

Plan for a Florida water czar resurfaces at conference

[Craig Pittman](#), Times staff writer

In Print: Wednesday, September 24, 2008

St. Petersburg Times

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/environment/water/article824694.ece>

A controversial proposal to route water from one part of the state to another, scuttled after a huge uproar five years ago, may be revived as part of an Orlando gathering this week to plot the future of Florida's water supply.

The two-day gathering of more than 100 utility officials, developers, bureaucrats, lobbyists, lawyers and environmental activists has been organized by the Century Commission on a Sustainable Florida, led by St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker.

At the meetings of the Florida Water Congress on Thursday and Friday, the agenda calls for discussing topics, including conservation, desalination and whether the state needs a water czar with the power to order drinking supplies piped from the regions that have it to the regions where developers need it.

"Hopefully that's not going to happen," said attorney Richard Lotspeich, who will represent Tampa Bay Water at the Orlando conference.

In 2003, the state's most powerful business group, the Council of 100, came up with a plan that called for then-Gov. Jeb Bush to appoint a seven-member water commission with the power to transfer water from rural areas north of Interstate 4 to fast-growing areas south of that Central Florida dividing line.

Since 1998, state law has mandated a practice called "local sources first." That means cities and counties must exhaust all reasonable possibilities for water within their borders before attempting to get it elsewhere. The Council of 100 plan called for upending that law, because "a statewide water distribution system would establish an economic value to water and water would become a general revenue source for the state of Florida and sending areas."

Council of 100 chairman Al Hoffman, developer of such communities as Sun City Center, said then that Florida did not have a water supply problem, but a water distribution problem.

However, when the plan was exposed by the St. Petersburg Times, it created a statewide furor. A public hearing in North Florida drew 1,000 people, where one speaker shouted, "Not one damn drop!"

Although Bush then scuttled the proposal, the idea of a statewide water czar never went away.

In convening the Water Congress, the Century Commission called for ideas from all across the state. Then the commission listed the most popular ones in its "consensus recommendations," posted on its Web site prior to this week's meeting.

In that document, the commission staff reported that "one of the most controversial subjects identified in the delegate recommendations was the establishment of some sort of statewide water entity."

Among the groups raising that possibility: the American Water Works Association, which consists of utilities, including Tampa Bay Water. In a position paper submitted for the Water Congress, the association says "the creation of some type of state-level entity may be needed," because there is "growing awareness that Florida may not have a water shortage problem as much as it has a storage and distribution problem. There may be a seasonal abundance in one part of the state at the same time there are seasonal shortages in other parts."

Floridians used an estimated 6.7-billion gallons per day of freshwater in 2000. State officials estimate that will increase by about 30 percent to 8.7-billion gallons a day in 2025.

For decades, Florida relied on its underground aquifer to supply the water to fuel growth because it was cheap. But increased pumping caused lakes, rivers and wetlands to disappear.

So state officials have told utilities in Central and South Florida that in the future they cannot count on drawing extra water from the underground aquifer. That limitation "forces them to develop alternate supplies," just as Tampa Bay Water did with its desalination plant and 15-billion-gallon reservoir, Lotspeich said.

Although creating a water czar would require legislative action, only one legislator has signed up as a delegate: Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, who according to the Century Commission staff will be representing the Florida Home Builders Association.