance, while salaried workers will get two years' pay. Since the company is partially employee owned, those who are vested will receive about \$350 per share.

The company declined to provide details on how many shares an average employee owns. Thompson, who also would not reveal details, said employees were starting to count up their shares 'to see if they'd be able to pick up and move somewhere else'. For many who have worked at the mill, on the railroad and in the fields for decades, the news was a stunner. The company kept its negotiations with the state secret. Employees were told about the deal with the rest of the world, through a news conference Tuesday. 'It's really something,' said US Sugar railroad mechanic Tom Owens, 44, as he rubbed his hand firmly across his forehead, smearing the sweaty grit below his ballcap's bill.

Lives on sugar 'I'm third generation. This community lives on sugar,' Owens said. Ramn Iglesias, 36, manager of Roland Martins Marina

and Resort alongside Lake Okeechobee, has lived his whole life in this town of 7,000. 'Clewiston is US Sugar and it always has been,' Iglesias said. In 1931, the town near the bottom centre of the state between coasts was a speck on the map, surrounded by rich, black soil, known as muck, that would later become its fortune.

Industrialist Charles Mott transformed the old bankrupt, and much smaller Southern Sugar Company into US Sugar. The company brought in sugar experts from Louisiana, Cuba and the West Indies, and by 1941, a profitable Florida sugar industry had emerged and the town began to take shape amid the tall, green stalks.

Twenty years later, when Fidel Castro stopped Cuban sugar imports into the US, the company began to boom, eventually operating two mills, a 200-mile (322-kilometre) railroad system and accumulating its land.

The demise of the company, which processes up to 800,000 tons of sugar a year, has rattled residents and business owners, who rely on sales to mill workers, field hands, mechanics and contractors.

But Clewiston has always been resilient, struggling back repeatedly from despair after drought, depression and a massive 1928 hurricane that killed an estimated 2,500 people in the region.

Opportunity amid despair

Many residents hope another industry, possibly a food processor, might come in and take over the high-tech mill. Maybe other large companies will eye the region as a cheap alternative to the high-priced coastal communities.

Or maybe the town's geography will again be its salvation, a big enough draw to establish a tourism-based economy. 'We've got Lake Okeechobee at our back door and the Everglades at our front door,' Mayor Mali Chamness said. 'And when we talk about America's sweetest town, it's not just because of the sugar that's grown here, it's because of the people.' Residents like Iglesias see opportunity amid the despair. 'I think in the long run it's going to be good for Clewiston,' said Iglesias, who makes his living off folks who come to fish in Lake Okeechobee, the second-largest freshwater body in the contiguous United States. 'We're going to bounce back,' Iglesias said, 'and we're going to be stronger than before US Sugar got here.' - AP

A LINGERING LAWSUIT COULD PUT A SQUEEZE ON THE EVERGLADES' RESTORATION PROJECT.

07/18/2008

NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

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NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

A LINGERING LAWSUIT COULD PUT A SQUEEZE ON THE EVERGLADES'RESTORATION PROJECT. ACCORDING TO PUBLISHED REPORTS. THE NATIONAL WILD LIFE FEDERATION FILED THE LAWSUIT ORDERING THAT THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT FOLLOW GUIDELINES TO SHOW IT FLOWS TO DID EVERGLADES CORRECTLY. OFFICIALS SAY THE LAWSUIT COULD HURT THE BORROWING POWER WHICH IS NEGOTIATING A \$187,000 ACRE PURCHASE FOR NEARLY \$2 MILLION FROM US SUGAR.

Community News Marcus and Jamason face off on the issues at forum

07/19/2008

Jupiter Courier

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BY KIT BRADSHAW-Stuart News

In one of the most hotly contested races, that for District 1 of the Palm Beach County Commission, incumbent Karen Marcus and challenger John Jamason faced each other in a spirited and informative debate Tuesday night.

The event, sponsored by the Juno Beach Civic Association, pitted the two in a civil but feisty confrontation, where longtime commissioner Karen Marcus of North Palm Beach and Palm Beach County employee John Jamason of Jupiter Farms promoted their points of view about a myriad of topics.

The Juno Beach Town Center was packed for the forum, and the audience wasn't shy when jotting down tough questions for moderator Roger Buckwalter to field to the candidates.

Questions took up most of the hour-and-a-half debate, leaving scant minutes for the initial comments and summation by Marcus and Jamason. The theme of money - how it should saved, spent, taxed and used - was paramount during the question-and-answer period, but other issues were also addressed.

Here are some of the many questions answered by the candidates during the forum:

Q: What plans do you have for budget cuts in lieu of higher real estate taxes?

Marcus: We planned on this set aside of a lot of dollars in reserve and will be cutting programs. Next year, we're looking at buyouts for many of the longtime employees in the county, but still be able to provide services. But there are many expenses that are mandated by the state Legislature, such as funding for Tri-Rail and paying off the touch-screen voting machines that we are not now using.

Jamason: I'm a fiscal conservative and the commission has not been good stewards of tax dollars. We need to make cuts to non-

essentials. There needs to be a thinning out of the bureaucracy. Government is making the easy cuts, but is not looking at the manager who has been there for 30 years. This means cutting my co-workers. It is unfortunate, but we have to grin and bear it.

Q. Do you support expanding local gambling?

Marcus: The Florida Legislature will make the decision. Gov. (Charlie) Crist's plan with the tribe got shot down. If it does happen, then we need to make sure that local government has a say so with zoning and compatibility with the surrounding areas. It is up to the voters and the Legislature whether or not it expands.

Jamason: Personally, I don't think it should expand, but we don't need to take away what we have, such as greyhound racing. If people really want to gamble, they can go on the 'Palm Beach Princess.' We don't want to be like Las Vegas.

