

State 'water czar' idea resurfaces

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Six years ago, Florida's business leaders came up with a plan to create a state water commission that could route water from sleepy North Florida to supply the booming development in South Florida. But their plan proved so controversial that Gov. Jeb Bush scuttled it.

Now it's back.

It's time to "establish a central regulatory commission that oversees Florida's water resources and supply development," recommends a new report from the staff of the state Senate Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee.

A similar idea is put forward by a new draft report from the Council of 100, the same Tampa-based business group that came up with the water plan in 2003. The draft report from the business group that has advised governors since 1961 says "people are asking whether it's time to consider the creation of a state-level water supply entity."

A water supply commission could oversee building pipelines and storage tanks "needed for the storage and distribution of water over broad geographic areas so as to provide water to and between regional water supply entities," the draft report says. Or there could be "a state water czar with the responsibility .??. concentrated in a single individual."

The council's draft report stops short of endorsing either idea. The report - to be discussed at a Council of 100 meeting in Palm Beach later this month - is just "an effort to lay the groundwork and see if there's anything of value to move on," explained president Susan Pareigis.

She noted that the Senate committee's report reads as if it was lifted straight from the 2003 Council of 100 plan, which she took as a promising sign.

The committee's chairman, Sen. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, said Friday that he has not read the report his staff wrote last month, and so "nothing has been decided." However, he said he agrees it's time to review Florida's water supply system and perhaps make changes.

Pareigis said if the council and the Legislature do push for a statewide water commission, she is hopeful they can avoid the controversy that derailed the idea last time.

"If it's good policy, it's good policy," she said.

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During the Tampa Bay water wars of the early 1990s, Pinellas County and St. Petersburg drained the lakes and swamps of Pasco and Hillsborough counties by overpumping the aquifer, leading to lawsuits galore. One defiant Pinellas commissioner announced: "Keep the Suwannee River cold, because we're coming for it."

In 2003, the leader of the Council of 100 study group, Clearwater commercial real estate broker Lee Arnold, called the Suwannee River region "the Saudi Arabia of water."

Arnold's group contended that taking water from such water-rich regions "would establish an economic value to water, and water would become a general revenue source for the state of Florida and sending areas" in North Florida.

But North Florida residents fought back. A public hearing at rural Chiefland High School drew an estimated 1,000 people, some toting signs that proclaimed, "Not one damn drop!"

A revived version of the idea would face similar resistance, predict North Florida water experts.

"It's a slippery slope to seek some sort of statewide distribution system at the expense of those parts of the state that still have reasonable amounts of water," warned David Still of the Suwannee River Water Management District. "Do people in Dade or Duval or Hillsborough have more of a right to water in Suwannee County, just because Suwannee may have more of this finite resource?"

According to the Senate report, no county should count on exclusive use of its water if someone else needs it: "The people of Florida own the water collectively,

irrespective of regional jurisdiction, and a statewide body should govern Florida's water supply accordingly."

As in 2003, neither report addresses a key question: How the costs of piping water around the state would compare to building desalination plants or other alternative water supply projects, or even emphasizing water conservation.

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In 1998, in the wake of the Tampa Bay water wars, the Legislature passed a law mandating "local sources first." Cities and counties must exhaust all reasonable possibilities for water within their borders before attempting to get it from somewhere outside their boundaries.

The Senate committee report and the Council of 100 draft report say it may be time to reconsider the "local sources first" law. The business group's report blames fear for the passage of the 1998 law and contends that "the absence of a state-level water supply entity to ensure adequate water supplies for all has allowed these fears to continue."

The fear that Florida might run short of water led to a gathering in Orlando last year of more than 100 utility executives, state officials, regulators, farmers, lawyers, lobbyists and environmental activists, dubbed the Florida Water Congress.

The American Water Works Association, which represents the state's utilities, suggested that the Water Congress call for a statewide water commission like the one proposed in 2003. The association contended that there was "a growing awareness that Florida may not have a water shortage problem as much as it has a storage and distribution problem."

But the delegates to the Water Congress quickly rejected that idea. Instead, they agreed that their top priority was seeking state money for building desalination plants and other projects to draw water from somewhere besides the aquifer.

The idea of a statewide water commission is based on a faulty premise, namely that the continued growth means the demand for freshwater will inevitably increase in Florida, said Cynthia Barnett, the author of *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.*

Actually, across the globe "the most progressive thinking on water right now is to plan for how to use less - not how to use more," said Barnett, a senior writer at Florida Trend magazine. "It's where everything is headed in the future."