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## Water management

BY: JEAN GRUSS | EDITOR/LEE COLLIER

January 16, 2015



Daniel DeLisi, chief of staff for the South Florida Water Management District, stands by the Caloosahatchee River in LaBelle, east of Fort Myers. Photo by Ed Clement

There was a time when Daniel DeLisi thought the South Florida Water Management District should be disbanded.

DeLisi, an engineer whose career has spanned the private sector, was speaking out of frustration with the water-management agency, which over time had become a bureaucratic swamp with its share of wasteful spending.

Today, DeLisi is chief of staff for the agency that has a \$720 million budget and 1,530 employees. "The organization has transitioned in the last four years. What I hear from business people, from a regulatory standpoint, is we're infinitely easier to deal with and to work with than at any time in the past," he says. "That's what I wanted to see four years ago."

In 2011, Florida Gov. Rick Scott appointed DeLisi to the district's governing board, the youngest member and at the time the only one from the west coast of the state. In March 2013, he resigned from the board to become the organization's chief of staff.

A winner of the Business Observer's 40 under 40 award in 2006, DeLisi, now 41, says accessibility and transparency are the keys to improving relations with constituents ranging from landowners to developers and environmentalists.

DeLisi says he remembers what it was like to sit across the table from district officials when he represented residential developer Bonita Bay Group and later with his own Fort Myers-based engineering firm. "I try not to forget that mindset," he says. (He sold his share in the firm to business partner Drew Fitzgerald, who continues to operate it under the same DeLisi Fitzgerald name.)

Indeed, the Bonita Bay Group was at the forefront of creating consensus for development by encouraging discussions with environmentalists, anti-growth proponents and government agencies. It

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avored a non-confrontational approach to developing luxury residential communities that included nature preserves and vegetation.

"This is my opportunity to make an impact on the public sector," says DeLisi, who oversees the district's external affairs, legislative work, community outreach and budget. "It was a big change for me, but it's been very interesting and a great administration to work for."

DeLisi moved to West Palm Beach, where the district has its headquarters. "I still have my house over in Estero and I have my future retirement lot on the Caloosahatchee River in Hendry County," he says.

DeLisi says the organization is now more focused on completing projects rather than announcing new ones. One project that's about to begin is the creation of a 10,500-acre reservoir in Hendry County that will capture stormwater and improve the quality of the Caloosahatchee River. "It's hugely significant because just starting the project shows a big level of commitment," DeLisi says.

**Blast from the past**

Here are some of Daniel DeLisi's responses to a questionnaire when he was a 40 under 40 award recipient in 2006.

Professional achievements/honors: My career started in Beijing, China, where I founded a management-training center for multinational corporations. I also did volunteer work for China's first environmental nongovernmental organizations and wrote a popular column in Chinese for a Beijing newspaper.

Mentor or business hero: Lawrence Susskind, author of "Dealing with an Angry Public," a book that has had a huge impact on public discourse in America. He was my adviser at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He and his book have shaped my career.

Formula for success: Open your ears; close your mouth. To build trust with public agencies, non-governmental organizations and community groups you have to listen, listen, listen.

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