

February 11, 2016

Mayor Nick Batos, Estero
Mayor Ben Nelson, Bonita Springs
Mayor Anita Cereceda, Fort Myers Beach
Mayor Marni Sawicki, City of Cape Coral
Mayor Randy Henderson, Fort Myers
Mayor Kevin Ruane, Sanibel

Dear Mayors,

We truly wish that the mayors and local officials from the cities south of Lake Okeechobee could have participated in today's Emergency Mayors Meeting in Lee County. It seems that our cities and their flood control protections were the main topics of conversation there.

Those of us who have represented the hardworking men and women in the lakeside communities understand the concern and frustration felt in the coastal communities as a result of the continued fresh water releases from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary. However, we are deeply troubled by the lack of understanding and factual information on the issues important to all our communities. More than 95% of that water is coming from North of the Lake. Yet, the discussions this morning centered on demanding greater transparency from the South Florida Water Management District regarding their decision to back-pump flood waters from cities south of the lake—Canal Point, Pahokee, Belle Glade, South Bay and Clewiston—into Lake Okeechobee—seeking to understand what alternatives were considered before a final decision was made to back-pump. Because apparently you believe that water is then pumped your way.

If these mayors had attended last week's Water Resources Advisory Committee meeting at the SFWMD, they would have received the very information they were seeking. District scientists made it very clear that the water back-pumped into Lake Okeechobee from the south added less than three-quarters of an inch among the more than 10 inches of water that the rain event poured into the lake as of Feb. 4. They also stated the quality of water from the southern cities was no different than any other water flowing into the lake, except that it had LOWER nutrient levels than many other sources that feed into Lake Okeechobee. And when asked directly by a Lee County representative how much of the back-pumped water would have been discharged to the Caloosahatchee, the District explained how it would be extremely difficult for water to make its way from the southeastern pumps all the way to the discharge sites on the other side of the lake's littoral zone. Of special note, the district data showed that less than three percent of the water in the lake comes from these back-pumping events. More importantly, SFWMD reports, just like the University of Florida Water Study, showed that 70-80% of the flow to the Caloosahatchee River is from local run-off. These are critical facts that would have been extremely helpful to your discussion this morning.

The mayors at the emergency meeting should familiarize themselves with the attached water quality report that clearly shows the backpumped water is cleaner in phosphorus and nitrogen than most other stormwater drainage throughout the 16-county area and not some toxic water that is different from anyone else's stormwater. The reality is that the South Florida Water Management District agreed more than 50 years ago to act as the local sponsor for the federal flood control system that provides flood control for all 16 counties in the SFWMD. All 16 counties. Not just Lee County and Martin County and not just the heavily populated coastal portions of these counties. Every single resident, every single business, every single community, regardless of color, profession or level of affluence is entitled to basic flood protection from the SFWMD. Some areas drain into the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, some areas drain into Lake Okeechobee, and other areas drain into the Caloosahatchee River & Estuary or the St. Lucie River, Indian River Lagoon, Florida Everglades or the Atlantic Ocean. Every structure and pump in the system has a flood control schedule that governs how it is operated. When water levels reach a certain level, these flood control features are activated. The cities south of Lake Okeechobee deserve automatic flood control just like Ft. Myers, Sanibel, Cape Coral, Bonita Springs and Estero. The people who live and work here want to see their homes, businesses and communities protected from the threat of rising waters, just like the residents who live on our coasts.

Why on earth should the SFWMD single out the few cities south of Lake Okeechobee and put their basic flood protection under a microscope and not provide flood control unless a certain number of lives are at risk? One Lee County mayor wanted to know, is it 100 lives at risk in Pahokee if they didn't back-pump? The decision to backpump is not an emergency decision made by the SFWMD board, but rather a flood control regulation that tells pump operators to start pumping when flood stages in the canals near the cities reach a higher level. This prevents our residents from having their homes and communities flooded.

These regulation schedules are automatic triggers for SFWMD field operation people to follow to prevent homes and communities throughout all 16 counties from flooding. Our homes and communities should be treated no differently.

Are the six Lee County mayors going to set themselves up as judge and jury for how many Glades flooded homes it would take to make it okay with them to start the pumps to drain water off our rural cities? Do they get to determine the relative worth of our towns, our people? Because it harms their tourism? If you want to talk about tourism damage, we are sick and tired of the coastal media characterizing Lake Okeechobee water as toxic or polluted. The lake is as healthy as its ever been. Just last weekend, Mary Ann Martin said at WRAC that Roland & Mary Ann Martin's Marina hosted 167 boats paying \$4,500 each to fish in a nationally renown bass tournament. Lake grasses are healthy, spawning a large number of great trophy bass for these tournament fishermen. Repeated falsehoods about polluted water harm our critically needed tourism effort just as much as too much fresh water in the estuary.

Every other community in the 16-county district expects and receives flood control to keep their streets drive-able, their businesses dry and their neighborhoods drained of harmful

standing water. Our cities deserve that as well, and we deserve to have that flood protection without being accused of polluting the Lake or being treated like second-class citizens who have to justify getting what everyone else takes for granted.

If the Lee County mayors want to have a real discussion, we would be happy to drive over and chat. We need to stop pitting wealthy coastal tourism against small farming towns. We are both important and contribute to Florida's diversity and prosperity. What we need to do collectively is find a way to hold and treat the water from the huge northern basin before it ever enters the Lake. Then no one has to suffer these negative consequences. The Legacy Florida bill would help provide funding for just such efforts and we would be happy to work with you and our coastal neighbors to make that happen.

Sincerely,

Mayor Colin Walkes, City of Pahokee

JP Sasser, former mayor, City of Pahokee

Mayor Steve Wilson, City of Belle Glade

Mayor Joe Kiles, City of South Bay

Mayor Phillip Roland, City of Clewiston