

Lakeland Ledger

[OP-ED COLUMN]

Learn About Your Water Sources

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Twenty years ago, the United Nations declared that "The fulfillment of basic human needs, our environment, socioeconomic development and poverty reduction are heavily dependent on water." As a result, it designated March 22 of each year as World Water Day.

This year's theme is Year of Water Cooperation, which seems especially relevant in today's changing world.

The city of Winter Haven, like many communities in Polk County, has a special relationship with water. With 50 lakes gracing the community, many people in Winter Haven realize the special role that water plays in everyday lives.

In 2000, one of the key statements of the Winter Haven Chamber's "Our Vision by Design" process was "Water benefits all aspects of our economy, culture and environment." I imagine that many of the communities in Polk County and Florida would say the same.

Polk County is the headwaters to six major river systems, and includes the Floridan Aquifer, which supplies water to urban, agriculture and industrial users. This means that the primary source of water for lakes, rivers and people is what falls from the sky. We have a unique responsibility to be exceptional stewards of this precious resource.

Historical practices that treat water as a waste product still continue and make future decisions more complex. Drainage ditches dug 100 years ago continue to discharge precious water out of the watershed each time it rains.

Past development practices covered sandy ridge areas that once recharged the very aquifer that provides water for lakes and business. Aquifer levels throughout the region have been lowered by thousands of wells that affect our area.

The approach in the future must be different than the approach of the past if we are to become good stewards of water.

Most agree that Polk County will experience significant growth in the next 20 years to 30 years. If this growth occurs according to today's approach, more water will flow out of watersheds at the same time that we will need it the most.

Lake levels and water quality will continue to decline. In addition, rainfall patterns appear to be changing, with more rainfall coming in larger, more intense storms, which means we will have to be even more prudent at managing water.

A future in which we treat water as the incredible resource that it is will take hard work and a cooperative approach.

Instead of development causing additional impacts to water, local and regional agencies could partner with development projects to store more water within the natural landscape. One of the special things about water is that not only is it a valuable resource on its own but, once it is stored, the land around water is even more valuable.

Providing incentives for future development to store water in historical wetland areas could result in much as 20 billion gallons of water stored in the Winter Haven area alone. This is enough water to fill two large reservoirs.

At the same time, these areas can be used for walking and biking trails, and waterfront access, which increases property values and provides recreational opportunities for future generations. Development would benefit from waterfront land values and less land used for storm-water ponds.

Imagine 10 to 15 projects the size of the Circle B Reserve, but with higher-density development surrounding the area. Most agree that this concept makes sense, but implementation will take significant change.

In urban areas, approximately 50 percent of water use goes to irrigating urban landscapes. Proven Florida Friendly Landscape practices can save nearly half of this water, and also require less fertilizer and pesticides, which improves water quality. Also, instead of discharging precious water into lakes, rain gardens could recharge more water into the ground, improving water supply and enhancing the appearance of neighborhoods.

If we strive to become exceptional stewards of water resources, communities that depend on water at numerous levels must take a leadership role. Large water-storage areas serving as water frontage for future developments, homes using less water for landscaping, and rain gardens percolating more water into the ground must become the norm and not the exception if we are to realize our very special place within our watershed.

If you appreciate lakes and the need for future economic growth, please take the time to learn about your water resources. Ask questions of your local staff and state agencies about the health

of lakes, rivers and aquifers. Organize a neighborhood meeting to talk about making a difference. Future generations are counting on your involvement.

[Mike Britt is the Natural Resources division director for the city of Winter Haven. He has nearly 30 years of experience in managing water resources, 23 years of which have been with Winter Haven.]