Q. What is your position on the purchase of the land and business of U.S. Sugar?

Marcus: I'm pleased that this occurred. This is a way to have a flow-way between the southern part of Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades and to provide a new natural area. We will be working with the residents of the Glades - the governor has mandated this - to create a sustainable economy that is not dependent on agriculture.

Jamason: I think in theory it is good, but it is bad to take this property off the tax rolls - \$5 million will be taken off. And we are shutting down a sugar mill as well. I would like to see the state use this money they will be paying to buy U. S. Sugar for education and the courts. And don't forget that the Fanjul family is still involved, and they'll get their money for their land.

Q. What should the Commission be doing to promote housing in the county?

Marcus: Voluntary inclusionary programs didn't work, so we now have mandatory inclusionary housing. I don't think we need to encourage housing. What we need to do is encourage housing in the \$150,000 to \$200,000 range. We will have this opportunity in the Briger property. We need to work with land trusts. Kennedy Estates, where we owned the land and put in the infrastructure and Habitat for Humanity is building the homes is an example of providing infill housing.

Jamason: We need to eliminate inclusionary housing provision. It may have worked five years ago when the marketing was booming but not now. We need to look at infills with nonprofits as the way to go. We should encourage the housing department to get Federal grants for buying housing.

Q. What do you think about the Briger property in Palm Beach Gardens?

Marcus: This is a 20-year project in progress. Seventy acres is for the expansion of Scripps. We are now master planning the property for bioscience and housing, and when the economy settles down, that's when it will begin. It will take 15 to 18 months just to get the permits, since this is a Development of Regional Impact.

Jamason: Four million square feet of commercial space is slated for Briger, that's one-tenth of all the commercial space in all the county.

There are plans for seven homes per acre, and if we do this, we'll have others asking for this kind of density. Palm Beach County will march to the west ... it is just a matter of time.

Q. What should be done with Mecca Farms?

Marcus: It is the perfect opportunity to apportion some of this property to go back to its natural state. It doesn't need infrastructure. Tie it into the Vavrus property and Corbett. To help the Loxahatchee River. It could support large equestrian estates. I don't think westward expansion is inevitable, if you plan it right.

Jamason: It should have been where Scripps and a bioscience village should have gone. Now, the county would be crazy to sell it. We'll have to sit on it. I would love to see it go back to agriculture.

Q. Do you support purchasing more preserve area?

Marcus: If it is a quality piece, and we can work with the municipalities as we've done with Jupiter, Juno Beach, and others, then we should.

Jamason: There isn't much more to buy; half the county is in county hand and off the tax rolls. As long as everyone realizes that this property comes off the tax rolls and we'll have to pay for the maintenance of the land, then you can purchase it.

Q. Do you see any further budget cuts, and where would you draw the line?

Marcus: We need to have county departments reinvent themselves, so there are better efficiencies. There will be program cuts. The private sector needs to step up in arts and culture area. No one is talking about cutting parks and natural lands.

Jamason: I think things will get worse next year. It is hard to say what the state Legislature will do. The size of government needs to be cut. We look at challenging the way things are. There are plenty of environmental places to cut.

Q. What about the user fee for boaters? Marcus: We

Balancing act

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Tallahassee Democrat

Ecological, economic interests at heart of EPA case

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this?

By any measure, water is critical to environmental and economic health. Pollute it sufficiently and it becomes virtually useless for drinking and recreation. But entire economies and communities would die if lakes, rivers and oceans were off limits to commerce.

Balance must be the objective.

In a broad sense, achieving a better balance is the goal of a lawsuit filed in federal court last week in Tallahassee by five environmental groups. They sued the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, contending that the EPA is violating the federal Clean Water Act by not setting new limits for urban and agricultural runoff that fuels algae blooms in Florida waterways.

Here in the capital region, we've seen how harmful nutrient pollution can be. Pollutants from the city of Tallahassee's Tram Road spray field have promoted the growth of algae and invasive hydrilla at Wakulla Springs, and now the city is spending multimillions of dollars to mitigate the damage.

The lawsuit against the federal agency charged with protecting America's environment alleges it has neglected its mission. According to Earthjustice, the public-interest law firm representing the five plaintiffs, the EPA gave the state until 2004 to set limits for nutrient pollution. The state disregarded the deadline, Earthjustice says, and the EPA also failed to set its own limits — instead approving a plan that, at best, would result in only proposed limits by 2011.

If the suit succeeds, it could have national implications.

The case throws a spotlight on sustainability — that is, making sure that air, water, land and other natural assets are sufficiently protected to ensure that future generations can benefit from the health and economic advantages they provide.

That the suit was filed in Florida is significant partly for historical reasons: Nutrient pollution has played a huge role in Sunshine State economic growth, but now Floridians and U.S. taxpayers are paying the price.

More than a century ago, unspoiled Everglades land was sold dirt cheap so Florida could recover from crippling Civil War debt.

In 1881, then-Gov. William Bloxham struck a historic deal with Philadelphia industrialist Hamilton Disston, selling him 4 million acres at 25 cents each to help pay off the state's creditors. In exchange, he could drain huge swaths of what eventually became known as the River of Grass.

It was the beginning of a drain-and-fill frenzy that turned Florida from backwater to boom state. In the process, a delicate Everglades ecology that we now know is a crucial component in the natural water filtration process and even climate of South and Central Florida was severely damaged, not only by drainage but also a steady stream of

agricultural runoff.

As a result, billions of dollars have been approved by Congress for Everglades restoration and a \$1.75 billion deal is in the works for a public purchase of 300 square miles of Everglades land owned by U. S. Sugar Corp. And the Everglades is just one example of nutrient pollution, an ongoing problem in our state.

As populations grow, migrate and consume, it's critical that we do a better job at finding the right balance between ecological and economic interests. Continued failure has dire implications for the not-too-distant future.

IT IS THE VISIBLE LINE THAT DIVIDES THE EVERGLADES FROM EVERYTHING ELSE.

