

Water quality a longtime county focus area

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There has been a lot of attention paid to the issue of water quality in and around Charlotte County in recent weeks – and rightly so. Regular readers of this column can attest to my recurring columns on the subject for many years. Just this year, water quality has been a topic in this space a dozen times, beginning in January when the County Commission streamlined its strategic focus areas from nine to four. Two of those four focus areas address environmental stewardship and protecting our natural resources.

The commission's strategic plan states: "The County Commission recognizes water resources are one of the most important assets the county has and protection of those assets, in all its forms, is a top priority for the board." The board knows the issue will require resources and partners at all levels of government to tackle. So when I read or hear the board hasn't prioritized water quality or staff isn't capable of addressing it, it's just not true.

Commission Chairman Bill Truex and Commissioner Ken Doherty, who just completed serving two years as chairman, sit on the Florida Association of Counties' Water Policy Committee. Charlotte County is an active member of the 16-county coalition of the South Florida Water Management District and next year will become a voting member of the coalition.

The commission has seen four water quality presentations and held two votes on water quality issues in the past two months alone, including a report from Western Michigan University on nutrient reduction projections stemming from the county's Sewer Master Plan septic-to-sewer conversion program. The board approved the next phase of the sewer program in the Ackerman Waterway area. Another presentation came from the executive director of the Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership to which the board agreed to increase its annual funding. The board will continue to hold future workshops and meetings going forward to launch new initiatives and gauge the progress of existing ones.

To achieve the board's water quality goals, I established a task force comprised of staff from five departments and administration's Public Information Office. Already, the task force has identified and mapped existing water quality testing locations and mitigation programs, such as shellfish monitoring and restoration and septic-to-sewer conversions.

Last month, members of the task force met with officials at Florida Gulf Coast University's new Water School to explore partnership opportunities, including internships and water quality studies. The task force also met with Department of Environmental Protection officials to review red tide monitoring and reporting efforts and to discuss Gov. Ron DeSantis' red tide task force, which he launched with an announcement right here in Charlotte County on Manasota Key in August.

Next month will mark the anniversary of the county's Water Quality Summit at the Event and Conference Center. The summit featured panel discussions with scientists, researchers, engineers and policymakers about harmful algal blooms, such as red tide and blue-green algae. Several hundred people attended and the presentations can be viewed on the county website. Visit CharlotteCountyFL.gov and click Hot Topics, then Water Quality Summit.

Coincidentally, a year to the day of that summit, the Water Quality Task Force has scheduled a One Charlotte, One Water assembly bringing together scientists, water professionals and stakeholders for a daylong workshop Jan. 29 at the Cultural Center of Charlotte County.

The One Water phrase is based on the U.S. Water Alliance's interconnected approach to water-related issues, including green infrastructure, resource recovery, water reuse, watershed planning and restoration, climate resiliency and water efficiency. One Water refers to the fact that all water issues — potable, stormwater, reclaimed, wastewater, surface water, groundwater, etc. — are all about the same finite, non-renewable resource.

Some of those issues are more noticeable than others. Potable, or drinking, water is something we use every day. Charlotte County excels at delivering clean, reliable drinking water to more than 60,000 homes and businesses daily. That requires 24-hour monitoring and maintenance of 1,400 miles of pipeline and more than 18,000 valves. Staff take more than 130 samples monthly to test for contaminants. Earlier this year, the Florida Section of the American Water Works Association recognized the Charlotte County Utilities Department as its Distribution System of the Year. The department also earned the association's Best-tasting Water Award over seven utility departments in our five-county region, including Sarasota, Manatee, DeSoto and Hardee.

Going forward, we want to improve how we communicate our commitment to water quality by consolidating the data created by multiple water quality efforts and putting it in one place and in context. Simply stating all we are doing to preserve and protect our water isn't enough. It needs to be presented in a comprehensible way, with clear goals, identifiable initiatives and demonstrable results. We need to reach as many people as possible so they both appreciate the efforts underway and understand their own role in improving water quality, whether that's using fertilizers and plastics, water conservation, and proper waste and hazardous materials disposal.

One Charlotte, One Water captures and conveys the message we are all responsible for water quality. You'll hear it more in the weeks and months ahead