

# Peace River board urges halt to water war

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SARASOTA — A brewing water war between the Polk County Water Cooperative and the Peace River/Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority could come to an end as early as Monday.

On Wednesday, the four directors of the Peace River Authority signaled they were looking for conciliation rather than battle, issuing a call for the litigants to stand down and try to resolve their differences.

Following an executive session between the four board members, executive director Pat Lehman, and their attorney Doug Manson, the directors voted unanimously in favor of putting the litigation on hold pending concurrence by the cooperative.

“It is better to collaborate than to litigate,” Commissioner Alan Maio, chairman of the board, said through a news release. “While we can’t do anything about the water challenges faced by Polk County, we support the district’s efforts to help them.”

Maio was referring to a proposal floated by Brian Armstrong, executive director of the Southwest

Florida Water Management District — commonly known as Swiftmud — one of the parties to the litigation, to get Polk involved in a project under development in Hillsborough County that has the potential to solve Polk’s future water needs.

Armstrong presented the proposal to the cooperative’s board of directors two weeks ago. According to the Lakeland Ledger, Armstrong’s proposal received a positive reception.

Lehman said Thursday the cooperative’s directors had met in executive session at the time, but did not announce the results of that meeting. He added that, to his knowledge, the cooperative did not plan to meet again in advance of a mediation session between the parties scheduled for this Monday.

After Swiftmud approved an application by the authority to withdraw up to 258 million gallons of water a day from the Peace River to meet the future needs of its customers, the cooperative and the five municipalities in Polk County filed suit in May challenging the issuance of the permit.

The authority currently withdraws 120 million gallons per day from the

river during the rainy season under an existing permit.

Polk, with its many municipalities and where the headwaters of the Peace River originate, is looking to the river as its future water supply and sees the authority’s plan to withdraw additional supplies as a threat to its own plans.

After hearing preliminary arguments, an administrative judge in Tallahassee ruled that the litigation could proceed.

Monday’s mediation session, however, could bring an end to what would be expensive litigation.

Hillsborough’s project, a complicated process, essentially involves injecting reclaimed water into the saltwater zone of the aquifer and raising the freshwater supply table upstream from Polk County.

Lehman has said that Hillsborough is supportive of the idea that Polk County join the project.

“The lawsuit, win or lose by either side, does nothing to develop water supplies for anyone. We hope the cooperative concurs,” Lehman said through the press release.

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