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CBS4 News at 11 PM - WFOR-TV

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CBS4 News at 11 PM - WFOR-TV

GET READY FOR A FIGHT. THE STATE SAYS IT WILL TRY AND STOP FURTHER DEVELOPMENT BEYOND THE SO-CALLED URBAN DEVELOPMENT LINE. IT IS THE VISIBLE LINE THAT DIVIDES THE EVERGLADES FROM EVERYTHING ELSE. THEY APPROVED THE CONSTRUCTION FROM A BUSINESS PARK AND A LOWE'S HOME IMPROVEMENT STORE. THE CASE WILL HEAD TO COURT SOMETIME NEXT YEAR. PERMITS CANNOT BE ISSUED FOR THE NEW PROJECT IN THE MEANTIME.

State blocks efforts to expand Miami-Dade's UDB

07/18/2008

South Florida Business Journal

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South Florida Business Journal

The Florida Department of Community Affairs ruled that plans for a commercial center and a Lowe's Home Improvement store outside the UDB were not compliant with state land use laws. That finding means the state must initiate a proceeding before an administrative law judge, a process where overriding the DCA has been rare.

Despite a veto by county Mayor Carlos Alvarez and earlier objections from the DCA, county commissioners voted 9-4 in favor of two comprehensive plan amendments on April 24.

Mooresville, N.C.-based Lowe's Home Centers, which has 15 vacant acres inside the UDB, wants to expand to include 21.6 acres outside the boundary and open up an additional 30.1 acres outside the boundary for a charter school, although the zoning could allow other uses if a charter school didn't buy the land. The sites are on the western fringes of Southwest Eighth Street.

The other project planned for outside the UDB is a commercial center on 42 acres west of West Kendall Drive by David Brown, Steven Brown and Victor Brown.

The DCA stated that the UDB should only be moved for such developments when there isn't an adequate supply of land for similar development inside the UDB. Miami-Dade County staff found no need for extra land for commercial development -- and the DCA agreed.

The DCA also objected to the Lowe's project building over wetlands and the Brown project replacing agricultural land.

Miami-Dade County planning officials did not respond to a call and e-mail. The attorneys for both developers did not return calls for comment.

State to fight change to Dade development line, Miami riverfront

07/18/2008

Miami Herald - Online

MATTHEW I. PINZUR and MICHAEL VASQUEZ

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MATTHEW I. PINZUR and MICHAEL VASQUEZ

State regulators will fight local plans to build two controversial projects in West Dade and invite more residential development along the Miami River, the Florida Department of Community Affairs announced Friday.

Regulators said the Miami-Dade commission violated its own growth policies, approving a business park and a Lowe's home improvement store that the county's own analysis said were not needed. It would build unnecessarily on wetlands, the state said, and violate numerous Florida guidelines about protected lands and urban growth.

They similarly rejected the City of Miami's vote to gut protections for waterfront businesses such as marinas and shipping lines.

Unless the state and local governments can settle, the case will be heard by an administrative law judge. Such a hearing would not take place for months, possibly not until early next year. In the interim, permits cannot be issued for the new projects.

DCA files objections to Miami River plans

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South Florida Business Journal

The Florida Department of Community Affairs filed several objections to Miami's plan to eliminate zoning protections for the marine industry along the Miami River.

The DCA said, among other things, that the proposed comprehensive plan amendments do not include meaningful and predictable strategies to guide and control development along the river, which it said allows the recreational and commercial uses of the waterfront to be vulnerable to "piecemeal displacement by residential uses."

The DCA also questioned the economic soundness of the plan, saying redevelopment should include economic development and job creation at the neighborhood level and that it is premature to do a comprehensive plan favoring residential development when the economic development study on the Miami River has not been completed.

The DCA also said the amendment lacks strategies to ensure effective intergovernment coordination among the government entities that have planning responsibilities related to the river, including the Miami River Commission, Miami-Dade County and the South Florida Regional Planning Council -- all which objected to the proposed amendments.

The DCA also had objections to the city's planning for traffic, affordable housing, water and coastal hazard management.

Critics of Martin County deep injection well call it a 'terrible idea'

07/20/2008

Jupiter Courier

Andreassi, George

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Andreassi, George-Stuart News

JENSEN BEACH With state environmental officials poised to issue a permit to Martin County for an injection well that sends treated wastewater, concentrated salt water and landfill leachate about 3,000 feet underground, several environmentalists are questioning whether the system will threaten drinking water supplies.

Joe Florio, a Jensen Beach homeowner who gets his drinking water from a well, said he is particularly concerned the leachate from the closed Palm City Landfill that is pumped into the injection well could contaminate the Floridan and surficial aquifers that provide most of the county's drinking water.

'This raw leachate is coming right out of the landfill and has no treatment whatsoever,' Florio said. 'You can just imagine what's in that liquid. We've been drinking this water the past couple of years. It should be a concern. We don't know what's in it.'

Florio has written to the Martin County Commission and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to share his concerns and ask for public hearings on the well permit.

But no one from the public attended a hearing about the injection well permit May 1 at the North Martin County Water and Wastewater Treatment Facility, said DEP and county utilities officials.

The DEP published a notice Tuesday announcing it intends to issue an operating permit for the well and set a July 29 deadline to ask for an administrative hearing.

Martin County and DEP officials said the injection well has been tested regularly for the past five years and no problems have arisen. The officials said the well is safe, the leachate meets state standards, and there is no reason to deny the permit.

'Mr. Florio's concerns are unfounded,' said Anne Murray, the county's hydrologist, and Ted Robbins, a Utilities Department administrator, in a memo to the commissioners. 'There has been no evidence of upward fluid migration through the confinement at the site and no threat to potable water supplies.'

The 10,000 gallons per day of landfill leachate injected into the well amounts to less than 1 percent of the fluids disposed of underground, said Utilities Director John Polley.

