



Viewpoint

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OUR VIEW

Lehman put water authority on solid footing

OUR POSITION: *The retirement of Pat Lehman as head of the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority marks the end of a progressive era.*

It seems Pat Lehman has been around forever. And, that's almost true when it comes to the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority. Lehman, executive director of the authority, has spent 30 years of his life working on water problems for Southwest Florida — specifically Manatee, Sarasota, Charlotte and DeSoto counties.

When he retires early this Fall, he leaves a progressive organization that has outlived criticism over the purchase of the General Development water utility, feuds over local water supplies

and interconnects and colloquialisms that might be expected when working with various boards, cities and counties. What he can look back on is the establishment of a water supply system that is well prepared for any disaster, has a year's supply of water in a DeSoto County reservoir and has plans for the next 50 years.

Lehman said he has good memories of his 30 years with the authority — 24 as its executive director. He said his retirement will coincide with the burning of the mortgage on the General Development utility and that will be a sweet occasion for all involved.

"I believe we'll have our annual barbecue in November and that will make it official," he said of paying off the debt that has saddled many customers with some of the highest water bills in

Southwest Florida.

Does he think it was a bad deal?

"If you look back, history prevails," he said. "What would you pay today for a water system like the one they had? It's hard to say if we overpaid, but certainly to build (from scratch) would have cost a lot more."

Lehman, a native of Iowa, is an engineer by education. He came to Florida to interview for a job with a private company and liked the warm weather. Before coming aboard with the authority he worked for a private company and for the city of Tampa.

Much was accomplished under Lehman's leadership — not the least of which was the massive string of pipes that serve as an interconnect between counties and cities in the authority's district. One of

the most important — and one of the last to get done — was the pipe linking Punta Gorda to the rest of the members. The reservoir was another major accomplishment. It holds water that could, technically, provide for service to the area for a year if some catastrophic event would require that.

Another significant responsibility is the authority's role in monitoring the Peace River — the lone water supply. That oversight includes keeping tabs on the impact on the river and its tributaries by farming and phosphate mining. That responsibility will grow in the coming years as Mosaic intends to begin mining in DeSoto County.

"We meet with Mosaic and DeSoto County and keep a close watch over our monitoring system," Lehman assured. "We have total

communication with (all parties involved)."

Lehman praised the cooperation today between the authority's members. He said that has been a tremendous help as trust grew over the years from the early days that resembled an every-man-for-himself approach.

We believe Lehman deserves much of the credit for that. There may have been times when criticism directed his way was just, but he has set a great example of someone who can get people to work together. His personality has been perfect for the challenges he faced.

He'll be around for a few more months, but we'll say it now — three cheers for Pat Lehman and the job he's done.