



SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT COUNCIL OF SARASOTA COUNTY

Southern Coastal Watershed Leadership Program Consensus

The Science & Environmental Council of Sarasota County (SEC) developed four workshops as part of its Southern Coastal Watershed Leadership Program, with support from the Southwest Florida Water Management District and the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice.

The program sought to forge an understanding across a diverse group of stakeholders regarding the interrelationship of the vitality of natural systems, water quality, water supply, and flood management. To this end, the SEC invited a varied group of local government decision-makers in land use planning and water management, local water utility operators, civic leaders, developers, builders and private land use planners.

Each of the four sessions was well-attended and the dialogue represented a rich cross-section of expertise, opinions, interests, concerns, and insights. In the final session, the workshops were summarized to reflect a consensus across the disparate perspectives.

Workshop 1- Relationship of Watersheds and Estuaries

- There has been a significant decline in the abundance and diversity of life in bays and estuaries due to "ditch & drain" modifications to the watersheds for agriculture, mosquito control, flood control and increased population growth.
- Engineering solutions are too often narrowly focused on flood protection and water supply problems rather than on management of water and natural systems as invaluable resources.
- Harmful algal blooms may be occurring more frequently and with greater intensity in our coastal waters, and non-native species are increasingly encroaching upon and altering our ecosystems.
- Man-induced hydrological changes have altered the seasonal ebb and flow of freshwater and saltwater during rainy and dry seasons, and negatively impacted the life cycle of many marine and estuarine species.
- It is essential to work in concert with natural cycles and restore unaltered watershed hydrology and systems. This approach offers a more sustainable and cost-effective approach to ensuring healthy ecosystems and adequate water supplies.

Workshop 2 – Water Supply Stakeholders

- There are significant utility assets “owned” by individual counties, municipalities, and other entities.
- Historically, the focus has been go-it-alone capital investments and protecting of “our” supply
- Population growth may continually drive the requirement for new potable sources.
- The primary regional focus is on developing new potable water supplies, and the cost of new supply development will continue increasing. A diverse portfolio of sources and an interconnection of systems emphasizing a go-with-the-flow approach tapping surface water during rainy seasons, groundwater during dry seasons and storage during droughts would be more reliable and cost-effective, and would reduce environmental impacts and increase supply.
- Conservation may be more cost-effective than development of new supplies, but there is no comprehensive and coordinated conservation management strategy throughout the region
- Rainwater, stormwater and reuse supplies are all valuable supply resources than can be more effectively utilized.
- The benefits in cooperating and developing an integrated water management strategy are much greater than the economic, political and environmental costs in competing across political and jurisdictional boundaries for new water supplies.
- A higher degree of trust among key players and stakeholders is essential to developing an effective regional approach to integrated water and watershed management.

Workshop 3 – The Politics of Water

- Tampa Lessons Learned
 - The Tampa regional water authority resulted from a “shotgun wedding” imposed by the state legislature and courts.
 - Tampa Bay Water’s common rate structure was an essential component in realizing a regional approach to water supply.
- The Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority, (PRWSA) or another regional entity, still has the opportunity to do it right.
- There is strong agreement that a regional approach is needed.
 - However, there is a great concern that a regional approach may be heavy-handed and bureaucratic, as well as hostile to the vitality of natural systems.
 - There is often a bias towards centralized, capital-intensive approaches rather than distributed, self-sustaining infrastructure and conservation strategies.

- There is also concern about rewarding inefficient or wasteful users and encouraging growth with cost being shifted to communities that are more built-out.
 - Development of common rates and even common ownership throughout the region also needs to consider inequities in conservation strategies, commitments, and efficiencies of individual members.
- The current regional system is more focused on financing bricks and mortar than on coherently integrating capital and natural assets with long-term water and watershed management strategy.
 - A long-range vision for restoring the hydrologic balance is required in place of political decisions that are often a result of short-term considerations.
 - A regional integrated water and watershed management strategy needs to include all water suppliers, and to develop a common set of strategies, priorities, and coordinated investments for watershed and habitat protection, flood control, natural system restoration, and wastewater reuse.
 - Conservation strategies and policies should rest on clear performance standards based on accurate assessments of current usage.
 - PRWSA's role would need to expand or change significantly, or another entity could take the lead in creating a new regional entity.

Workshop 4 – Future Possibilities

- There are a wide range of new technologies, designs, and strategies of varying scales that can significantly contribute to restoring natural systems and ensuring the long-term economic and ecological sustainability of our region.
- Individual homeowners and builders can choose Florida-friendly landscaping, non-potable water sources (rainwater/reuse) for irrigation and a range of indoor uses, along with water-efficient (Energy-Star) appliances.
- Neighborhoods and developers can choose low-impact design standards, centralized micro-irrigation systems, and stormwater reuse systems.
- Regional stakeholders can prioritize new water supply projects that protect and restore natural systems; encourage cooperation and collaboration between counties, municipalities, and other water providers; create a regional strategy for managing water resources; invest in a diversity of interconnected sources managed for sustainability; and develop a regional conservation strategy.
- The Watershed Leadership group would like to present their findings to a gathering of regional and local political decision-makers, and discuss how working together can more effectively meet the challenge of the future.

Potential Road Map for a New Vision