'The leachate undergoes chemical analysis to demonstrate that is not hazardous,' said DEP spokeswoman Cristina Llorens. 'Injection of hazardous substances is prohibited by DEP rules. The permitting process is designed to minimize any potential for environmental harm.'

The well started operating in January 2002 under a construction permit and now is being considered for an operating permit, Polley said. IW-2 replaced the county's first injection well, IW-1, which was in operation from 1986 until 2002, and has recently been plugged.

But Florio is not alone in his concerns about the content of the landfill leachate rainwater that passes through the piles of garbage and collects at the bottom.

Gerhard 'Gary' Witt, an expert on injection wells who co-authored a book entitled 'Groundwater Injection: Modeling, Risks, and Regulations,' said there have been problems with some injection wells in Brevard, Broward, Miami-Dade and Pinellas counties.

Donna Melzer, the chairwoman of the Martin County Conservation Alliance, and Howard Heims, an environmental and land use lawyer, said they share Florio's concerns.

'I think it's a terrible idea, based on what I know that's happened in other parts of the state. What's happened in Florida is they leak,' Heims said. 'Common sense tells you, don't put anything that's not 100 percent pure, drinkable water down into our drinking water supply. We get our water from the aquifers, and there's already a shortage.'

MARTIN COUNTY DEEP WELL INJECTION

Location: 3100 N.W. Hillman Drive, Jensen Beach

Well depth: 3,350 feet

Treated wastewater flow in May: 958,000 gallons per day

Reverse osmosis concentrate flow in May: 1.29 million gallons per day

Landfill leachate flow in May: 5,000 gallons per day

Total flow in May: 2.25 million gallons per day

Well capacity: 7.37 million gallons per day

Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Editorial: Doing it by the numbers

07/18/2008

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Naples Daily News

A new state survey identifies waterways most in need of cleaning.

The survey goes one step further and puts a number on the percentage of targeted pollution reduction.

Naples' Gordon River is recommended for a 29 percent cutback; Bonita Springs' Imperial River is earmarked for 22 percent.

Immokalee's Lake Trafford needs to clean up by 60 to 77 percent, the Department of Environmental Protection says.

Good. We've long known all those bodies of water need some work.

Now we have something to aim for, on our way to the goal for all waters — 100 percent.

Our view Stop the runoff

07/19/2008

Florida Today

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Florida Today

Courts should force EPA to set runoff rules to protect waters in Florida, nationwide

The polluted stormwater runoff that's pouring into the Indian River Lagoon and threatening its survival is just one example of how the tainted mix is destroying Florida's waterways.

That's why a federal court should rule in favor of a lawsuit filed this week in Tallahassee that would force the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to comply with the Clean Water Act and set tough runoff standards for farm and urban runoff.

The suit by five Florida environmental groups rightly charges the EPA is violating the law by ignoring its own 1998 admission that Florida needed to stop the torrent of runoff entering its lakes, rivers and coastal waters.

Runoff that contains so many pollutants it has created 'dead zones' in the Gulf of Mexico and outbreaks of *paratuberculosis*, a microscopic organism that can harm humans and fish. Fish ulcers resembling *paratuberculosis* were found in the Indian River Lagoon in the 1990s.

A decade later the Florida Department of Environmental Protection continues dragging its feet, saying it hasn't determined how much runoff can safely enter a waterway.

That's hogwash as the deteriorating condition of the lagoon and other Florida waterways unmistakably shows.

That's why the court should review the case quickly and require the EPA to enforce the Clean Water Act in Florida.

Our view Thick, rancid muck

07/19/2008

Florida Today

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New study shows worsening impact of development on Indian River Lagoon

Everyone knows about clogged arteries and what they cause -- strokes, heart attacks and even death.

So it's easy to understand the worsening plight facing the threatened Indian River Lagoon from a dastardly by-product of development:

Muck.

Thick, black, rancid muck loaded with toxic metals that now covers 1 in 10 acres of the lagoon's bottom and is growing deeper with time.

And, in the process, choking out more sunlight, strangling seagrass beds and further damaging the foundation of the lagoon's food chain that's essential for fish and other marine life to feed and reproduce.

That's the finding in a new study conducted by the St. Johns River Water Management District and Florida Tech scientists that examined 73 sites from the Mosquito Lagoon in northern Brevard County to Vero Beach in Indian River County.

The revelations show the worsening pressures the lagoon faces despite efforts to stem pollution and how those pressures are increasing the risk to the estuary's survival and \$1 billion in annual economic impact it provides in recreational fishing and boating.

The study found:

Muck thickness was up 67 percent at sites where it was found nearly 20 years ago.

A toxic soup of chemicals including chromium, mercury, nickel and lead are present with copper and lead up 50 percent since 1992.

No clams south of the State Road 528 causeway to Sebastian, a sure-fire indication of worsening water quality.

The muck comes from soils flowing into the lagoon through stormwater runoff, caused by rampaging development in its watershed that has only slowed with the steep downturn in home building and commercial construction.

And it continues despite projects to remove muck through dredging projects, including areas around Melbourne where enough muck was removed to fill 6,100 dump trucks in 2006.

Added to studies that show toxic chemicals likely behind worsening diseases in lagoon dolphins, the report provides more proof that tougher development regulations and funding to prevent stormwater runoff from reaching the estuary are needed.

It also highlights the folly of those opposing the purchase of lands to help the lagoon's health through the county's Environmentally Endangered Lands program.

The purchases include last week's unanimous County Commission approval to buy 295 acres of salt marsh and mosquito impoundments on Merritt Island. Brazilian peppers and other invasive plants will be removed at the site and replaced with native mangroves to improve water quality and restore a fish nursery.

The lagoon is the most diverse estuary in North America, making it not just a Florida but a national treasure. It's also a centerpiece of the quality of life along the Space Coast and East-Central Florida.

But humans -- in the form of more bulldozed land and destroyed wetlands, and more subdivisions and strip malls in its watershed -- are loving it to death.

