

Compromise may avert water war

OUR VIEW

No one is ever a true winner when it comes to Florida's history of water wars. In a state with a booming population, where water is a most precious commodity, an ample supply of water is life and death for communities.

Polk County's fight for water survival threatens to spark a full-fledged water war with the Southwest Florida Water Management District (Swiftmud) and the Manasota Peace River Water Authority. As we addressed a month or two ago, Polk Regional Water Cooperative (PRWC) feels threatened by a plan to take an additional 120 million to 258 million gallons a day out of the Peace River. That water would be diverted into reservoirs at the water authority's DeSoto County plant.

While that is good for Charlotte County and other coastal communities, it does nothing for Polk.

We argued — as did the water authority — that taking water from the Peace before it spills into the Gulf of Mexico was in no way a threat to Polk County. That water has already passed through that county.

Polk's real issue was feeling slighted. The

forgotten stepchild.

The PRWC filed a lawsuit to stop the plan to take water from the Peace. Killing that plan would do nothing to help Polk with its water supply. But, in the end, it may have served its purpose.

After an administrative law judge ruled that Polk's case against the water authority could go forward, there came a plan for compromise.

While some details are missing, Swiftmud has proposed it could facilitate a deal between Polk and Hillsborough County to allow some withdrawal of surface water. The project, complicated to anyone who doesn't deal with water tables and water sources, would involve injecting water into the saltwater zone of the aquifer and raising the freshwater supply table upstream from Polk County.

The advantage of the proposal means cleaner groundwater from the Upper Floridan can be shipped to Polk. That water would need little or no treatment and would not have to be stored in reservoirs. Trying to mine water from the Upper Peace or Alafia rivers would be much more expensive, and that water

would contain many more contaminants, according to the water authority. In addition, the supply would rely on rainfall and leave Polk in a lurch during drought conditions.

"At staff level, Hillsborough supported the idea at a meeting last week," said Pat Lehman, executive director of the water authority.

"Technologically, it should work," Lehman said.

Mediation on the idea is scheduled Oct. 8 — well-ahead of a January hearing on the lawsuit.

We urge all sides to maintain an open mind and remember there are no winners in water wars. Florida's history of spats between government entities over water have been costly and never produced any new water supply — only hard feelings and big legal bills.

We're convinced all sides in this want a positive outcome for Polk County. That positive outcome would include not spending on litigation and moving ahead with a plan to build up the water supply for the burgeoning coastal communities.

Everyone should come out a winner here.