
Authority for water issues eyed for growth

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Some three dozen elected and appointed officials from 16 Polk County cities and the county met Friday to take the first concrete steps in forming a regional water cooperative to address present and future water issues across the county.

Only Mulberry failed to send representatives to the half-day meeting held in Auburndale. It was wall-to-wall with city commissioners and mayors along with a host of city managers joining forces to create the Polk Regional Water Cooperative.

With discussion led and moderated by Lakeland government-specialty lawyer Edward de la Parte, the meeting focused on forming an authority to deal with water issues that are expected to present themselves over the next several decades, based on projected water use countywide.

According to de la Parte, the county's water needs will escalate from the present 280 million gallons a day to a whopping 1.1 billion gallons a day by 2035, based on projected growth.

de la Parte also told the officials that the cost of finding and developing new water resources will range from \$360 million to \$460 million, according to the Southwest Florida Water Management District in which Polk County falls.

"As our communities continue to grow, there is a need to identify new sustainable water resources to meet increased demand," he said. "We currently do not have the needed infrastructure to utilize new sustainable water resources, nor the capability to obtain it without a concerted inter-local effort."

The Lakeland lawyer also said that the Friday meeting was to discuss and select the terms and conditions for inclusion in the regional cooperative and the agreements that will formally create the agency.

de la Parte also explained the cooperative's role is to proactively identify alternative water resources and projects that will ensure the future sustainability of the region's water supplies, and will specifically identify groundwater sources, develop strategies that will meet the anticipated demands, identify the necessary infrastructure and establish consistent rules.

The water board will develop, with help from consultants specializing in governmental affairs, the co-op, develop and assess potential projects and have its ducks in a row by April 2016.

From there, the attorney said, the co-op will identify projects to provide new sources of water which much be in hand by April the following year.

The co-op, he said, will decide policy issues, draft the inter-local agreements that will institute those policies, and get their individual councils or commissions to approve them.

Also, by early next year, the water management district's consultants are expected to have identified initial projects for the co-op to sign off on which may include but not be limited to water supply projects, interconnection and water sharing systems, reclaimed water projects, water conservation projects and regional water resource development planning.

On Friday, the assembled officials agreed that the group would be initially restricted to Polk County, but left the door open to future expansion. It also agreed that each member community and the county would have one vote for policy decisions, but that could be changed for approval for projects depending on the percentage of local funding.

de la Parte said there would be a cost associated with membership, however, that number wasn't mentioned. He did add that Polk County and the water management district were presently footing the bill to get the co-op established.

At the October meeting, the group is expected to formalize the communities that will be members and elect a chair, a vice chair, a secretary and treasurer. It also was decided that the chairmanship will be rotated through the four elected board members, and augmented as needed and terms expire. No term limits were established on Friday.

It was also decided by consensus, that the voting board members will be elected officials with an alternate of their choice.

The next meeting of the co-op-to-be will be at 9 a.m., Oct. 22 at the Sports Marketing Building at the Lake Myrtle Sports Complex in Auburndale.