It has taken decades of degradation for the estuary to reach this pollution-ravaged point, and it will take decades of concentrated work to turn the situation around.

Let's hope that happens before the lagoon reaches a point of no return.

Growth outpaces our capacity to meet demands

07/20/2008

Miami Herald - Online

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Old hands will be tempted to dismiss the latest Florida obituary in Time as media hyperbole. Our paradise has been declared "lost" so many times before that we've stopped paying attention. Think again.

The environmental, demographic, political and economic challenges of today add up to a fundamental struggle over the increasing demand for shrinking resources. Florida's future is in jeopardy. Thursday's Miami Herald front page contained in microcosm a view of the bleak prospects if we don't mend our ways.

The lead story reports on the need for \$9.4 billion over the next 30 years to support Miami-Dade Transit, above and beyond projected revenue from current sources of funding. The crazy-kar derby on reconfigured I-95 is part of the same problem -- too many people trying to get from one place to another on an overburdened, ill-financed transportation system.

Further down, another story about a 45 percent to 70 percent rate-increase filing by State Farm Insurance reflects the continuing insurance crisis produced in part by the boom in development along our long, vulnerable coastline. The system has been patched up repeatedly by the Legislature since Hurricane Andrew in 1992, but for many Floridians the insurance bills on the house rival or exceed the mortgage payment, and they're still going up.

Unbridled development threatens more than our coastlines. Our drinking water is clean, but we will have to pay more for it and stop dumping dirty water into the ocean. The annual fight by the Miami-Dade County Commission over the Urban Development Boundary is, at bottom, about how to cope with the demographic pressure on a fragile Everglades ecosystem and the threat of environmental collapse. Solutions cost money, and a poorly conceived tax system doesn't yield enough revenue.

That is connected to a third story on the same front page. Miami Fort Lauderdale tops the list of the nation's metropolitan regions with high-inflation rates. A related story notes that Florida is "the top job-loss state in the country" and forecasts a grim economic outlook due to shrinking wages and record home foreclosures.

It doesn't take a Ph.D. in economics to see that a low-wage state with a high cost of living (due in part to the insurance crisis and high property taxes) is woefully unprepared for these challenges. Nor does it give the next generation the tools it will need to come up with solutions.

Florida already is No. 50 among the states in spending per pupil in public schools. Still, the state has cut funding by \$75 million to the Miami-Dade school district because of falling tax revenues. That leaves administrators and unions to fight over the scraps, and forces cuts at every level. Next year could be worse.

Florida's failure to manage growth lies at the heart of this problem. If times were good, the basic flaws in Florida's economic structure would remain hidden, but they would still pose a threat to the state's future. More and more newcomers enter Florida every year but state leaders don't seem up to the job of updating and overhauling physical and economic infrastructures that were never designed to cope with the needs of a population that has ballooned to 18 million people.

Sure, other states and regions have their own, seemingly intractable, problems. But that doesn't diminish the seriousness of ours. The question not only is what we will do about it, but who will lead us. The vision and imaginative leadership required to pull Florida out of this mess is as scarce as the nearly extinct Florida panther.

As Time puts it, a Legislature that prefers "protracted arguments about evolution and other Terri Schiavo-style social issues as well as legislation proposing crackdowns on bikers who pop wheelies" while slashing \$5 billion from an already inadequate budget, will never be mistaken for a repository of political wisdom.

It isn't that the state and our own region don't have strong leaders in a variety of fields. The ranks of our public and private universities, business communities, arts, entertainment, philanthropy and civic activism offer a wealth of ability and potential as rich as any region in the country. However, only government can tackle problems that require the marshaling of public resources and the reordering of priorities that the times demand. Where are those leaders when our state needs them most?

One drop at a time

07/19/2008

Gainesville Sun, The

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By ERICA BLAKE-Gainesville Sun,

July is known throughout the United States as the peak water usage month, with some areas of the country increasing by as much as 70 percent, said Cynthia Amos, the member services director at The Irrigation Association, an organization that promotes efficient irrigation.

Established three years ago, the campaign is geared toward residential homeowners and small businesses, she said. It is intended to bring awareness to the drastic increase in water consumption during the peak summer months and help decrease the environmental impact of irrigation.

Wendy Wilber, an environmental horticulture agent at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, said that Florida has finally returned to the rainy season after months of drought conditions. 'People were irrigating their yards multiple times a week just to have their landscapes survive the treacherous conditions that Gainesville has been experiencing since March,' Wilber said. Florida law requires that all irrigation systems installed after May 1, 1991, be outfitted with a working rain sensor that adjusts the system according to rainfall, Wilber said.

In 1991, the St. Johns River Water Management District adopted a rule limiting lawn and landscape irrigation to before 10 a.m. or after 4 p.m. in Gainesville.

In 2006, tighter irrigation restrictions were placed on the city, Wilber said. The district amended the rule, limiting irrigation to no more than two days a week.

The key is to apply just enough water to satisfy a yard without being wasteful, Amos said.

The Irrigation Association encourages people to irrigate more efficiently, by watering lawns separately from mulch beds, she said. Grass requires more water than flower beds, but most irrigation systems are set to water both equally.

To make sure consumers are not watering the sides of their homes or the sidewalk, they should check irrigation systems monthly and adjust controller schedules often, Amos said.

But the biggest challenge is changing human behavior, said Brent Mecham, an industry development director at The Irrigation Association.

Prior to the establishment of local regulations, people used to set their irrigation controllers and never change them, he said. The sprinkler system would come on whether the lawn needed water or not.

As technology improves, the controllers are becoming smarter and

more efficient, Mecham said.

According to Michael Dukes, an associate professor in the Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering at the University of Florida, there are two other new technologies that aid in wise water use.

Soil-moisture sensors that measure water levels in the ground to determine when watering is needed, and climate-based controllers that create irrigation schedules based on a landscape's needs.

