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Council approves funds for water quality

October 28, 2015

By BOB PETCHER (rpetcher@breezenewspapers.com) , Fort Myers Beach Bulletin, Fort Myers Beach Observer

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A successful sales pitch from a neighboring city official may deliver a home run and benefit all Southwest Floridian residents and visitors to the area.

Sanibel Mayor Kevin Ruane is on the campaign trail for water quality. He has visited city halls in Cape Coral, Fort Myers, Bonita Springs and Estero as well as his own municipality and Fort Myers Beach.

"We are working together with all municipalities. All I would really like is to have our city manager talk to your city manager and have everybody come up to the plate," he said.

The water quality advocate is asking officials at each municipality to pledge no more than \$2,500. The Fort Myers Beach Town Council unanimously approved the allocation of funds toward the endeavor.

Together, the collected municipality funds will allow Ruane to hire former South Florida Water Management District Chief of Staff Dan DeLisi to become the right water quality lobbyist at the state and federal level. DeLisi resigned from his position at SFWMD in early September.

"Nobody has the institutional knowledge that (Dan) has," said Ruane. "He is also well respected in the House and the Senate. He'll continue to knock on doors for us."

Ruane stated Congressman Curt Clawson is on board with the lobbying plan. The Sanibel mayor said he is expecting to go to Washington D.C. four to five times in 2016 to speak about appropriations for Southwest Florida.

Beach Mayor Anita Cerceda, who has worked closely with Ruane and the other area mayors during meetings, calls what Ruane proposed a "focused targeted lobbying effort" that should produce results. She is currently continuing to investigate the viability of QR codes at beach access locations to inform residents and visitors on many environmental issues including water quality.

"We will probably see a tremendous return on our investment," she said.

Town Manager Don Stilwell stated money has been budgeted for 2015-16 for water quality purposes. He will work with Sanibel City Manager Judith Zimomra on a contract for funds not to exceed \$2,500 for such an endeavor.

Ruane referenced the summer of 2013, when heavy rains filled Lake O and caused high flow regulatory freshwater releases to be discharged into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers. The action created a disproportionate mix of fresh and salt water that eventually creates damage to the estuaries' coastal habitats. The lake releases are also known to involve back-pumped nutrient-rich water with large amounts of phosphorus and nitrogen that negatively affects water quality.

"There is no silver bullet for high flow issues," Ruane said. "We could have had 15 C43s, and it wouldn't have held enough water. When

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you get 170 percent of normal rainfall, there's nothing you can do. That's nature."

While the impact from Lake Okeechobee's harmful and unnatural releases of toxic and contaminated water have not been as severe, there are still water quality issues. Inland watershed run-off to our estuary during a week late last month was said to be almost twice the harm threshold (4,985 cubic feet per second).

"We are all affected by this," Ruane said. "We can't have tourism impacted. We can't have real estate impacted."

Ruane spoke about the C43 West Storage Basin Reservoir Project, which is located south of the Caloosahatchee River midway between Lake Okeechobee to the east and Fort Myers to the west. The purpose of this project is to reduce peak flows to the Caloosahatchee Estuary during the wet season and provide water supply to the region during the dry season. The project is intended to improve the timing of environmental deliveries to the Caloosahatchee Estuary, including the reduction of damaging flood releases from Lake Okeechobee.

"C43 will allow us to store water and, when we need water, we will actually get water," Ruane said. "It also allows to hold some water."

The reservoir has been stated to have a total storage capacity of approximately 170,000 acre feet and could potentially provide water quality benefits in the long term due to the settling out of nutrients within it.

With Council on board and other municipalities following suit, Ruane believes the allocated money and DeLisi's effort will be fruitful.

"It's a one-year contract. Obviously, we will measure his success. If we believe it has some merit, he might come back next year," said Ruane. "I think it's \$2,500 that's well spent for an area and issue that is near and dear to our hearts."

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