

State must invest in water resources: My Word

Opinion

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Water is life. It is our most basic need and the most important element sustaining all life on this planet, and yet we too often take it for granted.

A report published by the American Society of Civil Engineers in 2013 estimated that Florida will need \$32.4 billion in new drinking and wastewater infrastructure by 2020. That estimate does not include the funds necessary to repair or replace aging infrastructure, provide adequate levels of flood protection or to restore the Everglades and other natural water bodies needed to satisfy the new state and federal standards for pollutants in the state's water bodies. Where will that money come from?

Currently, state government spending on water averages 0.25 percent of Florida's total annual budget.

No one would argue the need to invest in health care and education, which in the governor's "Keep Florida Working Budget" proposal for next year would receive 41.3 percent and 29.9 percent, respectively, of the total budget. Next follows transportation and economic development at 15.3 percent. It isn't until you pass public safety at 6.2 percent of the budget that you arrive at the environment at 4.4 percent, with the funds being directed to water being a little less than a quarter of that funding.

Florida saw the first indications that we were in trouble in the Tampa Bay region years ago. Now, Central and South Florida are teetering close to the brink of crisis. The water supply and current infrastructure needed in order to sustain these areas do not exist. Projections show the utilities of Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole and Lake counties need billions of dollars of water-supply projects in order to produce the 250 million gallons per day necessary to satisfy the regions' growing population by 2035.

Despite 2015 being dubbed the "Year of Water" in the Florida Legislature, the House is proposing to spend only about \$6 million more on water than last year, and the Senate is proposing to spend \$182 million less than last year in its budget. We must focus on ensuring adequate funding for water moving into the future in order to grow our economy and ensure a sustainable and affordable supply of water for future generations.

The time to be proactive is now. We can no longer put off investing in our most valuable resource.

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