The technology ranges from \$20 to upwards of \$400, Dukes said, depending on the system.

Florida's favorite lawn, but is St. Augustine's appeal fading?

07/20/2008

Orlando Sentinel

Jackson, Jerry

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Florida's thirst for water has sparked a growing attack on St. Augustine grass, the staple sod of lawns statewide. Many landscape experts and scientists say the assault is mostly one-sided and misdirected -- a mean-spirited mow. Environmentalists and others say it is a justified, belated attack on a water-sucking vampire.

Yes, for many reasons!

Some new residential communities, such as Oakland Park in west Orange County, forbid residents from planting St. Augustine, and calls to outlaw the grass are increasing.

"Reducing turf grass is a good idea for any number of reasons," said Catherine Read, a botanist and president of the Florida Native Plant Society's Central Florida chapter, which is called the Tarflower chapter after one of the state's many obscure, native plants.

Read, a landscape specialist who lives in Orlando's Hampton Park subdivision, managed to get permission from her homeowners association to strip out most of the grass in her yard and replace it with various native plants and trees and an organic vegetable garden.

"There is a statewide push on," said Rick Ehle, another member of the Florida Native Plant Society's local chapter. Ehle concedes that he used to have a St. Augustine lawn in Orlando, but gave it up a decade ago when he moved to rural Geneva in Seminole County and opted for a more natural look. Now he's trying to get rid of his remaining bahia grass.

For sure, the end is near for sprawling, glossy green lawns in Florida.

Big stretches of brown woody mulch -- no water needed -- and patches of hardy native shrubs and drought-resistant wildflowers are going to be visible in more and more communities, especially those without homeowner associations, which often mandate green lawns.

Proponents of the "back to native" movement say they are up against

powerful forces, including well-financed advertising for lawn fertilizers, pesticide, riding mowers and power tools that "make it look like fun" to mow grass and manicure big lawns.

No! It works great.

"St. Augustine lawns have become the scapegoat for Florida's water availability and quality issues," said grass expert Barry Troutman, the Orlando-based technical-services director of East Coast operations for ValleyCrest Cos., a giant landscaping company. It's no accident that St. Augustine is by far the most common lawn grass in the state, Troutman said, because of its "nearly perfect adaptation [to] Florida's sandy soil and mixture of sun and shade."

More often than not, St. Augustine gets more water than it needs, especially during the summer, said Celeste White, a University of Florida extension-service horticulture and irrigation specialist in Orange County. "During the rainy season, you can almost shut it your irrigation system off, no matter what kind [of grass] you have," she said. "Pretty much everyone is over-irrigating."

Of course, not enough rain and you have problems, too. White said the summer rains that recently arrived in Central Florida came too late for some St. Augustine lawns -- including her own, which has no irrigation.

"My yard doesn't look too good," she said. But it's the first time in nine years, she noted, that she has lost some of her St. Augustine grass to dry weather, despite having no lawn sprinklers.

People who want to experiment with other types of grasses, White said, will find that they all turn brown during extremely dry weather and all suffer from various pests. "If you want green grass, you will have to irrigate," she said. "There is no perfect turf and there is no pest-free turf."

According to UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, "the best way to irrigate an established [St. Augustine] lawn is on an as-needed basis." When the grass begins to wilt or turn bluish-green, or fails to recover when people walk across it, UF turf scientists say, hit it with a half-inch to three-quarters of an inch of water. "Do not water again until the lawn shows signs of wilting," which could be a week, maybe two or more.

The lowdown on lawns

St. Augustine

Researchers with the University of Florida and other scientists have crossbred different grasses through the years to produce newer hybrids of St. Augustine with different growth characteristics. Some handle shade better than others or need less mowing. But the search for a truly drought-resistant strain is ongoing. As a nitrogen filter, St. Augustine grass does a better job than Bermuda or Zoysia and "blows away mulched plant beds." By soaking up nitrogen, grass reduces contamination of groundwater and runoff.

Bahia -- The second-most-common type of lawn grass in Florida, it is expected to continue spreading in popularity. A drought-tolerant plant, it can rebound from a dull, brittle brown to a fairly decent shade of pale green with just one or two good rains. Irrigation is not absolutely essential. Its main drawbacks: It does not grow as thickly

as St. Augustine, and many homeowners don't think it looks as good other than as a roadside grass.

Bermuda -- Has little shade tolerance and needs more frequent mowing and maintenance. Produces a vigorous, medium-green, dense turf that is well adapted to most Florida climates and soils. It wears well, and tolerates drought and salt. It establishes rapidly and is able to outcompete most weeds. It is readily available as sod or plugs, and some improved cultivars are available as seeded varieties.

Zoysia -- Slow to establish, some versions also do not tolerate shade. Zoysia can adapt to a variety of soils and tolerates both salt and traffic. It provides an extremely dense sod that resists weed invasion. Once established, the slow growth of some varieties is an advantage because less mowing is needed. For some varieties, two growing seasons may be required for coverage when propagated by plugging or sprigging. All zoysias form a heavy thatch and require periodic renovation. Other disadvantages of older varieties include slow recovery from damage, poor growth on compacted soils, high fertility requirements and poor drought tolerance.

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DOWN TO EARTH

07/21/2008

Macro World Investor

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Rainwater gathered from the rooftop will be used for drinking, washing dishes and flushing toilets before it trickles back out to nourish the gardens.

Solar energy will power the home and the Earth's soil will keep it cool.

Sometime around January, the Pfalzers will become the owners of Florida's first Earthship, a one-bedroom, two-bathroom home built largely from recycled material. The home has emerged as a model for those who want to live more in tune with nature, disconnected from utilities.

Although homes such as this were once the domain of fringe environmentalists, the rising price of electricity, food and gas have pushed many of the ideas into the mainstream.

