

OUR VIEW

On water supplies, cooperation is key

Plan would help authorities avoid litigation

Remember “make love, not war” from the sex-filled Sixties? Here’s an updated saying that deals with the mundane subject of water but is nevertheless important: “Make cooperation, not litigation.”

The Southwest Florida Water Management District, known as Swiftmud, is floating a proposal that seeks to ensure Polk County has adequate potable water; enables the Peace River/Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority (serving Sarasota, Manatee, DeSoto and Charlotte counties) to do the same.

There are engineering, hydrology, regulatory and financial challenges to overcome, but the concept is worth pursuing as an alternative to costly administrative hearings and court cases.

When the boards of Swiftmud, the Peace River/Manasota authority and the Polk Regional Water Cooperative hear presentations about the plan in coming days, we hope they will pursue it with vigor and agree to halt legal proceedings for a year.

The background:

The Peace River/Manasota authority has, over decades and with the district’s approval, developed a cost-efficient and environmentally friendly strategy for delivering and storing billions of gallons of water, and connecting utility systems. In the early 1990s, the authority purchased an aging treatment plant on the Peace River from a now-defunct developer and methodically increased its capacity.

The genius of the strategy: The authority takes water from the lower Peace River when flow levels are high, and distributes or stores it; during dry seasons, withdrawals are limited or nonexistent.

In other words, instead of saving for a rainy day, the authority saves water from rainy days.

The authority in October 2017 applied to the district to extend its permit and expand its withdrawals, both to meet demands and to fill an additional reservoir. Despite increased withdrawal capacities, the minimum flows of the lower Peace River would be maintained, according to the authority’s application.

Swiftmud was prepared to approve the application, but the Polk County Regional Water Cooperative and its members filed a late challenge that was forwarded to an administrative law judge.

The case contended that the Peace River/Manasota authority’s plan to increase its use of downstream water during heavy flows would affect Polk’s potential use of river water upstream.

The merits of the case seemed dubious based on the direction of water flow. What’s more, the Polk cooperative had identified three likely projects and none of them involved withdrawing water from the upper Peace.

Nonetheless, an administrative law judge allowed the case to continue. In response, Brian Armstrong, Swiftmud’s director, recently made this proposal: If all the parties suspend their legal maneuvers, the district would examine how Polk could receive water from a Swiftmud-supported project in Hillsborough County.

In south Hillsborough, the county has injected treated waste water into a well in an underground area where seawater is intruding on the freshwater Floridan Aquifer. The high-pressure injection is designed to prevent further intrusion and make more fresh groundwater available slightly inland.

Swiftmud proposes that the Polk cooperative invest in the Hillsborough project, with incentives, rather than challenge the Peace River/Manasota permit.

Let’s hope the strategy is viable. One point demonstrated by the members of the Peace River/Manasota alliance is that cooperation trumps litigation as a means of providing customers affordable water.