The technology used in the Pfalzers' new home would work in a bungalow in Seminole Heights or a ranch home in Lutz. During construction, the worksite will be a laboratory for those who want to learn about sustainable living. After that, students will continue environmental testing to see how the home and nature coexist. Tire Walls Are Trademark Feature

With a budget of \$300,000, the cost per square foot is about the same as a traditional house.

Michael Reynolds, founder of Earthship Biotecture in New Mexico, came up with the idea in the 1970s. He wanted to find a way to build

affordable homes from natural and recycled materials that didn't need to be hooked up to local utilities.

The tire walls are a trademark feature. The tires are packed with soil and stacked to create exterior walls. Each tire weighs about 350 pounds, making the homes sturdy during natural disasters such as hurricanes.

Some of the walls will be built using a honeycomb of recycled cans surrounded by concrete, then covered with plaster. Others will be built using recycled bottles in blues, greens and reds to create a colorful mosaic within a concrete wall.

The roof will include four large domes that will collect rainwater and send it to a storage tank. During a one-inch rainfall, the 3,500-square-foot roof will collect 2,000 gallons of water for use in the home.

Solar panels will capture energy from the sun, then the electricity will be stored in batteries to power appliances and lights.

The home won't have an air conditioner. Instead, the house will be partially buried in the ground, using the cooler earth temperatures, a network of underground tubing and window ventilation to keep the interior a constant 75 degrees.

The homes first became popular in New Mexico, and are now in several states and throughout Europe and in Nicaragua.

Seeking A Quieter Lifestyle

The Pfalzers learned about the homes on 'The Tonight Show.' They wanted to live a quieter lifestyle, where they could garden, but still have a short commute from their jobs in the Tampa Bay area.

A real estate agent located 9.5 acres for sale in Manatee County, surrounded by horse farms and watermelon fields.

In 2004, they bought the land, which had trees choked by invasive plants and an overgrown wetland that did little other than breed mosquitoes.

They contacted Reynolds about the homes and exchanged dozens of e-mails and phone calls. But Reynolds wasn't familiar with Florida's building code, which is more restrictive than in New Mexico and other states.

The Pfalzers knew nothing about construction or home building. He is an actuary, helping life insurance companies calculate premiums and mortality risk. She is a math tutor.

They met Bryan Roberts through a group of organic farmers.

Roberts is a St. Petersburg contractor who specializes in building and renovation projects using sustainable technology. He plans to renovate a building in Ybor City utilizing some of the principles used in the Pfalzers' new home.

Roberts saw the site and fell in love with the plans.

His job has been as much about educating local building officials about sustainable construction as about keeping the project on budget. Roberts hopes the systems in the Earthship become more

popular once people see how well they work for the Pfalzers.

For now, Roberts and the Pfalzers are still collecting tires, bottles and cans. Roberts hopes to begin construction in about three weeks.

During construction, Roberts will be joined by an army of volunteers, and host a series of workshops and programs about sustainable living. 'The whole idea behind this thing is to be educational,' said Roberts, 39. 'We want to show people how to live in a little more concert with the environment.'

IT'S A WATER PIPELINE TO NOWHERE

07/18/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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Andy Reid-South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Development in western Palm Beach County has slowed to a crawl, but water for future residents still flows every day through the county's new \$51 million pipeline.

Residents in other parts of the county are picking up the tab for water lines once intended to serve The Scripps Research Institute and tens of thousands of homes developers planned to build on western farmland.

Those plans came to a halt when a court challenge prompted Scripps to build to the east at the Jupiter campus of Florida Atlantic University. County water officials contend the pipeline still will be needed to meet long-term growth demands. They say the cost of financing pipeline construction with bonds and reserve funds was a "negligible" increase of less than 2 percent for the water bills of current customers.

"We have pipes in the ground and there aren't people there, but in the long-term that's how it goes," County Commissioner Jeff Koons said. "It will be supporting something out there."

However, after losing sales during drought-imposed watering restrictions, the county in May also started imposing a 15 percent surcharge on water bills to help cover infrastructure costs that include the pipeline.

Joanne Davis, of the growth watchdog group 1,000 Friends of Florida, said that instead of responsible planning, the pipeline turned out to be a costly example of county officials getting swept up in the building boom.

"It was speculation," Davis said. "The county overspent on something that wasn't needed."

In 2004, the county changed development guidelines to expand its water service area to rural areas where wells and septic tanks were the norm.

With water lines going north to Scripps' proposed home at county-owned Mecca Farms and west to 2,000 homes proposed on 1,200

acres at Palm Beach Aggregates, the county also spread branches through Loxahatchee.

Pipeline construction started in April 2005.

The Palm Beach County Water Utilities Department used about \$19 million in reserve funds and \$31.8 million in bonds to pay for the water lines. Those bonds, backed by revenues from water sales, cost the county about \$2 million a year in financing charges, according to the utilities department.

County commissioners in 2005 also agreed to allow "oversizing" pipes to serve properties where new homes were proposed. Developers had to pay for the bigger pipes, while county officials insisted that did not come with a guarantee that building plans would be approved.

But in an area where hookups were once projected to spike by 2010, the building boom fizzled.

Without Scripps, the development future of Mecca Farms remains in doubt. Lennar Corp. backed out of plans to build on the Aggregates land. Public pressure prompted the County Commission to reject Callery-Judge Grove's 10,000-home building plan and the new proposal now calls for about 3,000 homes. GL Homes has at least temporarily shelved plans for 12,000 homes at Indian Trail Groves.

"We will ultimately need them," GL Homes Vice President Larry Portnoy said about the new water lines. "Sure hope so," he added, less confidently.

Even when building picks back up, the county should not allow the tens of thousands of homes once envisioned just because the water lines are there, said Jess Santamaria, the county commissioner who represents the area.

"We should not have put those lines in place for that excessive development," said Santamaria, who joined the board after the water lines were approved. "If you make a mistake, you don't perpetuate the mistake."

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@sun-sentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

PHOTO: DIAGRAM: Costly new water lines, few new customers.
Source: Palm Beach County

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Will Briger be new home for Scripps?

07/20/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online
Clough, Alexandra

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Palm Beach Post

The Lester family isn't talking about its plans for the Briger tract in Palm Beach Gardens, but the family's lawyer is, sort of.

And Alan Ciklin says the family still is undecided about whether it will develop the 683-acre tract for bioscience space, homes and shops - or just sell off pieces of land and let someone else build.

'The answer, really, is that they have not made a decision,' Ciklin said.

The Briger blueprint calls for 2,700 homes and 4.5 million square feet of commercial space, with 1.6 million square feet set aside for Scripps Florida, and 2.4 million available for other biotech companies. Palm Beach County and the Lester family aim to jointly submit a development of regional impact (DRI) plan to state officials in September. The Briger tract is vacant land across Donald Ross Road from Florida Atlantic University, home of the Scripps Research Institute's first labs in Florida.

Scripps originally was to be built at a massive campus at Mecca Farms, in northwestern Palm Beach County. Environmental concerns killed the deal, leading Scripps to opt for space at Florida Atlantic University's Jupiter campus.

Homes, schools and shops already surround Scripps Florida in Jupiter, so there's no need to build houses immediately if the market won't bear them right away. At Mecca Farms, however, the idea was to build a housing village to accommodate Scripps scientists, a notion that looks downright silly, now that vacant homes go begging for sale.

With spiraling gas prices now making long-distance drives prohibitive, the notion of a bioscience village out in the hinterlands seems even more unwise, in retrospect.

In April - before pump prices hit more than \$4 a gallon - Palm Beach County commissioner Karen Marcus had this to say about the Mecca Farms campus: 'If we had done it out there, with the state of the economy, they would have been out there by themselves,' she said.

Judging by recent events, 'It was the right move to bring it east,' Ciklin said.

Office vacancy rate rises

Creeping up: Palm Beach County's office vacancy rate is rising almost as fast as gas prices.

The county's vacancy rate rose to 14.7 percent at the end of the second quarter, a slight uptick from 14 percent at the end of the first quarter of 2008 - but 11.4 percent at the end of the third quarter of 2007, according to CoStar Group, a Bethesda, Md.-based research firm.

Tenants moving out of large space included First NLC Financial, which moved out of 120,000 square feet at Boca Corporate Center in Boca Raton; and Eclipsys Corp. moving out of 46,500 square feet in an office building, also in Boca.

But not to worry, said Neil Merin, chairman of commercial brokerage

NAI/Merin Hunter Codman in West Palm Beach.

'I think we're in a normal cycle. We've come off a very strong landlord's market, with very low vacancy rates,' Merin said.

Normal vacancy rates are in the mid-teens, Merin said. So today's numbers, while higher than the single-digit vacancy rates of a couple of years ago, are nothing near the hard times in 1990. 'That's when we had a 36 percent vacancy rate,' Merin said.

Helping temper the vacancy rates from rising too much higher is the fact that the credit crisis put the crimp on new construction. In recent years, most of the real estate market has been focused on residential, with little going toward commercial.

That will help keep the market on a fairly even keel in the coming months, Merin said.

The only folks who should be worrying are people who paid big premiums for office buildings and who might not be able to recoup as high a rate of return as they anticipated. But still, Merin isn't forecasting a huge fallout leading to owners losing office buildings in foreclosure.

Port St. Lucie's dilemma

07/19/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

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Palm Beach Post

Even with state officials 'speeding' things up under pressure from Senate President Ken Pruitt, R-, any decision on a crossing point for Port St. Lucie's proposed bridge over the is at least four years away. That's bad news for Port St. Lucie, which prematurely purchased homes in the path of the Crosstown Parkway and planned the route to link West Virginia Drive with village Green Drive, just north of City Center, Port St. Lucie's new downtown now under construction. The city's favorite route, however, would cut through the St. Lucie River Preserve State Park, which the public did not buy as the path of a bridge. At a meeting last week, residents looked over that route and others, including a more environmentally friendly northern route, which would avoid the park and affect fewer wetlands. The park is home to such endangered and threatened species as the Florida scrub jay, gopher tortoise and eastern indigo snake.

State and federal officials won't make a final decision until after several more years of study, which in government amounts to moving quicker. Port St. Lucie claims that the northern route would be less direct, but the state should not set a precedent of spoiling land bought for preservation. Granted, the northern route would require Port St. Lucie to buy 75 houses, but even the city's preferred central route would require buying 46 houses. Choosing the southern route would mean buying 131 homes.

City officials seem confident that pressure from Mayor Patricia Christensen's orchestrated 'grass-roots' effort and Sen. Pruitt's

influence - he just finished up as Senate president, and he has two years left in office - on state agencies will get Port St. Lucie the route the city wants. But for the city, the bridge route problem remains a lose-lose situation. Contrary to Port St. Lucie's attempts at revisionist history, there's no record of any state promise to grant the city its coveted central route. With that route, the park and its wildlife would be the losers, along with the public that bought the land. Without that route, Port St. Lucie residents will have to pay more. Port St. Lucie should have waited to build a road until the city had a guaranteed route across the river.

Job cuts in the works? City hammers out spending plans

07/20/2008

Orlando Sentinel

Sashin, Daphne

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WINTER PARK -- The mayor and commissioners meet at noon Monday to discuss the proposed budget for next year. Winter Park expects to collect \$46.9 million in 2008-2009, about 1.7 percent more than in the budget. Blaming voter-approved tax cuts, City Manager Randy Knight has recommended cutting 19 positions, including cultural and economic development director Chip Weston and three other jobs currently filled. The budget sets aside \$666,000 in contingency money for big-ticket items or other requests. The commission could increase that by raising the tax rate or stormwater fees or freezing additional open positions, Knight said.

COLUMN: Regional Report

Central Florida in 60 seconds

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